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GREENWICH

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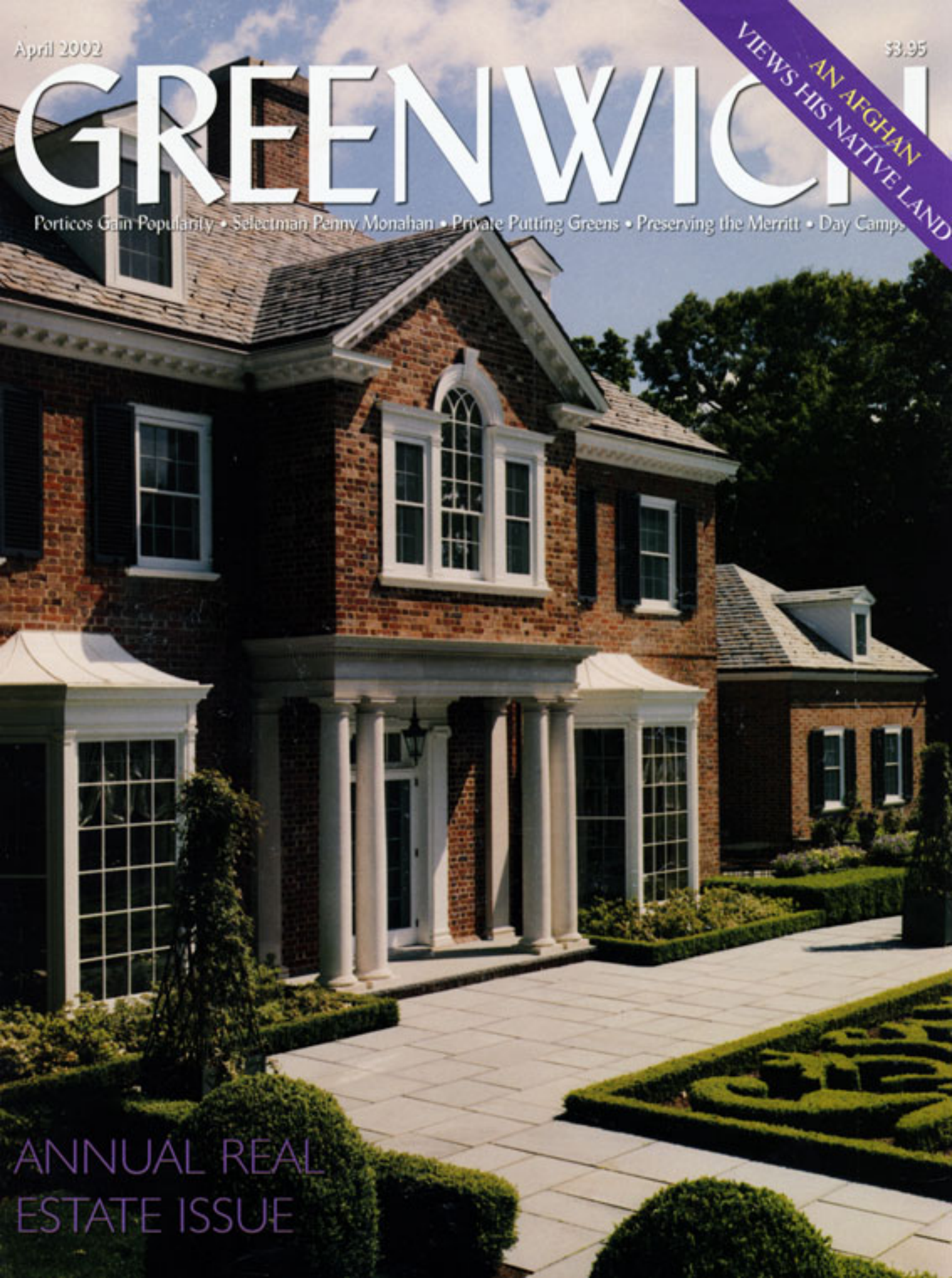

ANNUAL REAL ESTATE ISSUE

PORTICOS SEEM TO BE GOING UP ALL OVER TOWN. SOME ARE GOOD, SOME ARE NOT.

FOLLOW THE RULES

BY JAIMIE SEATON

Built in 1942 and based on a Maryland plantation mansion, this Georgian was invigorated by Charles Hilton and Daniel Pardy of Hilton-VanderHorn Architects. To accommodate a 2nd-floor addition at the rear of the house, the architects added a portico. The sweeping lawn and formal parterre of boxwood on the piazza echo the simple elegance of the Doric columns made of Indiana limestone.

One Saturday last year, as Greenwich architect Jon Halper was entering the Saugatuck Rowing Club in Westport, he noticed a woman meticulously measuring the building's portico.

"She was clearly measuring the width and depth," Halper says with slight amusement, "so I said, 'May I help you?' She looked up from her tape measure and said, 'I really like this portico and I'm thinking of putting it on my house.' I told her, 'I'm the architect and I'm flattered, but this is a 15,000-square-foot building. You might want to consider the size before putting this portico on your house.' "

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Copyright infringement aside, the woman's architectural innocence embodies some of the pitfalls associated with bad portico design and execution.

"She looked at the portico, thought it was nicely designed and thought she only needed to know the measurements to reproduce it, but there is so much more to good design than that," says Halper, whose firm, Halper Owens Architects, has offices in both Greenwich and Washington Depot.

Not that the woman should be criticized too harshly for her ignorance. Each of the architects interviewed for this article said that lack of knowledge about portico design runs rampant.

Of course, this may come as no surprise to residents who have witnessed porticos — some, extraordinarily beautiful and others, painful eyesores — going up all over town. Whether part of new homes or additions to existing structures, the portico just may be Greenwich's newest status symbol. One resident reports that on her street of eighteen homes, three new porticos have gone up in the last year alone.

"That's two too many," says Richard Cameron, half in jest. "Not every house needs a portico, nor does every street need five porticos, which isn't to say I'm anti-portico." To the contrary, Cameron, of Cameron, Cameron and Taylor and a founder of the Institute of Classical Architecture, both of which are in New York, waxed poetic about the simple yet elegant portico as he explained its evolution from ancient outdoor gathering place to modern entryway.

A new Georgian in all its perfect symmetry came from the drawing board of Doug VanderHorn. The house sports porticos with wooden Doric columns front and back *(both pages)*.

The closest historical prototype to what we know as a portico is the Greek stoa, which was a long colonnaded space, typically near the marketplace or agora. Traditionally, the stoa was either freestanding or connected to a theater building. (George Washington's Mount Vernon has a wonderful example of a Greek stoa.)

The Romans took the stoa and adapted the idea, actually attaching the columns to their basilicas. One of the earliest Roman examples of a portico being used on a structure is the Porticus Aemilia, which was built in 193 B.C.

"These days, when people think of a portico, they are most likely thinking of a temple front, which normally is a line of columns with a gable roof, most often triangular," explains Cameron.

The two most common types of porticos have either a pediment or balustrade on top of columns.

The modern portico dates to the Renaissance and Andrea Palladio (1518–1580), who was the first designer to take a temple front and apply it to a house. The Villa Rotunda (1567–1570), a private residence built in Vincenza,

In the renovation of a 1960s Colonial spec house in Riverside *(top, left)*, Hilton and Pardy removed the old portico and raised the roof. The architects added a 2-foot knee wall in the attic to give them the dimensions they needed. There are 6 wooden Doric columns at the front of the new 10-foot portico *(left and above, right)* to balance the 14-foot-wide by 8-foot-deep entrance.

is an excellent example of Palladio's use of the temple front. Though Palladio believed that the Romans had done the same, modern archaeology would prove him wrong.

In actuality, using a temple front on a house was done rarely in antiquity because of the desire to keep the sacred separate from the secular. A portico on a Greek or Roman house would have been at the back of the structure, or perhaps in the courtyard. Cameron says that it wasn't until the Renaissance that one sees the conflation of the temple front and the house.

"The residential use of the portico has always been an attempt to aggrandize a residential structure," explains Cameron. "In Palladio's day, the clients were wealthy merchants, people building structures to impress others with their erudition and knowledge of antiquity."

According to Cameron, Palladio's "new" portico designs were immediately popular and soon swept across Europe. In the early seventeenth century, the great British architect Inigo Jones launched the English Palladian movement, which remained the dominant theory of English classical architecture for the next two hundred years.

In the eighteenth century, Palladio's theories and designs spread to the United States with the publication of an assortment of "pattern books", which were Renaissance interpretations of classical designs. Two of the most popular were the *Book of Architecture* and *Rules for Drawing*, both by James

Gibbs. Soon carpenters throughout the colonies were referencing the books to fashion porticos for American homes. While there are numerous examples of these porticos on homes of that era, it was Thomas Jefferson who elevated American portico design to art with his masterpiece, Monticello (1770–1809).

"In the mid-eighteenth century, they were really just copying from books," explains Cameron. "Jefferson's approach was much more scholarly. He was one of the first to look at Roman architecture directly, rather than copying from pattern books. No one took portico design that seriously until then, neither the designers nor the builders doing the work."

Jefferson's Monticello launched a trend and by the 1830s and 1840s, Greek revival style had taken America by storm, with people adding full Greek temple-style porticos to even modest houses. Since that time, according to Cameron, porticos have remained popular with the general public. Unfortunately, popularity has not guaranteed quality when it comes to the gentle portico.

Broadly speaking, there are three primary reasons why all porticos are created not equal. First and foremost, the classical training necessary for good portico design disappeared from American schools of architecture in the 1940s, when the influence of the modernist Bauhaus movement replaced classicism in the curriculum.

Without proper training, many architects are forced to study the period on their own, and because portico design is based entirely on classical architecture, many of these self-taught designers get it wrong.

This was the impetus for Richard Cameron's co-founding of the Institute of Classical Architecture ten years ago. "Because classical architecture was discouraged in school," says Cameron, "we thought there should be a place to study."

Even with places like the institute to study, some architects don't bother learning the basics of classical portico design. Instead, they prefer to walk before they learn to crawl, architecturally speaking.

"Some designers are simply not interested in using the resources available to reference historical examples," concludes Halper.

The second problem, says Douglas VanderHorn of Hilton-VanderHorn Architects in Greenwich, is that fewer people today know good architecture. "Many people didn't grow up around fine architecture, so they don't value it. You really need that artistic sense to commit the money. Architects are expensive and construction is expensive. In the long run, the cost pays for itself because the right work will increase the value of the home, but many people just don't see that." →

The entrance portico of the Saugatuck Rowing Club has drawn no end of admiration since the structure was completed in 2000. Designed by Halper Owens Associates, it has Tuscan columns sitting on Attic bases; the posts of the upper railing are lighthouses and the balustrade is of crossed oars. For a stone and shingle house recently completed on Upper Cross Road *(opposite page)*, Jon Halper specified Greek Doric columns.

HEPHAISTION

Porticos are not new. They span the centuries, as these images show. Built in the 5th century B.C., the Hephaistion is one of the best preserved Doric temples in Greece. It dominates an area near the Stoa of Attalos that is today a sprawling confusion of stones, slabs and foundations. In ancient Athens, it was the civic center and focal point of community life, called the agora.

STOA

The Stoa of Attalos, a two-story building of cut-stone masonry and Doric columns, was probably our first shopping mall. Built in the 2nd century B.C., it has been completely restored and now serves as a museum. The stoa was discovered during excavations by the Greek Archaeological Society between 1859 and 1902.

VILLA ROTUNDA

The Villa Rotunda by Andrea Palladio, who designed more than twenty villas on the Venetian mainland, resembles the Roman Pantheon. Palladio's design reflected the humanist values of the Renaissance period. The plan for the Rotunda is symmetrical with a temple porch in front and a domed interior. The architect's work is frequently copied today.

Because of this, and the fact that some architects are resistant to working in traditional styles, many homeowners go directly to a contractor. This route presents a whole other set of challenges and is the third problem.

"Builders are not incompetent," says Cameron, "but are they literate enough to do a good portico?"

This brings us back to those eighteenth-century pattern books.

"Take, for example, the pattern book by Asher Benjamin," says VanderHorn. "A builder using this book today could build a perfectly beautiful portico, but carpenters no longer use these books and that's a big problem. Builders are producing the fastest work, not necessarily the best work."

Ignorance of classical theory and sloppy work can make for some very unsightly porticos.

Richard Granoff of R.S. Granoff Architects of Greenwich and Bridgehampton and an ardent portico advocate, says that one of the most common problems is bad proportion.

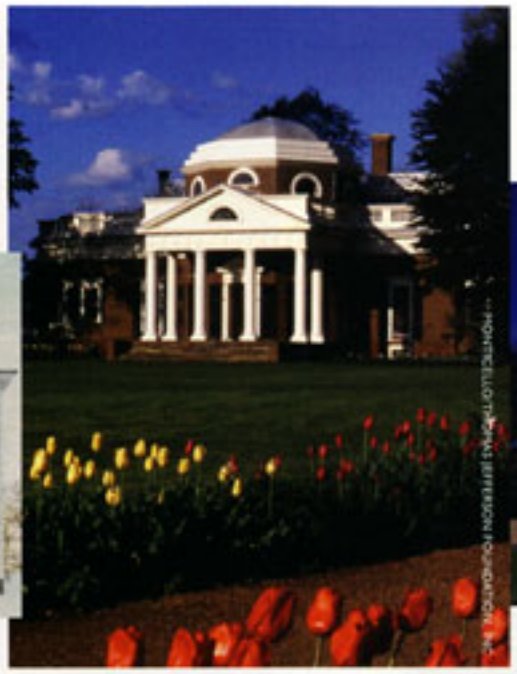
"The classic problem is a two-story high column that is only eight inches in diameter," says Granoff. "Those are the porticos built without an architect. A few builders can pull it off, but many can't."

Halper has his own list of the causes of incorrect porticos.

"The extreme would be the wrong elements — the portico just doesn't match the house, or matches but has bad proportions — too large, too small, the entablature is wrong, the projection is either too far in or too far out; it's top heavy or not top heavy enough, the span is too wide, or it just has bad columns," he says.

"There's a building in town that has a portico with straight columns, not classical columns that taper. With round columns, the diameter at the bottom is not supposed to be the same as at the top," says Halper in a wincing tone.

Another mistake Halper says people make is getting too



MORRIS-JUMEL

The Morris-Jumel Mansion, built around 1765 as a summer retreat for British Colonel Roger Morris and his wife Mary Philipse, is Manhattan's oldest remaining residential structure. The giant two-story portico is a fine example of the Palladian style, which became popular in the pre-Revolutionary era. The Morrises abandoned the house at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War.

MONTICELLO

Monticello is the autobiographical masterpiece of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. It combines the great European traditions of Palladio with American domesticity and is recognized as an international treasure. Monticello is the only house in America on the United Nations' prestigious World Heritage List.

COLONIAL REVIVAL

The renovation of a Colonial Revival house in East Moriches, Long Island, led architect Richard Cameron to add a new two-story portico to the south front that reminds one of Mount Vernon, home to George Washington for 45 years. The estate had been in the Washington family since 1674, when it belonged to the president's great-grandfather.

creative with materials. "There's a desire to break out of the box, but you have to be really careful that the materials used for the portico fit the house. I've seen stained columns on a white house. That's just wrong," states Halper.

"There is nothing worse than seeing a bad portico," says Cameron. "It's the same as a person who drops Latin phrases into a conversation to impress, but gets the grammar wrong.

"A portico, after all, is a quote of something else and should be proportionate, complementary and harmonious with the existing structure. Putting up a bad portico is like living with a giant misquote on the front of one's house."

Mistakes and pitfalls notwithstanding, there are some very good reasons to include a portico in home design — or to add one to an existing structure. And there are some sublime examples of good porticos.

The first question one might want to ask is, Do I want or need a portico? Richard Granoff believes that porticos are integral to every home design and a very common way to establish a home's entrance, both from a ceremonial and practical standpoint.

"Any good architect will consider the entry sequence to a home important," says Granoff. "Porticos don't necessarily have to be used on traditional homes or include traditional elements. We've done porticos on modern houses, but with a modern interpretation. Every new house we do has a portico, just as every house has a kitchen."

In contrast, Jon Halper takes a more holistic approach. "Not every house needs a portico. One should try to be true to the character of the house. Aside from porticos, there are other design vehicles available, such as recessed entryways," says Halper.

Like Granoff, however, Halper believes that there are both practical and aesthetic reasons to build porticos. The most practical consideration is to shield guests from the rain, but

How to Design the Perfect Portico

DOUGLAS VANDERHORN TAKES US THROUGH THE STEPS

"I'M GOING TO GIVE AWAY SOME TRADE SECRETS," VanderHorn begins, producing a tattered copy of ***The American Vignola*** (William R. Ware, 1902), an architectural bible. "The most important consideration is scale. I suggest sketching various options onto a drawing of the house to get the size right.

"The second is proportion. There are mathematical formulas for the proportions of the architectural elements such as, the taller the column is, the wider it needs to be.

"To start your design, pick your type of column or Order — Tuscan, Doric, Ionic and Corinthian — each of which has its own mathematical formula to determine the size of the other elements. Next, decide on the height; that will drive everything else. The most typical height for a portico column is between seven and eight feet."

For our example, if you picked seven feet within the Tuscan order, the diameter is one-seventh its height. If the height is 84 inches, we divide by 7, which gives us 12 inches. That's the diameter of the shaft at the base.

The entablature (the beam and moldings above a column) is determined by the size of the column, so if the diameter of the column is 12 inches, the Tuscan entablature is 1¾ times the diameter or 21 inches high.

"Once you understand these basic rules, you can vary from them a bit, depending on the feel you want to achieve," says VanderHorn. "It depends on the style you are working within. Palladio used similar proportions, which haven't changed much in over 2,000 years."

One mistake to avoid is improper use of moldings.

"Each shape has a specific position in design and every use of moldings, whether inside or out, has a proper place. Classical institutions give lectures just on the proper use of moldings. It's very important, there are rules to this too," stresses VanderHorn.

Another mistake to avoid, applicable when the portico has a balustrade, has two parts. The first is that the balustrade posts should be centered over the columns below. The second, avoid making the railing of the balustrade too tall. Otherwise, the proportions will be off. (One trick Hilton-VanderHorn used in a recent design was to lower the roof of the portico behind the moldings, so that the railings are high enough to provide safety, without upsetting the proportions.)

Asked to sum up his formula for good portico design, VanderHorn says, "Pick a style that goes with the house, make it big enough to function well, and make sure you have quality construction because the portico has to endure the weather."

Halper says that in some cases, original driveways and front entrances were poorly designed and guests simply need to be redirected. "A portico is a big symbol that says, This is where I want you to come in," he notes. On the aesthetic side, a house may look too understated or naked without the addition of a portico, says Halper.

Even so, Doug VanderHorn's philosophy is that "when adding a portico or any other addition, it should look like it was original to the design".

While VanderHorn, Halper, Granoff and Cameron have different styles and approaches, all agree that in order to achieve a good classical portico, one must have a thorough understanding of classical design. Only when there is a full understanding should one embellish or abstract to create an individual style. To put it in the vernacular, you first have to follow the rules.

Richard Granoff used a portico as a key architectural element to redesign an indifferent 1969 "builder's colonial" *(above)* on Stony Wylde Lane in Greenwich. The aesthetic transformation *(top)* helped the owner sell his house within weeks of completion. A short colonnade on one side is integral to the portico design.