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# Addition Magician

FROM OUTSIDE, THE LIVING ROOM THAT ARTISAN BENNETT BEAN ADDED TO HIS 280-YEAR-OLD FAMILY HOME LOOKS JUST LIKE THE ORIGINAL; INSIDE IT SPANS CULTURES FROM NEOLITHIC TO NOW.

In the addition, shelves hold Bennett Bean's own vessels. The carpet under the coffee table is a Bean design, while the Tibetan floral carpet abutting it inspired Bean to design rugs himself. Furniture includes family heirlooms, a Barcelona chair and a Sori Yanagi Butterfly stool. The corner ends of the barrel-vaulted ceiling are visible at the top of the photograph.





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ingular ceramist Bennett Bean is a man of prolific creativity, which is the reason, of course, why his elegant, Zen-like vessels grace collections from New York (the Whitney) to California (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). He has also channeled this quality into garden design, clever renovations of his historic home and more marketable pursuits like Tibetan-inspired rug design. But his right-brain creative process can also be infuriating, as Cathy Bao Bean, his very left-brain wife, discovered—yet again—when he decided to paint the old living room of their New Jersey half-hall colonial.

In *The Chopsticks-Fork Principle*, her memoir of raising a biracial child (Cathy is Chinese), she writes, “Normal people would have done a small patch as a test area. Bennett had to do the whole room . . . to get the full wrong effect. A total of 25 applications and two months later, I developed a severe allergy to paint and he had to stop.” He was also forever switching the pots where Cathy kept comestibles and spices with new containers he liked better, so that making tea could often become a voyage of discovery.

Cathy Bean is actually happy to leave aesthetic decisions to her husband. “That to me is work,” she admits. “I just keep track of what it’s costing.” But at some point, she says good-naturedly, “I want things to function.” So, although she wanted a new living room where she could seat more than six people, experience made her wary about taking Bennett up on his offer to build an addition onto the house to accommodate it.

PRODUCED BY LINDA O’KEEFFE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY CATHERINE TIGHE.  
WRITTEN BY JORGE S. ARANGO.



In the study, the mix includes Tibetan Manjushri staffs, Chippendale furniture and a Bean cupboard used as a shrine. Opposite (clockwise from top): The "dot painting" wall holds Vietnamese skirts, a Chinese scholar's stone and Bean's own pieces (the coat is Uzbek ikat); the addition from outside; Bennett and Cathy Bao Bean.



Bennett approached his wife obliquely, suggesting it would be nice to have the addition for the impending wedding of their son, William. But construction didn't end until just days before the ceremony because, along the way, Bennett also added two porches to a shed and elsewhere reconstructed a grape arbor. He also built two decks, a granite garden wall, two greenhouses and a tree house. Despite Cathy's protestations, she admits the results "function" admirably. The new room perfectly manifests the Beans' appreciation for the cultures of the world and the ways they cross-pollinate, adding richness to life. It effortlessly blends antique with modern, East with West, art with utility, private sanctuary with public entertaining and exhibition space.

Naturally, what excited Bennett initially had nothing to do with any of this. "I wanted to build something," says the



sexagenarian artist with boyish excitement. "We've always lived in a colonial deal, so everything was controlled by what was already there. This was the first time I could do structure."

He wanted the addition to blend with the 280-year-old house but was adamant about not looking up at a peaked ceiling while inside. Since the exterior design of the original structure dictated a peaked roof in the addition, he resolved opposing ideas by hanging a barrel-vaulted ceiling just below it. The result? Tradition outside; cool, pared-down modernism inside. "From the road," Bennett explains, "it's all of a piece."

Bennett had other ideas for the room. Clodagh, the designer and his friend, told him there were far too many. "She was my editor with that space," he allows. "She took a lot of ideas out and didn't put them back."



ne idea that survived Clodagh's editing process, however, is a quintessential demonstration of Bennett's ingenious imagination. One wall sports a grid of dots. Closer inspection reveals them to be the ends of threaded tubes sunken into the wall. Nearby is a pile of steel extensions that can be screwed into the "dots" to hold movable shelving for display. The dots function as conceptual art, the pile of extensions as sculpture and the whole thing as a thoroughly modern exhibition device.

Renovations in the rest of the house are more traditional, though they were undertaken with a contemporary desire for simplicity. Walls were ripped down, floors taken up and then refinished in Bennett's studio. "The house is insulated with logs and hay and mud," says Bean, "so it was a very messy job." The mess continued in the master bedroom. A false ceiling came out, and the room's 19th-century skeleton was coated in 20th-century color. Bennett spent days finishing the fireplace with a 1/8-inch coat of beeswax to give the piece its seeming radiance.

Cathy got the bookcase she wanted in the upstairs hall (though she stopped Bennett after the eleventh shade of yellow, explaining that the books would obscure it anyway). In the study, antique furnishings are updated with modern pieces like a cupboard-cum-shrine that works as a minimalist painting when closed, but opens to reveal family memorabilia.

The house is ever-changing. "Bennett makes no distinction between making a salad and making a room," explains Cathy, laughing. "It's an aesthetic process that has to be worked through. So we have a lot of beautiful salads." ☛

*See Resources, last pages.*



In the master bedroom, South American and Indian quilted textiles adorn an heirloom sleigh bed. The Federal-era mirror is also a family piece. The Indian painting cost \$7.50 at a flea market. The chair is a collaboration between Bennett (headrest and seat) and renowned furniture maker Daniel Mack. The 19th-century walls were given a splash of modern color. The rug is also a Bean design.

