

## DESIGN

### THE PARTY BARN

An Interview with Robin Kencel of Ellsworth Ford

Photographs by ChiChi Ubiña

Original Conversion: Philip Johnson

Decoration: Robin Kencel of Ellsworth Ford Associates and Carlene Safdie, design consultant.

#### FCL: What is the history of the barn?

Robin Kencel: The barn, which sits on a beautiful 5-acre property in Madison, is said to be the oldest barn in Connecticut. It was converted to a living space in the 1950s by the distinguished architect Philip Johnson at the request of his good friends the Tremaines. The current owner renovated the barn in 2003.



#### How is the barn now used?

The barn serves two purposes. First, it is a wonderful informal family gathering space. Flanked by fireplaces at either end of the 60' long structure, many a snowy evening have been spent curled up with a good book and roaring fires. The owner is an avid entertainer. With a full kitchen located in the guest cottage that is connected to one end of the barn, dinner parties of all sizes can be easily hosted. The walled garden on one side of the barn offers additional entertaining options.





**The decorating has a definite American theme. Tell us about the approach to furnishing the barn.**

The project began with the owner asking if we would recover the two large sofas that were the anchor for the space, as they were a dark mushroom color and she wanted the room to feel lighter. That request led us to a major rethink of the space in its entirety.

**So what were the goals of the project?**

The major goals of the decoration of the barn were to honor the influence of Phillip Johnson's original renovation of the structure, seen in the glassed in approach to the front and back of the structure and the cabinetry built -ins, while recognizing that the structure is inherently American and specifically, New England. A 1960s watercolor of a flag exemplifies the design approach in bringing together the modernism and Americanism of the architecture.





**What was the biggest challenge you faced in the project?**

Lighting. With its soaring timbered ceiling with suspended beams the barn was dark even in the brightest of days. The only lighting was large theatrical cans from the original conversion and a hanging light over the dining table, which did not provide adequate lighting.

A lighting consultant was brought in and the lighting system was completely replaced. Ambient lighting was installed throughout the beams and rafters with special focus on particular pieces of furniture and art.



**Everywhere you look there are wonderful objects. How were they selected?**

The owner is well traveled and has a very sophisticated sense of style. This fits well with how we approach decorating, which is by building a collection through carefully chosen pieces that fit into the scheme and reflect the owner's interests and tastes. The decoration of the barn has an underlying spirit of woodland animals in the space. The 1930s carved American owl watching over the bookcase and the bronze Japanese hawk by Tagaki Kibo atop the tramp art Adirondack table exemplify this.





**How do you go about building extensive collections such as this?**

Between design consultant and antique and decorative arts dealer Carlene Safdie and myself, there is over fifty years of resources and relationships. Having said that, we like to work with local businesses; many of the pieces in this project are from Harborview Center for Antiques and Hampton Galleries in Stamford and Center 44 in NYC. The tablescape is from Hoaglands, Greenwich.

