

HOUSE PROUD

In a Greek Revival, Wit and Stagecraft



By JOHN LELAND

HERE is one difference between drama and architecture: a play sells its fictions to the audience, while a house sells its fictions to the actors inside. On a recent afternoon in this New England coastal village, Tom Viertel talked about the stories he wanted his weekend house to tell. Mr. Viertel, 61, belongs to the Broadway team that produced "Hairspray," "The Producers" and, most recently, "Little Shop of Horrors." The house is an 1844 Greek Revival number in the final stages of renovation.

For Mr. Viertel, the house, like the shows, is an exercise in memory. "My grandparents had a screened-in porch in Stamford when I was growing up," he said. "It was a house near the water that I used to spend a lot of time in. I wanted to recreate that atmosphere."

"We were eating grilled cheese sandwiches and potato chips at the counter of an establishment called Carson's Variety Store, the kind of place where children grab candies from big glass jars, and 1960's R&B songs play on the sound system — an occurrence that would have been unlikely in the 1960's, when you didn't have a soundtrack everywhere you went, and certainly not a pop one."

Mr. Viertel, whose shows have been steeped in the music of this era, tapped along.

Led by the ghost of cholesterol past, we had entered a seam in time between the ersatz and the real, where an invented notion of the past becomes the source of the present. Critics often complain that reality television makes fiction of the present, but people make fiction of the past every day.

Mr. Viertel was comfortable in this seam. It was where he wanted his weekend house to be. "I wanted a sense of a beach house, which you couldn't have and still be part of a village," he said. "It was always about, 'How do you take an in-village Greek Revival and make it feel like a beach house?'"

The property in question, not far from Carson's, is a white clapboard house with carved pilasters and a storage shed that looks like a Greek temple. It is ringed by a mortared stone wall, which in turn is ringed by the houses of seven neighbors, all of similar style and vintage. In the backyard is a shingled outbuilding, built around 1910, that has been converted into a guest quarters. You can walk to the town's general store.

Last year, after a fruitless search for a beach cottage, Mr. Viertel and Pat Daily, his partner of 14 years, bought the house for \$400,000, in part because they fell in love with the possibilities for the outbuilding. Ms.



OFF BROADWAY Tom Viertel, a producer of "Little Shop of Horrors" (above left), and Pat Daily at their Greek Revival weekend home.

Daily, 53, runs a business called Showtix, which sells theater tickets to groups. Mr. Viertel and Ms. Daily also travel the country during the summer as barbecue judges. If pressed, the couple might describe the pillars of their life together as theater, 'cue and Dairy Queen.

When they began renovating, they loved everything about the house except what it was not. It was not the beach bungalow of Mr. Viertel's past. This called for some theatrical invention.

One way architecture and theater

are alike is that both construct the past through the prism of the present. For example, the Greek Revival style, which boomed throughout the United States from the 1820's to the 1850's, conjures images of Hermes and Zeus chilling with post-Colonial New Englanders. It invented a past (the Greeks did not go in much for clapboards) to make the present seem more august.

Mr. Viertel, whose theater productions play loosely with memory and music, wanted to construct a different classical past. "The 50's and 60's

are our era," he said. "Three years ago, our group produced a play called 'Mnemonic,' which was all about seeing human history as the history of flight — fleeing persecution, famine, identity. But after a while you are who you are. You can't flee that."

They hired William Roehl, an architect who lives across the street, to preserve the house's Greek Revival integrity, and Patrick Gallagher, a decorator, to undermine it. Mr. Gallagher's contribution might be called baby boom pastiche: a vintage stove; a croquet set and an antique glider love seat on the porch; an old red Arvin radio set in the den. He modeled the yellow tiles in the kitchen after the kitchen on the HBO show "Six Feet Under."

The outside of the house had to match the neighborhood, which had one relationship to the past; the inside was for the owners, who were constructing another. Mr. Roehl raised the height of the house to create more room upstairs, but stayed within the Greek Revival style. "One thing that would spoil your time in Noank would be something that didn't fit in with the community," Mr. Viertel said.

It was comforting that the architect lived across the street, so had a stake in how the house was perceived. Mr. Roehl said, "He kids me that he hired me because I'd have to look at it every morning. But architects aren't very harshful about their work."

Mr. Gallagher, on the other hand, was inventing from scratch. Because the couple did not own any weekend house furnishings, everything had to be bought, mostly from the antique stores of Hudson, N.Y. In a few afternoons, they selected the furnishings of a life well lived, albeit by somebody else.

The house was divided into small rooms, and each was supposed to look different. "We made a big deal that it not look like somebody's showroom," Mr. Gallagher said. At one point, after the decidedly retro kitchen was complete, they decided to pull back on the period look, mixing vintages so the house would not feel like a theme experiment.

"To some degree it was like proping a show," Mr. Viertel said of the accumulation of things. "But I saw it more as expressing an idea the same

way you express the idea of a playwright." On a pass through the porch, he said, "It all turns out to be a combination of memories and loves."

Mr. Viertel likened the process of renovating the house to staging a musical. You hire creative people, give them a budget and schedule, then grind your teeth when things inevitably take longer than expected. "With a theatrical production, you have an opening night, so everything has to be done by then," he said. "Without that, I lost some leverage for yelling." Over all, though, he described the process as smooth.

The question of whether and how to construct a past is one of the oldest in America. As the historian Michael Kammen notes in his book "Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Cul-

A theater producer decorates with an eye for fiction.

ture," the nation of immigrants has often seen itself as creating a land of the future. Traveling about America in the 1830's, during the ascendancy of Greek Revival architecture, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted that the people he observed would have no use for the past. "Among a democratic people," he wrote, "poetry will not feed on legends or on traditions and memories of old days."

For Mr. Viertel and Ms. Daily, living in two constructions of the past, the house only multiplies memories of old days, both their own and somebody else's. Stories of the past pile up around them: of ancient Greece, of 19th-century New England and of a beach house in 1950's Connecticut.

As a radio station played oldies over the recessed sound system, Ms. Daily opened boxes of pizza with bacon, yet another local tradition. The ghost of cholesterol past was back. With apologies to Tocqueville, in such a presence one is wisest not to consider the future.



TIME WARP Though the house is from 1844, the decorator, Patrick Gallagher, gave the interiors a 1950's feel. A sofa, top left, was upholstered in a Brunswick & Fils chenille; top right, a new faux 50's refrigerator from Northstar, genuine 40's dinette set and stove, and a hand-stenciled floor. Above left, custom glass tiles and a shower head inspired by one in the Savoy Hotel in London; right, a 40's rattan chair in the bedroom.

Specs: Vintages, Room by Room

FOR the home of Tom Viertel and Pat Daily, Patrick Gallagher created a period beach-house ambience, the period being the 1950's and 60's. The sofa in the study is upholstered with a cuddly yellow Yorks Chenille; to the trade, \$73 a yard from Brunswick & Fils, (212) 838-7878. The 1940's yellow kitchen dinette set was \$395 at Carousel Antique Center, Hudson, N.Y., (315) 828-9127. Mark King, an artist in Stonington, Conn., hand stenciled the wood floor in blocks of blue-violet and cream for \$2,500; he charges \$20 to \$190 a square foot; (860) 333-3857. The Northstar 1959 Retro refrigerator is new; \$2,795 at Preston Trading Post, Preston, Conn., (860) 886-1484. The 1940's stove is \$6,900 at Antique Stove Heaven, Los Angeles, (323) 298-5581.

In the bedroom, the linen fabric on a 1940's rattan chair is by Sheila Coombes, for Sanderson; \$150 a yard, to the trade, through



the Martin Group, Boston, (617) 951-2526. In the bathroom, he used a custom blend of one-inch blue glass tiles, \$46.20 a square foot; solid colors are \$28.60 a square foot at Urban Archaeology, (212) 371-6646.

The 1920's oak trestle table, above, was \$3,200 from Mr. Gallagher's private trove.

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