

Fait Accompli

When a couple built a house in the Northwest Woods, they had no idea just how involved they'd become in the process

BY LOCKHART STEELE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BÄRBEL MIEBACH

FEAR OF THE BLANK SLATE—it's one reason more people don't roll the dice on decorating their own homes. Faced with so many empty rooms, the mind races: can we find enough to fill this vacant corner, that blank wall? (The trauma is particularly acute when it's a second home that won't reap the same benefits of decades-long accumulation of art, objects and furnishings as a primary residence does.) And then there's the final exam: once everything's been gathered, where to put it all?



Stage Set | An old tray table (ABOVE) in the entry way sits beneath photographic prints by Donald Bronstein, the owner's late father. See Resources.



Piece de Resistance | In the living room, a mantel from a French chateau (LEFT) was found at John Sabello, Bridgehampton. The sconces are 1940's French from R.E. Steele, East Hampton. **Vista** | A view of the living room looking out to the backyard (OPPOSITE). The large gray sofa is custom; the wooden coffee table was discovered by Hillman on a trip to Thailand. See Resources.

Good decorating, however, is frequently not the result of a too-studied plan. There's something to be said for letting the house and furnishings play a symbiotic part in the process; for listening for spontaneity's knock at the door. At a house in the Northwest Woods, Julie Hillman and her husband experienced exactly this sort of tabula rasa. The results serve as inspiration to anyone who has stared at a swatch of fabric or an empty room and wondered, "What if?"

When the couple decided to build on the forested lot, they were quite literally starting from scratch. Hillman, a fashion designer by training, had recently left the business and was busy raising her two young children. They knew they wanted a house that would serve as a getaway from Manhattan for their young family and also echo the feel of an old house. Little did they know just how involved they would become in the creative process.





Mix and Match | The bright dining room (LEFT) features a mix of pieces found locally and internationally, including an oversized Burgundy wine table.

Side Sight | A dining room sideboard (BOTTOM LEFT) hosts an array of objects. At right, an Alexander Noll sculpture stands tall near a collection of garden balls that Hillman likes to use to decorate the dining room table. **Great Outdoors** | A summer living room opens off the kitchen in the rear of the house (OPPOSITE). See Resources.



Their first decision was to place a call to Farnaz Mansuri. The Manhattan-based architect laid out a classic residence in the shape of an H—a scheme that would ensure a strong centerline connecting the house's public rooms. Then, while construction got underway on the East End, Hillman and her husband left for France.

This wasn't out of the ordinary; "We've always traveled a lot," Hillman says. This time, though, they caught a new bug. "Suddenly, traveling through Provence, we realized we had this big house to fill with furniture," she explains. "We just started buying pieces we loved and shipping them back to the Hamptons."

One by one, the pieces arrived back on American shores: an island perhaps suited for use in a kitchen; an enormous wine table from Burgundy; a fireplace mantle. As the couple continued their travels, they continued collecting.

Once construction was completed, the real fun began. As the movers brought the newly procured pieces into the house, Hillman turned director. "As I was putting the furniture in the house, I was learning how to decorate a house," she explains. "I just buy what I love, walk it inside, and walk it around until it finds a home." Some rooms came together easily; the Burgundy wine table, for instance, made a perfect dining room table. But, other rooms called out for additional pieces, so Hillman shopped the South Fork with abandon.

