

A row of early 19th-century chairs greets visitors in the front passage of Chris and Lilla Matheson Ohrstrom's home. He copied the wallpaper ('Adena Pin Ring') from a pattern found in the house where Thomas Worthington, the first-ever senator of Ohio, lived

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When Chris Ohrstrom talks about moving house he's referring to the time he dismantled a derelict Jefferson-era gem bit by bit, then dispatched the whole thing to a different part of Virginia – whereupon it was painstakingly rebuilt and restored. Now, rightfully returned to splendour, the dwelling is enveloped by all the other orphaned historic buildings he's shipped and signed for. Mitchell Owens tracks progress with a conservationist extraordinaire. Photography: Simon Upton

In the beginning, at what is now known as Lee Hall, there was no house. There was no barn, no dairy and no smokehouse. No guest quarters. No kitchen. No eccentric dovecote – squabs above, hens below – and no privy, where General Robert Edward Lee's son reportedly hid from Union soldiers. The philanthropist Chris Ohrstrom brought all of these historic structures, one at a time, to The Plains, a tiny Virginia town with a population of just 255 at the last count lying about an hour southwest of Washington DC. The buildings themselves came from all parts of the region, where they had been allowed to fall into disrepair and ruin.

'This was a very, very high-style house for its area and period,' Chris says of the main house at Lee Hall, which he found in a parlous state near the state capital of Richmond, Virginia. Built in two phases, the first in 1818, it had been abandoned during the 1940s and was moved to its present site five decades later, the first structure of an eventual ten Ohrstrom salvations that stand proudly alone or have been incorporated on the more than 150-acre estate. With his conservation partner, Alex di Valmarana, who is now overseeing her in-laws' famous Villa la Rotonda in northern Italy, Chris watched the condemned structures be dismantled,

numbered, restored and made whole again over the decades. A personal Williamsburg, but without losing any of their 19th-century appeal. In fact, they gained it. Authentic furniture, vivid paints, patterned carpeting and wildly contrasting borders and wallpapers came into play. Some of the latter are antiques, such as the Zuber & Cie scenic panoramic of Brazil that lines the dining room; it has a few early 19th-century amendments, though most panels are 1920s reproductions. Other papers are hand-blocked by Adelphi Paper Hangings, the deluxe firm that Chris and his friend Steve Larson co-founded in 1999, in central New York state.





Above: an exercise in 'period-style decorating as opposed to a museum interior', the parlour features chairs made for the Massachusetts State House and, on the mantel, souvenirs from the owner's travels for the World Monuments Fund. Opposite: over a family-room door hangs a New York landscape, early 1800s, by Thomas Chambers. Beyond, the kitchen's pendants are from Stiffkey Bathrooms

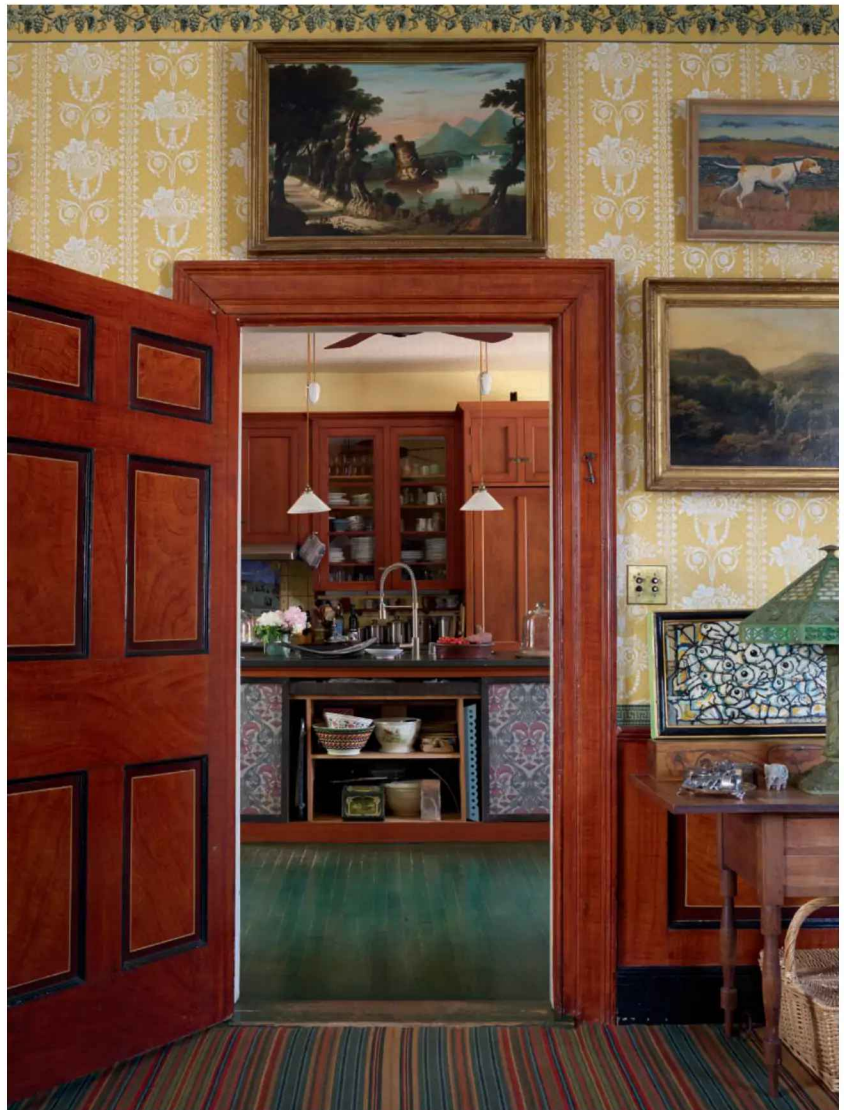


'My concept was to make a comfortable family house using period design, somewhat shambolic, filled with dogs, children and scattered boots,' says Chris, a father of four, who is now in the midst of moving an 1870s *minka*, or farmhouse, from Japan to Jamaica. The former chairman of the World Monuments Fund and his artist wife, Lilla Matheson Ohrstrom, are building a stone getaway there and will use the thatched *minka*, its wooden innards reconfigured into a four-bedroom guest house. Chris is also helping to restore the Georgian port of Falmouth, through the American Friends of Jamaica, and to establish historic preservation techniques on the Caribbean island.

What John Fowler, he of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, would have thought

of Chris's cultural cross-pollination remains unknown. But Fowler did decorate Daylesford House, the Anglo-Indian extravaganza in Gloucestershire where Chris's Dallasite mother, Mary, reigned as Lady Rothermere in the 1960s and 1970s, so perhaps the exoticism of those disparate countries would have found favour. Anti-museum sentiment aside – 'This is for a family,' Chris insists, calling Lee Hall's interiors merely 'period-style decorating' – there is something reverential about the rooms here.

'Wait a minute: if this is for guests, what does the main house look like?' marvelled Simon Upton, who photographed the property for *The World of Interiors*. He had just moved his bags and equipment into the 1820s North Carolina house that serves



as guest accommodation, its rooms outfitted with Adelphi wallpaper, copied from one at Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, and an old bed given to the Ohrstroms as a wedding gift. But, Simon says with a shrug: 'Things, in general, are treated with too much reverence by most people. A racehorse is meant to run.'

The Ohrstroms embrace a similar viewpoint: piling food on 19th-century plates (who cares if they have to be washed by hand?), while board games are played on a refectory table that Chris describes as 'one of the first antiques I bought when I was at the University of Virginia'. William Daniell's 1830s prints of Indian scenes – they are digital copies, by the way – are glued straight on to the sulphur-yellow walls of the front parlour and framed with

Adelphi's 'Otis Federal Chain' border, a 1790s English pattern. 'The prints were inspired by my childhood at Daylesford House,' Chris explains, 'which was built by the first governor-general of Bengal.'

Other Daylesford objects, such as a set of sporting prints found in an attic and once belonging to the first Viscount Rothermere, co-founder of the *Daily Mail*, can be found at Lee Hall, but most furnishings are either old or have been made or commissioned by the owners, including colourful tiles by Lilla. 'The most important thing about the house is that so many dear friends have had a hand in it,' says her husband. 'Some are still alive and some have passed, but I live with all of them every day. I am surrounded by the works of my friends, so it is meaningful to me.'





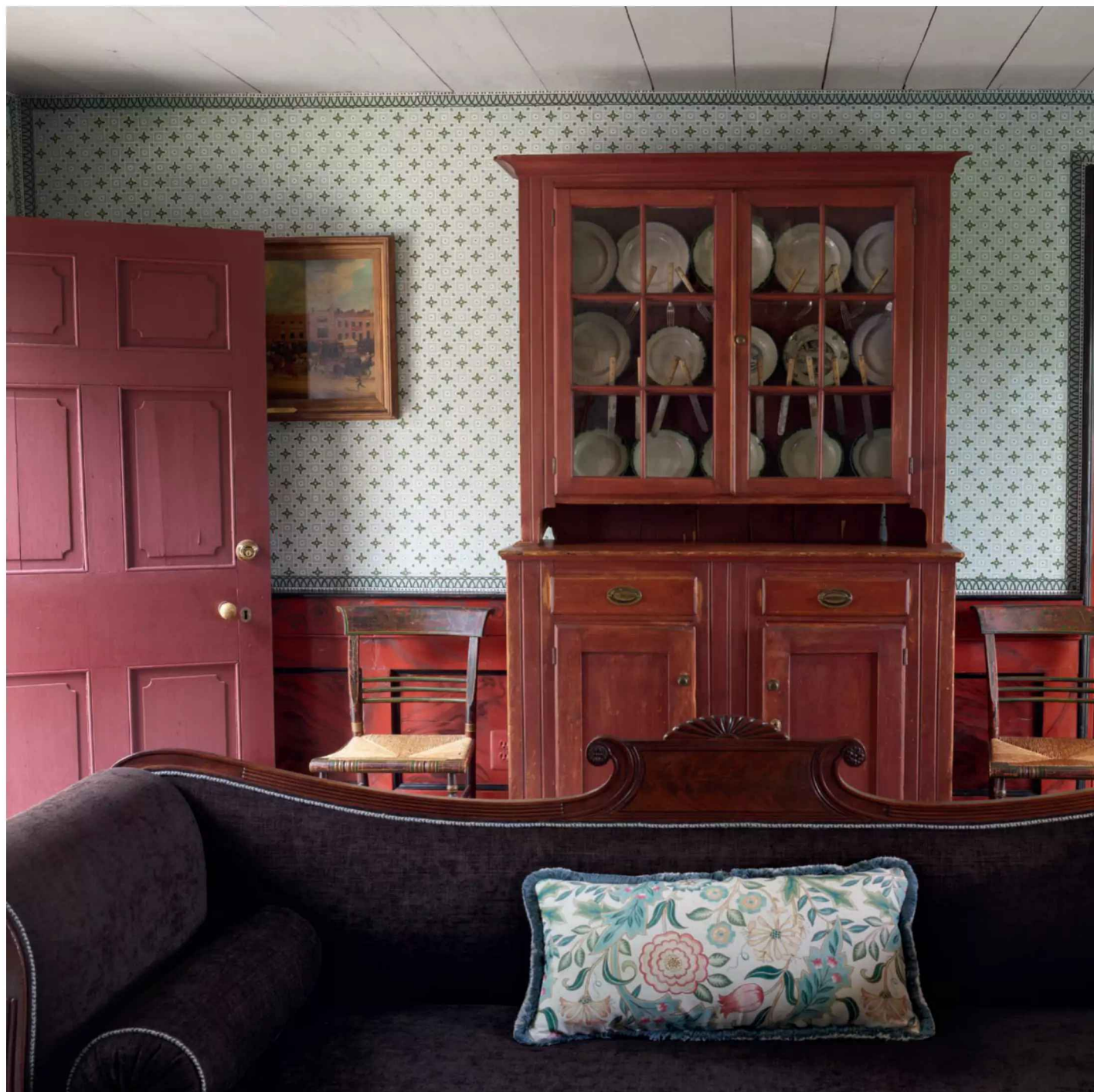
Opposite: surrounded by Philadelphia chairs dating to 1816, the dining table is set with a creamware service by Don Carpentier, a self-taught tinsmith, woodworker, blacksmith and potter. Above: Doug Vickers, a master carpenter, built the bookcases in the library, where an Egyptian-style frieze – copied from one seen in the Paris shop of Madeleine Castaing, Chris's 'decorating idol' – rings the room



Above: one of the bathrooms features a tub that architect Calvert Vaux installed in the 1850s at Beaulieu, Lilla's family home in Newport, Rhode Island. Opposite: a Philadelphia canopy bed lords it over the main bedroom, along with George Washington in an engraving



Below: in the guest parlour, a 19th-century glazed cabinet housing antique dishes is surrounded by 'Stars and Squares' wallpaper, a Federal-style pattern of c1796 discovered more than 100 years ago during the restoration of a historic house in Boston. Opposite: a pair of painted Windsor chairs sits beneath an heirloom portrait and alongside enclosed stairs, which lead from this guest room to the attic





The ‘brilliant’ Don Carpentier of East-field Village – ‘my mentor’, as Chris says – made the mochwaware vessels that the Ohrstroms use every day. Another friend, Rabbit Goody, wove the back parlour’s striped Venetian carpet. Chris based the main parlour’s pelmets on Baltimore, Maryland, chair splats, and he ground into linseed oil the same room’s yellow and red, as well as the Prussian blue used on the mouldings of the front passage and the dining room. The vibrant colours that make up his palette replicate those originally used, and an English Heritage analyst approved the schemes. He made and painted panelled doors too, and created golden cloak pins centred with rosettes for the parlour’s transparent curtains. Chris and Alex added stacked porches

to the back of Lee Hall, though they ensured that the details on them represented a later, but architecturally logical, time. The parlour doors, all of which are original, bear satinwood graining with sulphur inlay, faux-ebony panel mouldings and ‘incredibly rare’ mortise locks, Chris proudly points out.

Good luck trying to hire an architect who knows how to handle those. Or even how to execute satinwood graining. Chris Ohrstrom, however, knows precisely who to ring – and now you do too ☺ To contact Alex di Valmarana, ring 01327 260333, or visit alexandravalmarana.com. Adelphi Paper Hangings. Ring 001 518 284 9066, or visit adelphipaperhangings.com. American Friends of Jamaica. Ring 001 212 265 2550, or email info@theafj.org