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Hangar into Home

A Florida couple restores a former seaplane hangar on a Long Island estate, creating a vacation retreat full of nautical style

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The remodeled seaplane hangar sits eight feet from the shoreline, facing north toward Manhasset Bay. Its timber frame was stripped of paint and refinished. The pier was built by the original owners to accommodate a car driven through the opening in the west wing, now occupied by the master suite, home office and guest rooms.

During the mid-1900s, millionaire John Hay (Jock) Whitney and his wife Betsey lived on a 400-acre estate in Manhasset, New York, called Greentree. A pioneering movie producer, banker, philanthropist, art collector, diplomat and newspaper publisher, Whitney was given the property by his parents, William Payne Whitney and Helen Hay Whitney. The couple had purchased the estate on Long Island's "Gold Coast" in 1904. One of the buildings on the grounds—a 10,000-square-foot Arts-and-Crafts-style airplane hangar—housed the seaplane that satisfied Jock Whitney's love of flight.

The timber-framed hangar, added in the late 1920s, was designed by architect Christopher Grant LaFarge, who was responsible for such architectural icons as New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine and portions of President Theodore Roosevelt's residence at Sagamore Hill. After Jock Whitney died in 1982, some of the buildings on the estate were sold, including the airplane hangar. Its new owners attempted to convert it into a single-family home and the result was a mishmash of Victorian, English and other design styles.

When a second couple considered buying the house in 2002, the husband, an investment banker, understandably didn't share his wife's enthusiasm for the home. But the wife, a former insurance company executive, had what she described as "a feeling" this was the right house and convinced her more practical husband to purchase the remodeled hangar as a second home.

The couple, whose primary residence is in Boca Raton, Florida, has an extended family of children, stepchildren and grandchildren. "We wanted a compound where we could all gather and enjoy each other's company," says the wife. The two had searched long and hard before

finding the Manhasset property, a venue for recreation that only a waterfront location could provide. “In truth, I didn’t want such a big house,” she admits. “I sat in the living room with all the windows up for three hours, meditating about the decision. The sun was shining and the sailboats were sailing by. In the end, I concluded there was no better place in the world.”

It wasn’t until after purchasing the house that the couple learned that its proximity to the water had resulted in structural damage. Perched on a granite sea wall only eight feet away from Manhasset Bay, the house needed a vast amount of repairs to its timber-frame structure. For the necessary renovation, the couple tapped West Palm Beach interior designer Sam Rosenberg to create the same sort of resort-like quality he had instilled in their Boca Raton home.

“The house was an architectural nightmare,” Rosenberg recalls of the converted hangar. “The previous renovation had cut off the spectacular views, leaving the house dark and dismal.” For the structural repairs, he consulted Kean Development, a building and design firm in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Project manager Mark Andrews and his team spent the first year shoring up the sea wall and rebuilding the home’s timber framework.

Rosenberg’s design approach was to restore the original character of LaFarge’s Arts-and-Crafts architecture using historical photos as a guide. “Trying to turn this unique space into a regular home would have been the wrong approach,” Rosenberg says. “We chose to recognize the building for what it was originally—a seaplane hangar—and keep that theme and the boathouse quality it originally had.”

At the center of the old building, Rosenberg had the Kean team open the second-floor main space so that its mammoth proportions, defined by 14-foot-high ceilings, became visible. Within this great room, the designer created four islands of activity, each defined by a sisal rug set on the restored pegged oak floors.

The center serves as the dining area with a table for 12 that came with the house. Next to this space, a seating area is cozied up to the restored granite fireplace, which was discovered under plywood; a TV lounge occupies the side of the house away from the water.

The living area faces the bay through windows that can be raised to allow access to a verandah and erase the barrier between indoors and out. Next to this seating area, Rosenberg tore out a corner closet and extended the windows across the façade to expand the view. He added a bar and matching cabinets of French pine and in the opposite nook, removed a partition to create a breakfast area in front of the verandah. Visible through the windows is the bayfront and a wooden pier extending into the water where the owners moor their motor yacht.

On the ground floor below the great room, just yards away from the water, a recreational space focused on a lap pool conveys the original expansiveness of the seaplane hangar. Existing beams in the ceiling were wrapped in oak and augmented with new ones to create the same rustic look as in the great room. “The house is detailed like the great lodges found in our national parks,” says Rosenberg. To create a nautical look, he added ship’s lamps, oars and other antique nautical artifacts throughout the décor. An inverted dinghy was used as a ceiling over the bar. Racing sculls and painted oars from the 1940s were turned into art.

Bedroom suites and home offices for the owners are arranged on three levels within wings to either side of the central living spaces and reached by separate staircases. On the east side, the husband’s study, which opens onto a covered verandah, is a private suite with its own bathroom and entrance. Above it are guest suites and bedrooms for grandchildren. The master suite, wife’s office and additional guest rooms occupy the west wing. In keeping with the nautical theme, Rosenberg chose yellows, blues, white and touches of red in the décor. “We selected traditional furnishings with a timeless quality,” he says. “They appear to have been part of the house from its beginnings—like old friends.”

The family loves the home so much that the couple has extended its summers on Long Island by six weeks. “There isn’t a better view anywhere,” the wife says. “It’s become a sanctuary for us.”



The great room's media area focuses on a custom cabinet that is set between two windows at the front of the house. Chenille-covered sofas are arranged around a teak coffee table.



The kitchen was revamped with French pine cabinets and paneling, a butcher block island, blue-and-white marble countertops and stainless-steel appliances.



Sea-grass chairs and a Ralph Lauren pine table create a casual living area in the great room. McGuire stools from Baker are pulled up to the newly created bar.



Below the living level is the ultimate rec room with a swim-in-place lap pool and waterfall, a bar and a state-of-the-art gym. Rosenberg raised the ceiling and added beams to extend the rustic look from upstairs. Powder-coated-aluminum-framed doors between the rec room and terrace were customer made to slide open for indoor-outdoor living at the water's edge.



The dining area at the center of the great room accommodates 12 chairs from Minton-Spidel and Ralph Lauren. The massive table came with the house.



The front of the house.