



COMEBACK STORY

REBUILT & REBORN

A circa-1901 house rises from the proverbial ashes with its original spirit intact—and more period charm than ever

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PAST PERFECT Cabinets with brushed-on milk paint, tile with a crackled ivory finish, plus honed granite and a flea-market table give the new kitchen a softly aged look. *Cabinets: Crown Point Cabinetry*

When fire destroys

a historical house, should you rebuild it as it was originally, as it was most recently, or as something different and maybe better than both? Lynn and Larry Byrne, owners of a classic Shingle-style house, in Pelham, New York, opted for a little of each.

Today the exterior looks much as it did in a century-old photograph. Inside, the house is filled with period trim and furnishings—right down to reproduction 1880s wallpaper—but the new layout is more open, allowing air, light, and traffic to flow in a most un-19th-century way.

The couple had bought the house just 10 days before catastrophe struck and were living with their three young kids in a smaller home nearby. They still remember waking up in the middle of the night to a phone call from a neighbor who saw what was happening. “I could smell the acrid smoke and hear sirens,” says Lynn. It was scary, and it felt apocalyptic as well: Just seven days earlier, terrorists had attacked the Twin Towers, less than 20 miles away.

The Byrnes’ architect, Paul Osmolskis, also awoke amid sirens that night. It’s a small town, and he, too, was just blocks from the fire. “I knew right away what was happening,” he says.



FOCAL POINT

In the new open plan, a series of inlaid floor patterns draws the eye from the front door to a window seat just off the kitchen.



They all felt helpless as they imagined firefighters slamming through the house, aiming their hoses at its beautiful century-old oak stairs and inlaid floors. When the couple took a closer look the next day, the wraparound porch, a major selling point when they first set eyes on the house, was intact, but the top two floors of their spacious new home were gone, and the basement was under 5 feet of water. The original front door had survived, partly because it was protected by an exterior vestibule added by previous owners, partly because the firefighters had thoughtfully entered from the rear.

The family's loss was devastating, but "it was a material object," Lynn says. "During 9/11, so many people lost their lives. Our attitude was, *This is a fixable thing, we were lucky not to have lost so much more.*"

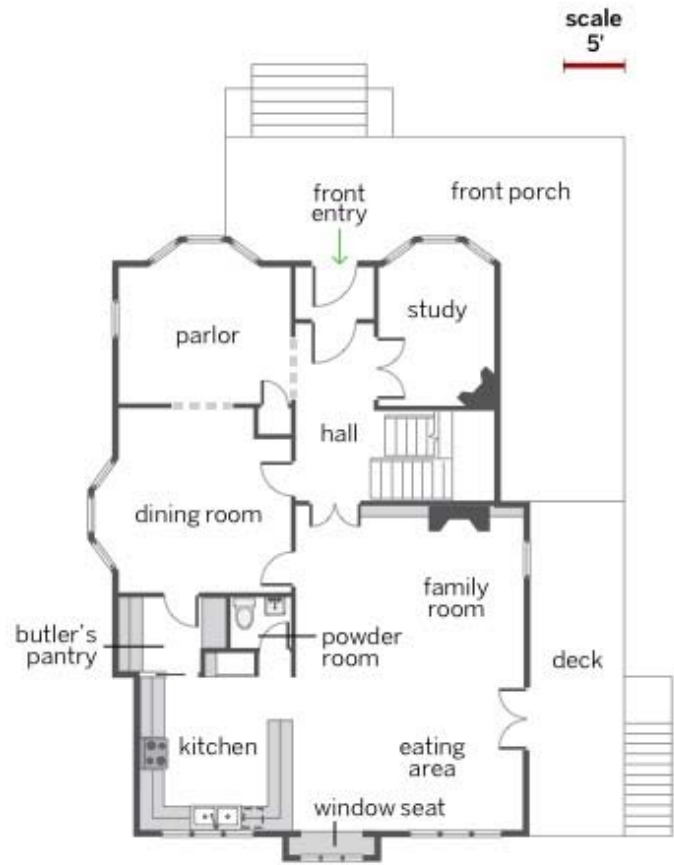
The gambrel-roofed house was something of a local landmark, so rather than walk away, they

COLORFUL MIX
A new gathering spot off the kitchen is period-eclectic.

FLOOR PLANS

During the redo, the original living room became a front parlor and study with a foyer in between; a powder room and laundry room that had been added behind the main stairs came out, allowing a larger staircase and a side deck. The back of the house was bumped out about 13 feet and the back stairs removed, making way for a new kitchen, powder room, and butler's pantry behind the dining room, and

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FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



STARTING OVER It took a year to resurrect the house after it was damaged by fire, INSET. The redo, ABOVE, restored the original rooflines and bay windows, winning a local preservation award dubbed the Phoenix.



decided to salvage and rebuild. “As an architect,” Osmolskis says with a smile, “of course I said we could do it.” General contractor Rick Marino was psyched for the redo too. “I also live two blocks from the house,” he says. “Larry came into my office and said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

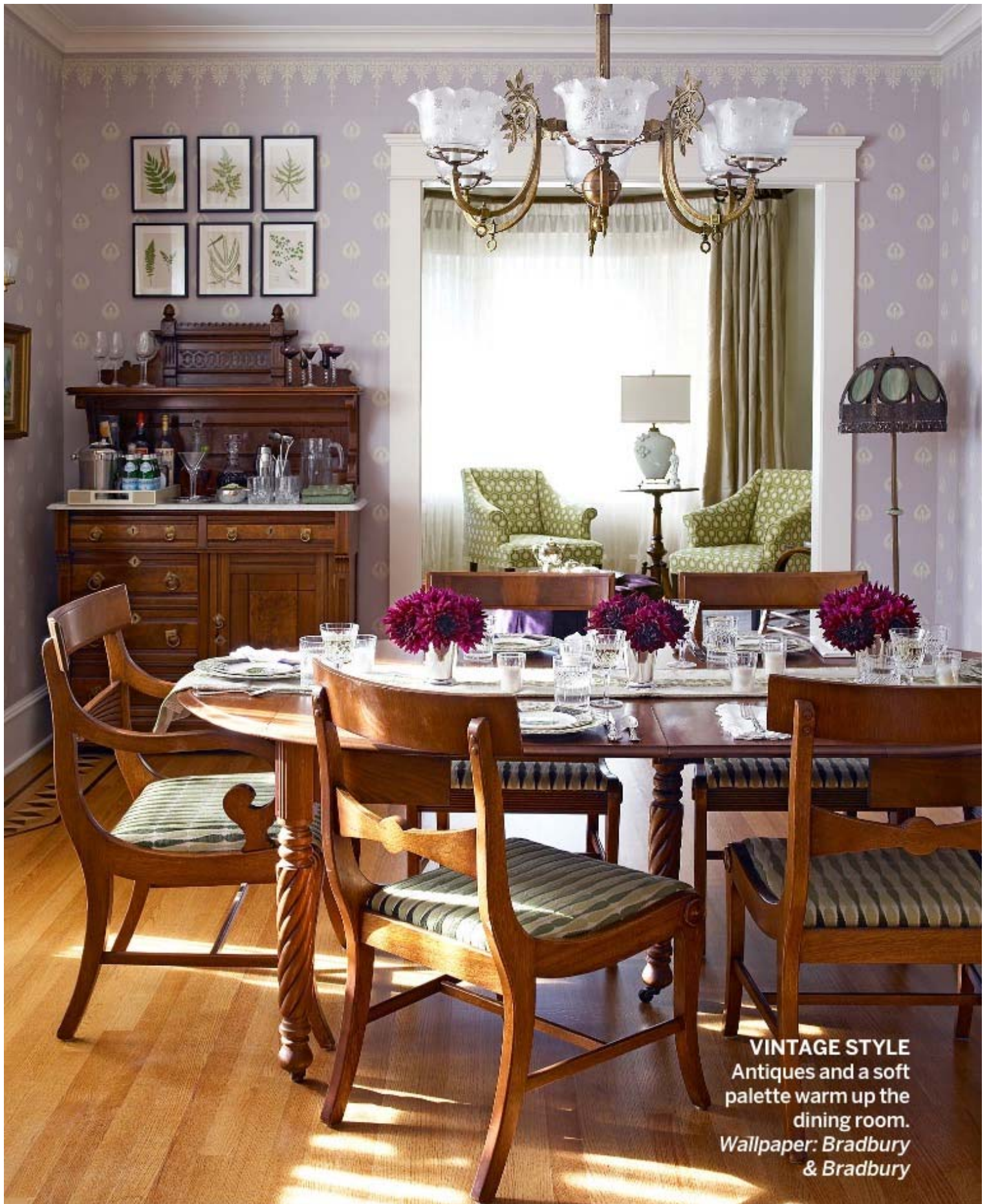
Lynn jumped in. A former attorney, she had developed an interest in decorative arts during legal stints at Sotheby’s and already had interior design as a hobby when faced with the immense challenge of rebuilding her own house. With a husband who was working long days and had no time to work on the place, she was game to make it her job.

“Larry wanted a Rumford fireplace and a wine cellar,” Lynn says. “He joked, ‘Call me when it’s over.’”

Though the endeavor ended up stretching to a year, Lynn now confesses that she enjoyed every minute. “It was like a modern barn raising,” she says of working

COZY SPOT

A deep sofa sets off the family room from the eating area in the opened-up living space. The new fireplace surround is based on one designed by the storied firm McKim, Mead & White.



VINTAGE STYLE
Antiques and a soft
palette warm up the
dining room.
*Wallpaper: Bradbury
& Bradbury*



with an architect, a GC, and subcontractors who all lived nearby. Neighbors even came forward with an old insurance appraisal to help document what the fire had consumed.

The year the house was built isn't known for sure but is thought to be 1901, when what is now called Pelham was moving away from its dusty village past and toward a more mannerly future. Around that time, horse-drawn railroad cars gave way to electric trolleys and a railroad station opened, placing residents within minutes of midtown Manhattan. John Fairchild, a civil engineer who helped plot out Pelham's building lots, may have lived in the house—which would explain the *F* engraved in a carriage step still sitting curbside out front.

The couple's former house was beginning to feel too small when they realized the old Fairchild place was for sale. They liked this one's generous size, and Lynn,

PARLOR IMPROVED

The redo of the former living room restored the original bay window and included a tweaked version of its inlaid floor. Homeowner Lynn Byrne designed the ottoman and chose fabrics with contemporary patterns for the settee and chairs.

with her interest in decorative arts and antiques, was also drawn by its history. After they snapped it up, their insurance company requested a walk-through.

Then came 9/11. The walk-through was postponed, and within days came the fire.

It started when no one was there, its origin unclear. Whatever its cause, it opened up the house to a new configuration—literally. “Demolition,” Osmolskis says deadpan, “was a snap.”

Ancient radiators were exiled in favor of a sleeker, forced-air HVAC system. The chimneys were rebuilt, inviting an overhaul of the fireplaces. And while the facade would soon closely resemble the original, inside Osmolskis tinkered with the back of the house and with the layout to create a better flow of traffic and light.

At the front, he restored the original arrangement by splitting the living room into a parlor and a small study separated by a more-tucked-in foyer. The front-door sight line goes all the way to the back of the house, where the old servants’ stairs were ditched and the rear wall bumped out about 13 feet, allowing one big, open space that could include a new family room and eating area.

Lynn’s priority was an open kitchen, with a peninsula as a buffer between her and her guests.



GUEST-READY The new powder room has “Honeybee” wallpaper, designed in 1881, and a Lincrusta wainscot. *Wallpaper: J.R. Burrows & Company. Sink: Kohler*



Osmolskis placed it behind the original formal dining room and added a neatly turned-out butler's pantry to connect the two. A row of leaded-glass windows over the sink pays homage to ones in the original exterior wall.

The open path from the front of the house to the back serves as Main Street—"everything branches off it," Osmolskis says—and is underscored by a series of inlaid wood "rugs" based on the original inlaid floor pattern. Divvying up the main drag this way "scales it down," Osmolskis says. The floor patterns' maple, Peruvian-walnut, and red-oak borders are echoed by coffering overhead and draw the eye to a sunny window seat overlooking the backyard.

The redesign also excised a powder room and laundry room that had been awkwardly plugged behind the main stairs during an earlier redo. This allowed a larger period-style staircase to go in

OLD MEETS NEW

Colorful fabrics and vintage-style furnishings reinforce the traditional look of the new master bedroom.



and to serve as a major thoroughfare that helps “organize” the house, Osmolskis says.

The stairs climb to three snug bedrooms, a hall bath, and a master suite on the second floor, passing a stained-glass window en route, and descend to a newly finished basement, with built-in shelves over a landing halfway down—an in-transit focal point. “That’s why it’s so lovely,” Marino says generally of the end result. “We didn’t have to work with what we had—we could improve it.”

Though the team wasn’t able to deliver on the Rumford fireplace, they found a spot in the basement for Larry’s wine cellar. They remade the third floor as an aerie for the kids and also extended the porch with a side deck. “I was envisioning kids running around the house,” Osmolskis says, adding with mock solemnity, “It’s important for kids to be able to circumnavigate.”

The house also got its first sprinkler system.

STYLISH RETREAT

The master bath holds pedestal sinks and a classic claw-foot tub. Tub and tub fittings: Porcher. Sinks: Kohler. Tile: Walker Zanger. Wallpaper: Cowtan & Tout



Lynn worked alongside the architect every step of the way, urging him to finish the family-room fireplace, for example, with a mantel similar to one in an 1880s house by McKim, Mead & White. Her patient painter, Oliver Marinovic, came armed with catsup bottles of pigment for custom blends, and buckets of wallpaper paste; research had led her to a half-dozen period patterns, none self-adhesive.

By the time she'd added a mix of antique and contemporary furnishings, Lynn's lawyering days were a distant memory. Today she is a freelance writer and a design and decorative-arts blogger. "It was actually a wonderful experience," she says. "I know that sounds weird—your house burned down and it's a wonderful experience. But it was exciting. I love the creative process, and everyone involved was so proud of what we did."

SOCIAL SPACE

A gathering spot on the front porch is set up for drinks and conversation.

SHOP THIS STYLE

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