



# What's OLD is NEW Again

Designer Keith Irvine uses timber and antiques to create a rustic look in a new house for friends in New Jersey

Writer: Ted Loos  
Photographer: Simon Upton  
Producer: Senga Mortimer



The double-height living room that anchors Seward and Joyce Johnson's New Jersey home has what designer Keith Irvine calls a "Henry Higgins gallery" surrounding it on the second level (above). Opposite: The rusticated found timbers are the central element in a strategy to make the new house look old. The huge fireplace has an antique iron fireback to help carry the heat.



# D

ESIGNER KEITH IRVINE had known J. Seward and Joyce Johnson for many years, and had designed multiple houses for them. But they had been out of touch for awhile when the Johnsons realized they were having a decorating and design dilemma at their brand-new house in New Jersey. They needed the comfort and security of someone with whom they had some history. "So we called him up and said, 'Come rescue us!'" recalls Seward, a successful sculptor and a scion of the Johnson & Johnson family.

Irvine, of the Manhattan firm Irvine & Fleming, didn't take long to say yes. "The Johnsons are fabulous to work with," he says. "They're both very intellectual and they're also both artists."

Appropriately enough, the decorating concept they came up with was to make new construction look just as old and comfortable as their friendship.

Left: Irvine went for a palette with many whites to help emphasize all the sunlight that streams into the house. The Italian Baroque chandeliers can be lowered on winches. Below: The entertainment room features a custom rug with a Native American design and, over the fireplace, a sculptural piece inspired by a Japanese Zen temple.

"The idea was to create something that looked like it had been working its way through life for a couple hundred years," says Irvine.

Found timbers were the key, giving the house an antique, homey feeling everywhere, especially in the double-height living room. The extra tall fireplace in the room, with an antique fireback to push the heat forward, also gives the impression of having weathered the years.

The mix of plaster and exposed brick atop the fireplace was purposely distressed to make visitors think a leak had been causing water damage. "It worked so well that the contractor called the Johnsons one day and said, 'There's been a terrible leak from the roof on the new fireplace,'" chuckles Irvine.

Irvine loves bold color, but here he created a scheme that was more neutral than his usual work. While there are splashes of red, whites and creams predominate, the better to emphasize the incredible light that floods the house. Color receives more of a workout in the huge entertainment room on the house's lower level, which has a deep red custom rug and Native American pottery.

The theme of old timbers continues there, with a literal twist: Taking inspiration from a Japanese temple design, Seward sketched an arched ornamental piece in the shape of a boomerang. Irvine had it fabricated out of antique beams and fastened to the mantel of the room's fireplace with rusted steel straps.

Irvine put his warm and personal stamp all over the house—in an incongruous-but-perfect wooden chaise by the piano in





Clockwise from left: The 19th-century American table and chairs are fruitwood, and two late-18th-century finials serve as mantel sculptures. The kitchen sports pale yellow and blue tiles and an island. The master bedroom has a fine 18th-century American wing chair covered in a beige check and an 18th-century English quilt in pinks and blues. In the sitting room are side-by-side his-and-hers chaises. Opposite: The guest room has curtains and chairs in a Bowood chintz from Cowtan & Tout. The dresser is a 19th-century American antique.



### Artistic Restraint

Seward Johnson is an artist known particularly for his sculpture, yet he has chosen not to place any of the works in the house or on the 240-acre grounds. But a painting he did of his son John as a baby hangs in the master bedroom (below, right).



“The idea was to create something that looked like it had been working its way through life for a couple hundred years,” says designer Keith Irvine

The Johnsons swim every day, so they created a barnlike structure out of Pennsylvania bluestone and added a rusted corrugated iron roof, complete with crooked weathervane. Irvine decorated with simple wicker furniture. The backside of the building is completely open, flooding the interior with light. For more details, see Resources.

the living room, in the country-style iron chandelier over the breakfast room table. "He's very good at keeping his mind on the whole, but still being idiosyncratic, now and then, just in the right place in the right way," says Joyce.

A native of Scotland, Irvine also used some charming and classic chair styles from the British Isles. An Orkney chair, low-slung but with a high back to keep a knitter safe from drafts, stands in the living room, and an 18th-century lambing chair—used during the lambing season to help with delivery—graces the entertainment room.

The kitchen is a particular source of pride for Irvine and his associate, Felicity Wilde. "It's such a happy space," he says. "When you go in the door, you smile." Glazed blue and yellow terra-cotta tiles brighten the space, as does the painted floor, and the room overlooks a pastoral field with grazing sheep.

Though the timbers continue in the bedrooms, the decor there has "a slight French turn," says Irvine. He placed two 18th-century French painted chairs in the master bedroom and covered them in a soft blue and white stripe.

Plenty of fine English and American antiques are scattered about, however, notably a pine desk dating to 19th-century New Hampshire and the English Regency painted mirror above it in the Johnson's sitting room.

The sitting room, just off the master bedroom, also has a bit of romance. The Johnsons requested side-by-side chaises with arms only on the outside of each piece. Why? So the couple could lie and hold hands at the same time. "It's not a request we hear too often," says Irvine, sounding very much as if he'd like to hear it again.

