

# From Schoolhouse to Our House

*Living in two-part harmony*

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The new living area is set below the loft and above the studios below. This open area employs built-ins for storage and a wonderfully painted floor for expression.



The extension was built directly off the narrow gable-ended back of the original 1858 schoolhouse.

## ATHOME

Tom Edwards is an architect who works in Branford, lives in Killingworth and teaches art at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain. As is true of many people, those bare-bones facts reflect only a tiny portion of his life. But *unlike* most of us, Edwards has been able to marry his profession (designing buildings) with a personal obsession (a variety of fine-arts activities) with a family that shares his depth of creative expression.

That family started a long time ago. Tom met his wife Linda in their Kansas high school, where they became sweethearts. Unlike most who fall in love at a tender age, they got married, stayed married, and had a son, Vincent. But they are not in Kansas any more because Tom went to Yale to earn a master's degree in sculpture.

What binds this family together is not just their abiding love (and for Vincent their genetic material), but the Edwards family

are a deeply creative lot. Rather than creating in stoic isolation, this family has built a home that both harbors and reflects their eclectic talents as expressed over the last two decades.

For Tom this means architecture, but it also means composing wacky objects — mostly centering around avian interests (bird feeders, bird houses, etc.) — often using found objects and rendering absolutely extraordinary works of two-dimensional art in the form of large-scale drawings and other media.

For Linda, it means creating delightful sculptures — small and wonderful things that hang from ceilings, sit in unexpected places and have a of scale that is both surprising and charming. Linda also teaches art at a variety of local venues (the Guilford Art Center, Wesleyan Potters, Creative Arts Workshop).

Son Vincent now lives in Indiana and creates extraordinarily precise woodcuts — a passion born in his boyhood home living with his art-focused parents. Vincent is also a musician who plays keyboards for a rock band in and around Bloomington, Ind.

For a family with so much in common, it is wonderfully ironic that the trio has been harbored for more than 20 years in a 1,300-square-foot hybrid of the antique and the kinetic. What became a two-part harmony of a home, started as a single room (18- by 24-foot) schoolhouse built in 1858. When Tom discovered it in the far western regions of rural Killingworth, it was very much an intact building of a bygone era where the existing floors still had the holes from the fixed desks screwed into its floor. When he happened upon the schoolhouse in 1986, Tom recalls: "More than anything I felt the silence. The site oozed with peace, quiet and solitude."

The young couple moved into the structure in 1987 and renovated the existing shell to accommodate their very young family of three. By 1988, following some whimsical design work, Tom created the first of several additions and renovations to the home that allowed it to be a very rare commodity in our generation — the "forever home."

So many people think of homes as being literally "where the heart is," and therefore that the actual places where we

live are merely shells that protect us from the elements. As a culture we endlessly migrate from box to box carrying with us the beloved objects and shared memories that families inevitably accumulate.

This common modern sensibility effectively consigns homes into window dressing — a progression of stage sets upon which we live out our lives. But for people like the Edwards family who create art on a daily basis, the idea of creating a nest (in this case one filled with birdhouses) is a virtually a dream come true.

The 1988 addition was a simplified version of an extremely exotic wing that Tom developed from a small model. The extension was built directly off the narrow gable-ended back of the schoolhouse. The new wing gained a lower floor as the hillside sloped away and it was given prominence as an upper level popped up above the ridge height of the schoolhouse. Although greatly simplified from his whimsical first design, this small addition manages to house five discrete levels and a variety of roof forms, complementing the singularity of the iconic schoolhouse box.

Rather than reinvent the schoolhouse to respond to his intricate addition, Tom decided to hold its simplicity at arm's length by making a low "joint" between it and his multi-leveled addition. It's a natural point of entry and serves as the visual pivot point where the simple white clapboard schoolhouse is balanced by the natural wood-clad intricately roofed addition. This crucial connection is a natural focal point and its centrality is celebrated by a turquoise trellis extending beyond both old and new parts.

The trellis itself is almost a symbol of how Edwards creates whimsy with a purpose. It has four posts, three of which have been decorated by Tom over the years (with one awaiting a final inspired cladding). Painted a delightfully weathered turquoise, all the components of the trelliswork were salvaged from a single dumpster by Tom to be retooled and reinvented over the years. A cascade of stone steps — as much a work of sculpture as a way to climb up to the house — extends the entry event down to grade.



The clarity of "old" and simple in a balancing act with "new" and zesty has a reasoned basis. Three individuals living together need separation, but these three share a common sensibility, so they also craved connection. "We made each space



The old schoolhouse interior is left open and is redolent with art, including a painted pattern on the floor that flows between this 19th century space and the 20th century addition visible through the door.



Once a child's bedroom and now an ancillary art studio, the loft is a compact space is filled with light from skylights and multiple expression of creativity.

[walls and ceilings] different in shape, height, etc. and keep the overall space as open as possible,” Tom explains. “As a result the house feels much larger than the 1,300 square feet it encloses.”

The intricacies of the addition have been embraced by the family to the point where it is filled with the products of their creative lives. Artwork is everywhere — painted on the floor, mounted on the wall, freestanding, hung from the ceilings, or simply cast about. Architectural massing studies are set amid found objects, sculptures and, yes, birdhouses.

The landscape around the home uses individual episodes of inspired hand-wrought exuberance (all created by Tom and Linda) to extend the house into the surrounding landscape beneath hovering trees. A wee stone arch married to a koi pond, surrounded by curving stone walkways amid posts capped by sculpted bird feeders and birdhouses make entry a fantastic event.

A radiating pattern of brick creates a patio off the old central schoolhouse door. But a patio is changed into a street-facing space by an array of salvaged or hand-crafted birdhouses set to posts all covered by an tree canopy. More than two decades of loving creativity have been applied to a place to live, and the result seems both ancient and fresh — soft and lyric.

Functionally, the house is quite simple. The living areas are located in the original schoolhouse. The central entry connector also contains the steps down to a kitchen dining area and bath. Built in 1990, the master bedroom extends the original addition out into the landscape with the bed space toplit by a cupola.

Steps continue on down to the lower level that contains two studios: one for Linda’s welding and metalsmithing work, the other for Tom’s printmaking. Above all of this is a loft that was Vincent’s bedroom, fully open and sky-lit, where Tom now does some of his work.

Each space has its own distinct shape, often formed by cathedral ceilings clad in natural wood beadboard. Some walls are low, a few are tall, and art is everywhere. Windows are divided lite to match the schoolhouse, but the occasional stock octagonal window makes a small space special. Virtually all the finish work was executed by Tom, often helped by Linda.

The house feels as though it is completely isolated in the woods, though the actual earth owned by the Edwards family is only half an acre. Beyond the property’s



The interior of the open entry space that connects the new multi-level addition beyond the existing schoolhouse behind this view. The stairs lead to a sleeping loft/studio above, all toplit by skylights.

perimeter a cemetery rests in peace to one side and the balance of the land surrounding the home is owned by a conservancy, effectively making this a solitary woodland refuge.

Whimsy permeates every aspect of this home, with the schoolhouse as the lone quiet element, grounded in antiquity, in calm repose amid all the activity.

Built in the late 1980s when architectural excess was coming into fashion — McMansions exploding out of the ground all along coastal Connecticut — it’s refreshing that Tom Edwards took a different path, a path that richly reflected his and his family’s values. A backhoe could have removed the schoolhouse in an

hour, and at the pre-boom price Tom and Linda paid for it, the land was a bargain.

But salvage is not just about economy. The embrace of existing objects, whether a birdhouse or a schoolhouse, celebrates history. This collection of built, found and recycled pieces is spontaneous and yet deliberate. As with all great places to live, it is a mirror to the souls of its builders and inhabitants.

Some homes are simple backdrops. Most homes in Connecticut are stereotypes of safe predictability — center-hall Colonial, Cape or ranch. Like a rich ethnic repast, the flavor of the Edwards home is not for a bland palate — but it springs directly from the palette of its loving creators. ❖