

Looking Homeward

A Designer's Return to a Classic Indiana House

INTERIOR DESIGN BY JOHN COTTRELL
TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY SOLURI

"This is a family house for me," says John Cottrell of the mid-19th-century residence he restored in Williamsport, Indiana. OPPOSITE: In the entrance hall, Portuguese jars flank a French gilt mirror. An Imari bowl is displayed on the English gateleg table. The English tall case clock was inherited.

"I'm not a trendsetter—I'm a farm boy who got into the design business," he says. BELOW: A Chippendale-style wing chair is by the fireplace in the living room. A 19th-century English bull's-eye mirror hangs above the mantel.

YOU CAN GO HOME again. That's the opinion of Los Angeles designer John Cottrell, who returned to his Indiana roots by buying and lovingly restoring an 1842 house in Williamsport, near his hometown of Attica.

Cottrell had been attracted to the house since his teens. On the way to his father's automobile dealership to wash cars on the weekends, he would ride by the stately house set among towering trees on thirteen and a half acres. "It was the most beautiful house in the area, and I'd think, 'Gosh, to own a house like that!'" remembers Cottrell. "But I left my hometown at seventeen and thought I'd never want to go back."

In 1959 he drove across the country to southern California. One of his first jobs, arranging window displays at Mary's Furniture in the sleepy beach town of Corona del Mar, eventually led to a career designing the interiors of model homes, renovating historic properties and buying Los Angeles real estate.

In time, Cottrell became known for the comfortable country interiors of celebrities' residences. He did retire from the business once, however. "It always bothered me that I didn't touch many people. If I do a house for a wealthy person, how many people get to share the value of it?" he asks.

In 1987 Cottrell saw an opportunity to work for a larger audience by purchasing the abandoned church that he had attended as a child. He restored it to its mid-nineteenth-century glory, replacing the steeple that had been removed some eighty years before.

"It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in our little farm town. It made the front page of the local paper," he says. "Then I developed the grounds; I bought the adjacent property to restore two more



"I feel it's important to share something of beauty," the Los Angeles-based designer says. "I do restorations so other people can get a direct joy from seeing them." Baskets, many handwoven by Cottrell and his mother, lend an air of informality to the family room. Red-and-white toile from Schumacher; woven fabric on chair and ottoman from Stroheim & Romann; Brunschwig & Fils check on open-arm chair.





ABOVE: "I call the library 'My Brother's Room'—it's a place for us to spend time together watching football and basketball games," says Cottrell. A late-19th-century midwestern walnut corner cupboard stands at left. Next to it is an English still life with mushrooms. Bamboo children's chairs and an English spinning wheel accent the French tables and upholstered seat furniture. The linen print is from Lee Jofa.

houses and continue the garden path. Now I have half a city block." The properties are owned and maintained by the John Sheppard Cottrell Foundation but have been made open to the public through Historic Landmarks of Fountain County. With a chuckle, Cottrell refers to himself as "the savior of old buildings."

Cottrell had been making regular visits to see his mother in Indiana, but the restoration projects seemed to dictate the need for a place of his own. He bought the house because of his childhood fantasies and began to restore it authentically, removing the parquet floors to reveal the old pine, stripping away the wallpaper. "Then I decided the house would have had a different kind of kitchen when it was built, so I tore out the existing kitchen and bought old floors for a new addition." He built two matching summer porches on either side of the new country kitchen and family room.

In his quest for authenticity, Cottrell also took off all the storm windows and weather stripping.

"The wind blows right through the cracks," he says. "But even as an old house, it had to be functional. So I converted an upstairs bedroom into two baths—one of them quite luxurious for me." State-of-the-art heating and air-conditioning and a security system were added too.

Cottrell the interior designer is a bit nervous about what Cottrell the Hoosier has wrought. "The house in Indiana is *not* the way I live in Los Angeles," he says, then apologizes for the inviting clutter and overstuffed ease. "If I were to do it again, it would be more spartan. But I have things I love. I inherited a lot of it. It all *means* something to me. It's like an English garden, lots of clutter lying around but comfortable.

"The house has collections of English things, early country French things and early Indiana furniture," Cottrell says. "A very good antiques dealer from the area walked in and quipped, 'What Mayflower did *this* come over on?'"

Cottrell's favorite room is the one



BELOW: In the dining room, 19th-century paintings inherited from Cottrell's grandmother hang near an antique Indiana cupboard filled with porcelain tomatoes and plates.

BELOW: Hand-colored botanical prints and a large pine-framed mirror adorn the walls of a bath added by the designer. Sink was converted from a 19th-century pine chest.



OPPOSITE: "The dining room is used for both formal entertaining and select family gatherings," Cottrell notes. A carved wood eagle is mounted above the mantel; Meissen plates are displayed beneath it. Faience tiles surround the fireplace. On the English writing table, at left, is a tin kitchen commissary for condiments and spices.

reserved for guests. "I love the simplicity of it: bare floors, clean lines. If I ever decide to redo it, the whole house will look more like this. Most of the linens belonged to my maternal grandmother, and the quilt was made by my paternal grandmother."

Each room in the house is equally personal, filled with objects that spark memories. In the library, a lamp in the shape of a monkey was inherited from Wil Wright, the Los Angeles ice cream entrepreneur. "He looked like that to me when he wore

his glasses on the end of his nose," Cottrell says with a laugh. The paintings are also by Wright.

Arranged around the fireplace in the living room is a typically disparate gathering of objects: a nineteenth-century bull's-eye mirror, Iranian plates and a miniature spinning wheel on the hearth. "I love spinning

wheels, but no one in Los Angeles would want it," he explains. "People there are into proper, better, more expensive things."

In the dining room, the late-nineteenth-century Indiana corner cupboard is loaded with a collection of nineteenth-century porcelains, including dinner plates and a Royal Bayreuth tomato service, wrested from a reluctant antiques dealer in the area. "It took me two years to get them," he notes with pride. "They were used

continued on page 220

"It's not important to me if something is expensive or out of a museum," says the designer. "Things I love go together." BELOW: The guest room has a four-poster from New Mexico and a pine armoire and side table. Most of the linens belonged to Cottrell's maternal grandmother; the quilt was made by his paternal grandmother.





Renewing Charles A. Platt's Historic Design in New York State
continued from page 157

carriage house, she explains, "My overall objective was to follow the original spirit of the architecture, but not slavishly. I wanted the completed whole to seem as if it had been cared for continuously since its first days."

Actually, the house had fallen into disrepair from the time that John Jay Chapman died in the early 1930s to when the owner first saw it in 1982. Some unfortunate alterations to the carriage house had to be undone, where spaces, once used by horses, had been divided into small apartments. Plasterboard and wallpaper covered most surfaces. They were soon removed, and the beaded boarding refinished in some areas, with new stucco applied to walls in others. The ceiling of the living room was ripped out to reveal the original wood beams and joists of the roof, and ceilings and floors almost everywhere were painted a buttery white.

As part of her agenda, the new owner also decided that the general look and color scheme of the house should be changed from winter to summer. During the warm months, pale cream slipcovers, bedspreads

brassy gold and a fawn hue that approximates the color of the deer that come to graze on the property. Then, too, the unique nineteenth-century iron fireplace in the living room is unmasked. Two Dutch seventeenth-century paintings, depicting autumn and winter themes, are hung over the fireplace to reinforce the seasonal mood, which is further enhanced by the Beshir rug and slipcovers of corduroy and old linen velvet.

In both seasons, throughout the house's two floors, one's eye is constantly riveted to the odd antique such as the seventeenth-century armoires and chests from England, France, Denmark and Flanders. "The furnishings are the sort one would hope to find piled high in the lofts of old outbuildings," the owner says. "These are the kind of objects that were exiled to storage when elegant eighteenth-century themes captured fashionable tastes." The abundance of iron pieces, such as the *étagères* that were once staircases, used as tables in the living room, are noticeable as well. "Iron indeed has been a focus for my collecting," the owner says.

**"Guesthouses offer the opportunity for experiment
—for odd rather than classic furnishings, for color
that is dramatic or extreme, for whimsical accents."**

and pillow covers are set off by dark green and bright marigold colors. At this time, too, the fireplace in the living room is completely hidden from view by a seventeenth-century-style canvas painted to simulate the more labor-intensive millefleur tapestries of the Middle Ages. Because of four floor-to-ceiling French doors, the room, added on as a kitchen for grooms and stable hands some years ago, now has the airiness and light of a garden pavilion. It is often referred to by the owner as the orangery.

In the winter, darker and richer colors take over, such as crimson,

"After years of being hauled about, most of the pieces have found their place in the carriage house."

The appropriateness of the entire setting proves the owner to be a very knowledgeable designer. But her work is not over yet, for she must complete the renovation, remodeling and decoration of the main house. Charles A. Platt, trained only as an artist, not an architect or landscape designer, succeeded on the basis of his own instincts and lessons learned from those who had gone before him. It looks as if this owner-designer has wisely chosen that path as well. □

Return to a Classic Indiana House
continued from page 169

for pot cheese." He was attracted to them as a complement to the strawberry-shaped cream and sugar set that belonged to his grandmother.

In the airy family room, the majority of the baskets hanging from the ceiling were made by Cottrell or his mother. Others are Appalachian.

The house, designed to take advantage of the seasons, is based around fireplaces in the winter and on the screened-in porches during the steamy summer. "Most of the living

**In the airy family room,
the majority of the
baskets hanging from
the ceiling were made by
Cottrell or his mother.**

in the hot months is done on the porch. In the Midwest, visitors come to the house through the screened-in porch, as though they know you wouldn't be in the main part of the house." Cottrell points out that the chairs around the dining table on the patio are made by the local Amish, with the added character that all the seats are at different heights.

The designer finds himself in Indiana every six weeks these days. "I don't live in Los Angeles, I work there," he says. "I live in Indiana. Attica is one of the most beautiful towns you could imagine." It is joining New Harmony and Connor's Prairie as a preserved historic community in Indiana. "Attica has some of the best examples of architecture that has been neglected, but not ruined through remodeling," he adds.

Throughout his career, Cottrell has designed his Los Angeles residences as an extension of his business, as interiors to be sold. The Indiana house means more to him. "It will never be sold," he states. Through his foundation, it will survive, Cottrell's legacy to his hometown. □