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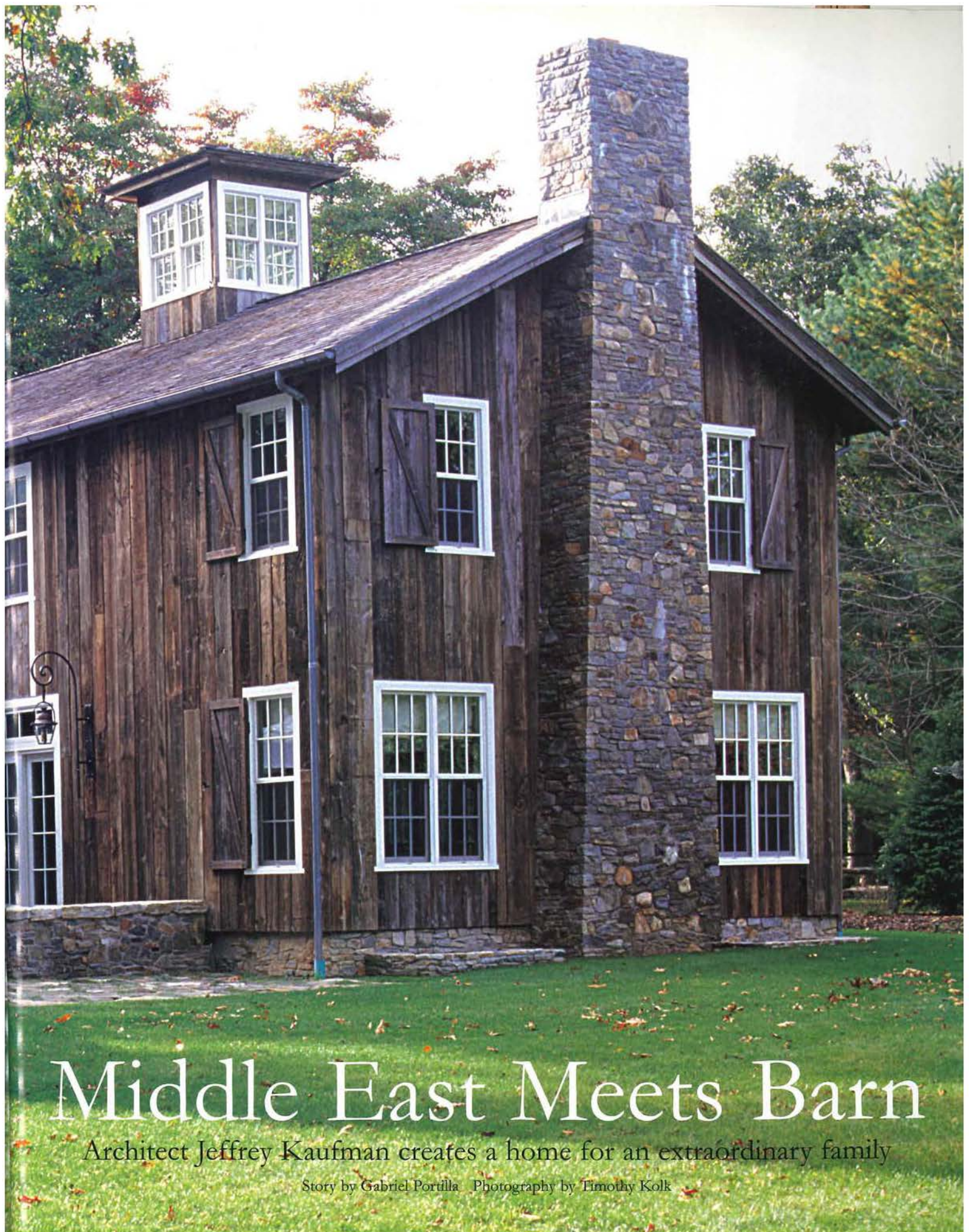
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# Middle East Meets Barn

Architect Jeffrey Kaufman creates a home for an extraordinary family

Story by Gabriel Portilla Photography by Timothy Kolk





Patio furniture by @Home Design (see resources).





The process of moving from one house to another is, for most of us an unpleasant chore. But for the owners of this home in Southport, their move was a harrowing event. Living in Bahrain during the first Gulf War, they were suddenly told they had just one week to pack up their life's belongings and evacuate.

The threat of war was upon the young family of three: she an American, with a love for Middle Eastern culture and design, he a Palestinian doing business abroad and an infant son. They packed what they could and escaped the desert brown of Kuwait for the bucolic green of Fairfield County, where they purchased a small unassuming 1970s cottage in a lovely verdant setting. The house was small—about 1,500 square feet—but it had character and a wonderful double-height living room that was unexpected in so small a home.





*(Facing page)* On the mantle, the Afgan platter is generally used to serve dates. The lantern is Moroccan and the object to the right of the platter is amusingly an antique American speaker, purchased solely because of its unique shape.

*(Above)* A Syrian inlaid chair, once owned by an Ottoman Governor, sits perched in a sun lit corner. The chest, whose top is actually one-half of a Bahraini door, sits atop a custom base of similar heritage, also built in Bahrain for the homeowner.









After the war, the family resumed annual visits to the Middle East, and spent their leisure time there exploring the labyrinthine souks and old world antique shops for furniture, unique decorative objects and, of course, beautiful hand-made carpets. To house their growing collection and their growing family, which now included three boys sharing one bedroom, the homeowners decided to enlarge their house. By completely renovating the existing cottage and adding to it, they would triple their space and recreate their home in the style of an antique barn.

"I always wanted to live in a converted barn" the homeowner says. Her architect, Jeffrey M. Kaufman of Westport, agreed to design a barn in classic American vernacular and connect it seamlessly to the wholly reconfigured house. In essence he created a New England homestead that appears to have evolved through generations, with additions accumulating over the years till house and barn connected.

To capture the look of a time-worn structure, the architectural design team, which included Jeff Kaufmann as design architect and Pablo Garcia as project manager while employed at Robert Orr and Associates, used salvaged wood from dismantled barns. Kaufman is very detail-conscious, so he made sure to use barn siding that had been exposed to similar amounts of sunlight so there wouldn't be too much variation from plank to plank, and the pieces would look like they had been in place for decades.

Kaufman carried the theme inside the house, using dark, unfaded siding from the sunlight-free northern faces of old barns for ceilings in the barn living space, establishing a wonderful warm expanse overhead. To create a cohesive whole within all the interiors, additional barn siding was used for floors and ceiling in many other spaces.

The most dramatic use of reclaimed materials is the incorporation of thick old posts and beams within the main house, making the cottage look like a great old barn that had been converted into a gracious dwelling. Kaufman wanted someone visiting the house to wonder, "Is this really an old place or is it new?"

That sense of wonder extends to the house's interior decor with its mix of Middle Eastern, European, and American design elements. It's surprising how well the seemingly disparate elements work together. "I call it Middle East meets barn," the homeowner says.

Visitors are greeted at the front door by a brass door knocker in the shape of a hand—an ancient Middle Eastern symbol intended to ward off the evil eye for the inhabitants. Inside, the living room is decorated with a comfortable sofa and chairs that were bought in Bahrain and re-upholstered in French fabrics.

(Above left) A traditional Baharaini lamp illuminates the stairway.  
(Above right) Kuwaiti calligraphy hangs over a Middle Eastern tea bench.



In the center of the room,  
Jordanian pillows face an  
Indian inlay table.





A great iron chandelier hanging ten feet from the high ceiling was custom made in Georgia. Above the fireplace the homeowner took a window which used to be on an exterior wall of the original cottage and made it into a clever mirror. On either side of the fireplace hang paintings by Middle Eastern artists; on the right is a painting by a female Iraqi painter, and on the left is a piece by a Kuwaiti. Beneath this painting is a tea bench typically used by men sitting in the souks and smoking their hookahs. The coffee table is Middle Eastern as is the carpet, woven in a red the shade of sun-burnt earth.

The homeowner, who decorated the house herself, likes “pieces with stories behind them, to live with history.” A desk in her husband’s study comes from the Queen Noor Foundation of Jordan, but the walls and built in shelves are all made with wood reclaimed from the walls of houses built a hundred years ago and as many miles away. This philosophy of living with history extends to such interesting applications of salvaged materials as using antique Syrian doors to make closets into spacious cabinets that house everything from stereo equipment to a wet bar.

Most of the home’s details were not so off the cuff, however. She labored over them. For instance, metal ties that hold the reclaimed beams in the living room in place were custom made to very particular specifications. When they arrived, she found the finish was all wrong—a rusty orange that didn’t look authentic. So she ran to a local paint store and had colors mixed until she came up with a perfect bronze-black paint to refinish the ties with. In the powder room, tiles were custom made and painted in Morocco to capture the look of old Moroccan walls. For some, less attention to details would have been just fine, but to her, “fine is not OK—it has to be great.” This became her motto during the project, and it inspired her design team to strive to meet her lofty challenges.

Truly great things were achieved in the barn addition, where a great room incorporates a magnificent kitchen, a dining area and a living area which faces the room’s powerful focal point—an enormous stone and wood fireplace. Here too, the introduction of Middle Eastern furniture adds a touch of exoticism into a classic Yankee interior. The hand painted dining chairs are Italianate, but the buffet is Middle Eastern. A wall-mounted flat screen television becomes just one more design element thrown into the cultural mix.

The kitchen is decorated with pottery bought on trips throughout the Middle East. A slab of stone topping an island workspace was the object of a tri-state search, as it was so difficult to find a solid piece large enough. The counter tops are a sybarite’s dream of bronze with an antique patinated finish made by Surface Techniques in Norwalk. The homeowner went to the company’s shop in Norwalk to work with the artisans to get the finish just right, because, of course, fine is just not good enough.



(Right) Table settings by Simon Pearce of Westport (see resources).









The canopy, tapestry and floor runner were purchased at various bazaars in Turkey.





Carpets have been collected over the years throughout the homeowners travels. Chair from Signorello of Westport (see resources).



An antique Syrian door, bought in Jordan, hides the house sound system. A Persian water pitcher stands in the foreground.  
*(Left)* A Middle Eastern door knocker wards off evil spirits.  
*(Below Left)* Cast iron light fixture in the French style, custom made in Aspen, Colorado.







Although the countertops are certainly opulent, the homeowner insists, “you don’t have to spend a fortune for great looking things.” A case in point being the decorative metal grills built into the custom wood cabinets. They look like something handcrafted by a blacksmith, but in fact they were trivets and door mats bought for a few dollars each at Linens ‘n Things.

These combinations of luxury with thriftiness, rusticity with sophistication, and Middle East with America come together to create a house that looks lived in, comfortable, and fun. Kaufman says his goal in designing houses is to “get a new house feeling warm; to make it a home instead of a house.” This house is the embodiment of that wish. ■

*(Facing page)* The candelabra, carved plaster backsplash and the tiles are Moroccan.

*(Right)* Dubbed “Command Central”, these built-in work stations are for the three sons.

*(Left)* Towels and dispensers from The Linen Shop of New Canaan (see resources).



