



Cathy Grier and Michele Steckler's Columbia County, New York, home beckons visitors in from the cold. Endowed with the stateliness of a pair of saltbox houses, it also features more casual screened porches and terraces. The building is sited so it receives passive solar heat in winter and shading from the roof overhang in summer.

# *Shaker It Up*

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL SHOPENN



A singer and a Broadway producer  
build a cutting-edge nontoxic home with  
Colonial and Shaker inspiration.



An overstuffed red chair invites people into the cozy study. “This is our smallest room, and it’s a haven,” Michele says. “It’s the place one of us is likely to go for a nap.”

**F**our years ago, when Cathy Grier and Michele Steckler started dreaming about a home in upstate New York, they came up with a wish list that might have seemed unattainable to some—Michele desired a graceful, historic structure while Cathy wanted the airiness and sustainability of a modern home. With time, lots of research and some compromises, the couple now happily resides in a house that embodies both.

Set amid 15 acres of woodland and fields in Columbia County, south of Albany, the home could be mistaken at first glance for two historic houses bridged by a slope-roofed modern addition. In reality, its 21st-century architecture blends timeless, old-fashioned quality and new green technology—a creative mix, much like the residents themselves. Cathy, a modernist with a passion for a healthy environment, is a blues and folk singer/songwriter. Michele, who loves all things antique, is a Broadway producer who works with Disney Theatrical Productions on projects such as the stage versions of “The Lion King” and “Tarzan.”

“I’m flattered when people ask whether this house is a renovation,” says architect Dennis Wedlick, who designed the home to blend into the region’s historic architectural style. “Cathy and Michele wanted a house that was gentle on the environment and as healthy as possible, yet they wanted it to suit the landscape and the area’s rural flavor.”

Wedlick designed two separate saltbox-style houses joined in an L shape by a contemporary, glass-enclosed living room/kitchen/dining room. (Saltbox architecture—named after Colonial salt-shipping tins with a similar shape—features asymmetrical roofs that slope from two stories to one.) The guest room, which doubles as Cathy’s music studio, is upstairs in one house with a study below; the master bedroom and bath are located in the other, above the kitchen and dining room.



The home's wood-burning fireplace warms the open living room in less than an hour on a wintry morning. Its soapstone surround stores radiant heat, much appreciated by Marguerite, who curls up on an antique rug from Michele's childhood home.

The couple originally considered buying an old house but never found one that spoke to them. They decided instead to build with nontoxic, eco-friendly materials. When they discovered rural property overlooking scenic rolling hills, the two native New Englanders swung into building mode. "With time, I became as passionate as Cathy about healthy building," Michele says. "Truthfully, I've never looked back and wished we had bought an older fixer-upper."

### Hardhat time

Construction revved up just as Cathy was beginning months of interferon treatments for hepatitis C. "I was more sensitive and aware of my home environment than I normally would have been," she says, "so I was very motivated to make our home as healthy as possible." With her musical performance schedule on hold, she plunged into research on everything from sources of indoor air pollution—glues, grout, spackle, sealers—to items that impact global health, such as clapboard siding made from mahogany, a tropical hardwood that's shipped across the world. (They chose quarter-sawn spruce from a family-run mill in Vermont instead.) "It can be overwhelming to make so many decisions about so many products," Cathy acknowledges.

The 2,300-square-foot house became Cathy's full-time job, and she kept a journal of everything she learned. "It was therapeutic for me to focus on research while going through treatment," she says. "In the process, I discovered a passion for green, nontoxic building that's equal to my love for making music." She's currently launching a healthy-house consulting company—two years after her home's completion and her full recovery.

Cathy and Michele accomplished their vision through close collaboration with Wedlick, who had green-building experience, and the contractor, Bill Stratton, who was new to the field. "We referred to ourselves as a team—a triumvirate of designer, builder and homeowner—and everybody had an equal voice," Michele says.

To assure that everyone who worked at the construction site was on board, Cathy and Michele posted a sign with an excerpt from *Prescriptions for a Healthy House* by Paula Baker-Laporte, Erica Elliott



A Shaker chair, one of a set of four, was a cheap tag-sale find. Michele and Cathy refurbished the rotted wicker seats with supplies from the nearby Shaker Museum and Library in Old Chatham, New York.



"Cathy and I agreed we wanted a living room, dining room and kitchen that flowed together, even though it's not a historically accurate floorplan," Michele says. Architect Dennis Wedlick created this open space with a ceiling that slants from 13 feet to 9 feet. Insulated, double-glazed windows and French doors let the couple appreciate views in a way upstate New Yorkers never could have 200 winters ago. Dramatic nighttime lighting is provided by a non-electric "candelier" over the dining room table and pendant lights made from rewired Victorian gas lampshades.



Cathy loves soaking in the reproduction clawfoot tub and gazing out the window. The house's cabinetmaker, Don Keith, created the sink base from cherry wood. A storage space is tucked beneath the eaves.

TOP: Michele, whose father is an antique dealer, grew up loving the classic New England painted blanket chest that now sits in the living area. Above hangs a 19th-century folk-art Hudson River Valley landscape painting that the couple appreciates because of its childlike whimsy.

BOTTOM: The Shaker-railed stairway climbs to the guest bedroom that Cathy uses as a music studio. The door leads to the home's "sunset" porch, an ideal place for watching the ebbing colors of a wintry sky.



and John Banta (New Society, 2001): *This is a healthy house. Toxic substances such as pesticides, fungicides and noxious cleaning products are prohibited. Gasoline-generated machines or open combustion heaters shall not be used inside. Smoking is prohibited. Spills of fuels, solvents or chemicals must be avoided. Alternatives to specified materials must be approved in writing prior to use by owner and/or architect.*

"Building our home was all about education and better health—for us and the builders," Cathy says. "Our electrician told us he usually gets headaches from breathing the chemicals that painters and floor finishers use. In our house, he felt fine—the only scents were wood and the natural tung oil finish."

Others on the crew needed convincing. "One day I noticed a delivery of wood was wrong—it was arsenic treated," Cathy says. "When I told the workmen we had to return it, their response was, 'Why can't we use this? It's up to code.' I pointed out that sawing it would spray arsenic-filled sawdust all over the place—and they weren't protected by gloves or masks."

Cathy's dedication extended to construction-site waste. Although collection barrels for recycling were available, her weekly Dumpster sorties uncovered wood and metal scraps, cardboard, and empty water bottles that had been tossed away. In the end, Cathy's vigilance saved both money and landfill space: In a year of building, they filled just two of the four Dumpsters for which they'd budgeted.

### Old-fashioned with a future

"If you consider the lifecycle of your house—from the time it's built until it's demolished—green, nontoxic building doesn't seem so expensive after all," Cathy says. "We all need to stop thinking of our financial returns in terms of what we'd get if we sell a house in five years. Instead, we need to start thinking about the investment of building houses to last."

Michele agrees. "I think we've accomplished that beautifully. Even though it has modern touches, our house feels like it's always been here."



Marguerite basks in the late-afternoon sun on an 18th-century rolled-arm loveseat, another family antique. The bedroom is shielded from electromagnetic fields, and a kill switch turns off all electricity in the room when the couple sleeps. In addition, the all-natural mattress is free of fire-retardant chemicals; linens are organic fibers. The antique, four-poster bed is fitted with a new headboard that expands it to queen size. Above, a colorful painting from Haiti depicts a local fruit market.



Fusing Shaker-style woodwork with sleek, stainless-steel appliances, the kitchen is uncluttered and elegant. "We prefer to keep it simple and healthy—without lots of gadgets or electronic devices," Cathy says. "We have just three appliances: the refrigerator, stove and dishwasher—no microwave, toaster oven or coffee maker." The wood countertop is from a maple felled during construction. "We decided to have it milled for sentimental reasons," Michele says. "It's nice to know the tree lives on in our home."



Homeowners Cathy Grier (left), a singer/songwriter, and Michele Steckler, a Broadway producer, relax with their griffon, Marguerite.

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE HOMEOWNERS

### What do you love most about this house?

CATHY GRIER: I love its efficiency, comfort and the fact that I use every room some time during each day.

MICHELE STECKLER: From any room, looking in any direction, you can see outside. In addition to views of trees or the fields, you catch glimpses of an angled rooftop or the clapboard wall. Plus, we have a number of outdoor rooms: a screened-in porch, the side porch and the front terrace.

### What's your favorite room?

CATHY: As much as I adore every room, I spend the most time in my studio, which is also the guest room. I can write and look outside; I can think, create and concentrate. It's where I do my music, organize all my community work and have all my phone conversations.

MICHELE: The kitchen/living room/dining room is my favorite space. It's the center of the house—a place for hearth, home, food and gathering together. It's where we begin and end our day; it's where we nap, relax and connect.

### What would you do differently?

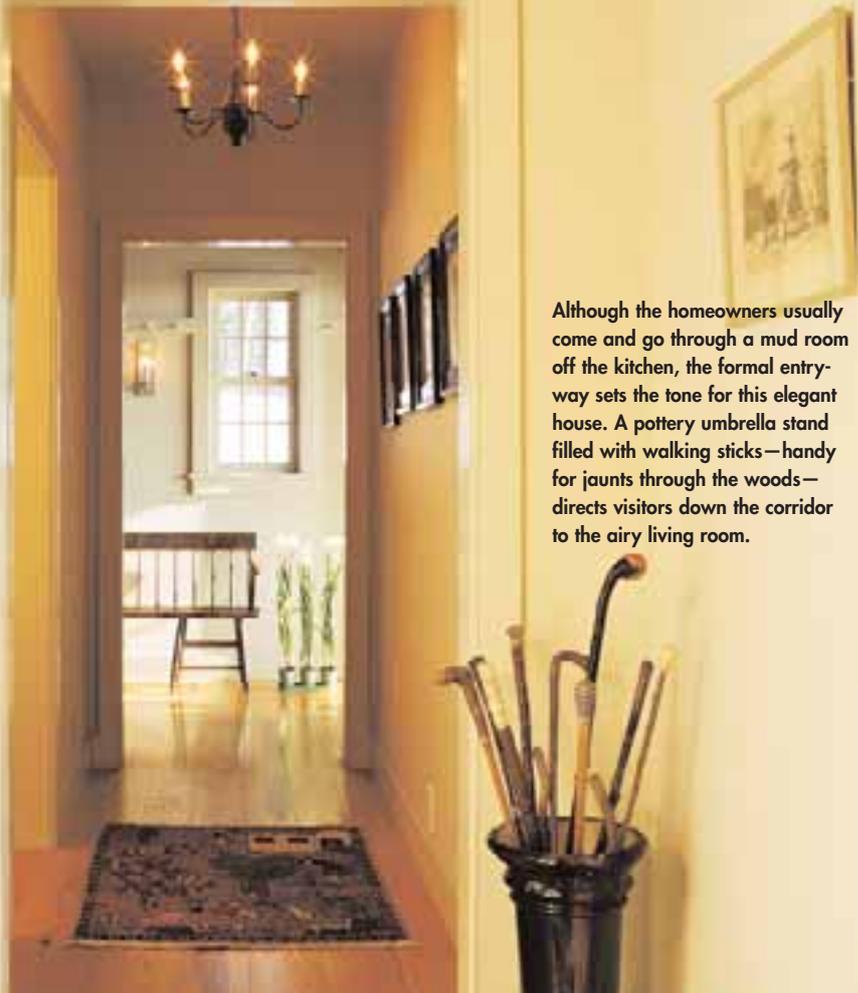
CATHY: I might have used spray-in foam insulation instead of formaldehyde-free fiberglass. Foam is more energy efficient, but it's a big-ticket item and there's still an issue of it outgassing while it's being sprayed.

MICHELE: I would have chosen old, reclaimed floorboards instead of the newly milled 8-inch pine boards. Recycled wood has an older, darker color, and the size of the boards varies.

### What advice would you give other homebuilders?

CATHY: Do the best you can within your budget. Every little bit helps, whether it's getting Energy Star appliances or recycling materials. In light of the energy crisis, seek out ways to site the house for passive solar—it's a cheap way to help you save on heating and cooling.

MICHELE: Be joyful about the process. When we said we were building, we heard so many negative comments. People warned us it could strain our relationship. It's true that building can be frustrating, but it doesn't have to be a nightmare. Be patient, persistent and an active part of the homebuilding team. If you, the architect and the builder collaborate, you'll find the right aesthetic and budgetary balance.



Although the homeowners usually come and go through a mud room off the kitchen, the formal entryway sets the tone for this elegant house. A pottery umbrella stand filled with walking sticks—handy for jaunts through the woods—directs visitors down the corridor to the airy living room.

## CATHY GRIER'S TIPS FOR BUILDING A HEALTHY HOME

- **Read as much as you can from many sources:** magazines, books, the Internet. Cathy and Michele's "building bible" was *Prescriptions for a Healthy House* by Paula Baker-Laporte, Erica Elliott and John Banta (New Society, 2001).
- **Partner with your architect, builder or contractor.** Willingness on everyone's part to learn as they go can compensate for minimal green-building experience.
- **Locate all gas, water, electrical and phone connections** into the house within a central, separate mechanical room.
- **Minimize exposure to EMFs.** Keep electrical wiring away from sleeping areas; install electric kill switches in bedrooms; and forgo recessed lighting, microwave ovens, digital clocks and appliances with LEDs.
- **Keep your indoor air clean** by installing a central vacuum system vented outside the house.
- **Buy materials from a local distributor.** Ask about the products it carries and where they came from. Ask to see Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), which list information on toxins and carcinogens.
- **Watch your budget, prioritize and be prepared to make tradeoffs.** If one important item gobbles up more money than expected, find a lesser project you could sacrifice to make up the difference.
- **Once your healthy home is built, continue your commitment** by purchasing nontoxic and petroleum-free supplies and cleaners, chlorine-free toilet paper and paper towels, and organic towels and bedding (such as a nontoxic mattress).

## The Good Stuff

- Efficient use of living space, practical storage
- Passive-solar orientation
- Local wood (from New England or house site)
- Metal roofing (copper, galvanized steel) is recyclable
- Cellulose blown-in insulation in attic spaces
- Formaldehyde-free insulation, cabinetry and wood products
- Zero-VOC primer and paint (Benjamin Moore Pristine Eco-Spec)
- Water-based wood sealant on kitchen cabinets and tile flooring
- Vermont soapstone for counters and fireplace surround
- Solvent-free wood adhesives and chalking
- Floors finished with Sutherland Welles tung oil
- Low-flush toilets
- Marvin windows (double-pane, low-E, argon-gas filled)
- Radiant heat (fueled with propane) can be retrofitted for solar-heated water.
- Viessmann boiler (99.9 percent efficient) with compatibility for future solar-powered pumps
- Water radiators in second-floor rooms
- Energy Star appliances
- Natural landscaping with native plants; stone walls made with rock from property
- Compact fluorescent lighting wherever possible
- Many furnishings are family antiques; new furniture from socially responsible Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams company 

TO FIND ITEMS USED IN THIS HOUSE, SEE PAGE 95