

ACCENT

HOME & GARDEN

REVITALIZATION

One day, homeowner Dana Dakin and her realtor drove past the sagging fire station with its peeling paint. "It looked so sad, for one thing, and I'm good at rescues," she says.



SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2005

At Home In a Firehouse

BY JENNY DONELAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HESSION

Not everyone would rebound from romantic disappointment by transforming a decrepit public building into a uniquely beautiful home, or by starting a program to improve the standard of living for women in Africa. But where other people might have taken to their beds with a pint of ice cream, Dana Dakin “adopted” an abandoned 3,500-square-foot fire station in the village of Wilmot Flat, New Hampshire, converting it to a stylish and funky retreat that’s also a hub for events ranging from yoga classes to artists’ get-togethers. She also helped revitalize her section of town, both by beautifying the firehouse and by donating land that helped the community center next door rebuild and grow. A few years into those projects, as a sixtieth birthday present to herself, she founded the Women’s Trust of Pokuase Village, which lends women in a Ghanaian village small amounts of money to start or expand their businesses.

Today, Dana’s home still recalls a fire station from the outside—albeit one that’s been beautifully and whimsically landscaped with gardens and contemporary sculpture, including a wooden Torii gate with rustic lines that somehow evoke *The Flintstones*. Inside, where your eye is immediately caught by a pleasing mélange of decorative objects from different countries and different times, it’s hard to imagine that you’re standing in what used to be a garage full of fire trucks. Moose antlers, wooden figures from Africa, a carved chest that looks to be from medieval England but was, in fact, built in California in the 1920s (and a family heirloom, at that) all co-exist in whimsical harmony. But there are still traces of the ways in which the

Left: The sunroom’s painted concrete floor pays homage to the building’s firehouse roots. The Wilmot Volunteer Fire Department sign on the wall is original.

Top: Outdoor works of art like this stone sculpture add character to the grounds. In the background stands Wilmot's community center.

Bottom: New windows and a trellis over the entry help make the former fire station look and feel like a dwelling.



building once served. The beams in the open-concept main living area, for example, once framed a couple of bays for the station's older fire trucks. And the sunroom's concrete floor is a nod to the building's past as well — though the floor has been painted in large checkerboard squares of blue and white.

Somehow all these unlikely objects in this unlikely space in a small New Hampshire community work together to create an environment that's spacious and airy, yet cozy and comfortable. Everything looks rather casual and effortless — yet getting the house to this point was anything but. Dana's journey was full of starts and stops, detours and bumps in the road.

Finding a home — and a community

It all began when Dana, a native Californian and marketing consultant to institutional investment firms, moved to Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire, in 1993 to be with a significant other. "When that came to an end, I was ready to leave," she



said. But a chance glimpse of a bookstore display on the poets Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall made all the difference. She was captivated by the rural community depicted in the Wilmot residents' works. "It was so grounded," she says. She decided to stay in New Hampshire, and to make Wilmot her home.

The first task at hand was to find a house within her budget — under \$100,000. She made an offer on a mountainside ranch house, but was outbid. Again, she decided to leave. "At that point, I said it was a sign

from the universe — I'm not going to live here," she says. But a few weeks went by and she hadn't left. "In some deep place, I couldn't give it up," says Dana. She hired the realtor who'd represented the client who got the aforementioned ranch house, in the hope that it would change her luck. But it didn't, at least at first. She looked at "lots of little houses with no potential" and was feeling discouraged when one day, she and the realtor drove past the sagging fire station with its peeling paint. When Dana expressed interest, "he said, 'You don't want to look at



Dana Dakin, a California native, now calls rural Wilmot, New Hampshire, home.

that,' but I said I did. I had to push." It was just a gut feeling. "It looked so sad, for one thing, and I'm good at rescues."

The fire station certainly needed rescuing. The community had built a new station elsewhere in town, and this building wasn't currently fulfilling any kind of function other than being an eyesore. Inside, grease stains covered the concrete floors and dropped ceilings concealed the natural wood above them. "There wasn't a sound window in the place," says Dana. And it was dark.

The original wood-framed building erected in 1939 had been well built, says Dana. Local wood had been hauled there by oxen and planed at the site. But an L-shaped addition put up in the early 1950s wasn't as sturdy. Adding to the overall challenge was the unavoidable fact that the building hadn't been designed as a home but as a sort of garage with some extra space for administration and hanging out—the Wilmot firefighters were volunteers and thus didn't overnight there.

Despite the building's disrepair, and its apparent lack of suitability, Dana was intrigued by its high roof and big open spaces. "I lived in New York in the late '60s when the lofts in SoHo were just being developed," she explains. "And I'd always dreamed of having a loft. Here was a loft in a rural community. How perfect was that?"

So she bought the building, and for two years, camped out in it—literally—pitching a tent in the middle of the ground floor to create an isolated living space for



Top: Behind the fire station is a large, landscaped yard, including a garden accented by a wooden fence.

Right: The ceiling over the upstairs living room dates back to when the building was constructed by local volunteers. The white balustrade at the far end is part part salvage (from down south) and part new construction.



herself, away from the grime and disorder in the rest of the firehouse. “I used a faucet and a birdbath as a sink.”

After Dana had collected the necessary funds, plans and contractors, two years of renovations commenced. New windows were installed. The building’s concrete floor was jackhammered apart and removed, as it was too oily to save. When workmen removed the dropped ceilings, they uncovered beautiful, natural-wood ceilings that Dana was delighted with. But in order to retain the beamed ceiling on the top floor, the necessary insulation had to be installed from the top down, by lifting the roof and putting the insulation underneath.

As the work continued, local residents became curious. “I am on sort of a prominent corner,” she explains, “and people started driving past to see what was going on—at least they tell me that now.” In the early days, however, before Dana knew people in the community as well, they wouldn’t say much more than, “I hear you’re from California.” She adds, “They were amazingly patient and non-questioning. And here was this woman living in a tent!”

Gradually, the house took shape. Radiant heat was installed throughout, and a wood floor went into the main living area, which included an open kitchen. One of the challenges of the renovation was dealing with all that open space. “The big problem with lofts or big rooms is they’re not welcoming,” says Dana. Here she had help from architect Alex Platt of Denver, Colorado, and interior designer



Left: An open concept kitchen makes it easy to socialize while cooking.

Below: Wood, whether painted, (as in the white balustrade in background), finished (as in the table and chairs), or unfinished (as in the ceiling) plays a big part in the house's overall decorative theme.

The firemen used to smoke cigarettes while playing pool up there, explains Dana, and worried that a spark from a cigarette might fall down through the slatted floorboards onto the garage floor below — therefore the carefully fitted floorboards.

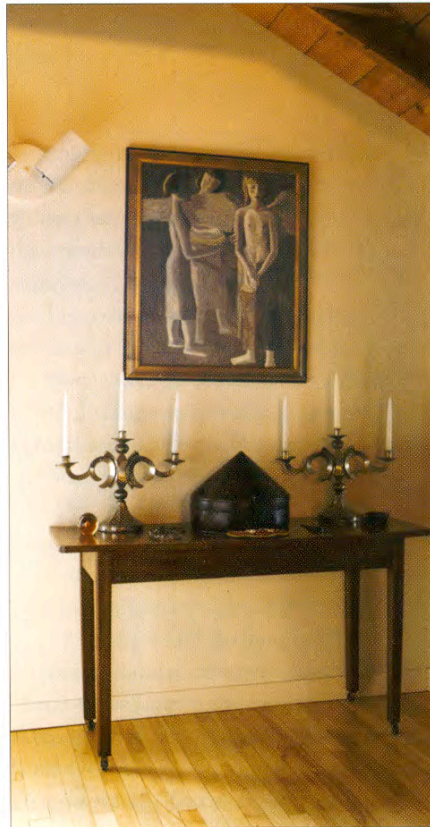
Lon Gaxiola from San Francisco. Both men helped with the challenge of retaining the building's character, yet making it a home. "There were constant tradeoffs," says Dana.

One such issue involved her desire for a fireman's pole from the top floor down to the bottom. "I begged for a pole," says Dana, but to no avail. Since the volunteers didn't live at the station, there had never been a need for a pole, so one had never existed there. It therefore wouldn't be authentic to add one, said Dana's architect. Finally, she gave in. (The house

did come with another kind of a pole, though, which it still has — a flagpole. It's a super-sized model of just the sort fire stations usually have.)

Designer Gaxiola played a big role in helping Dana make the firehouse a home — "warming it up," in her words. She already knew his style, as he had worked with her family in California for many years. "He's a genius," says Dana. "He can mix Chinese and catalog." His motto, she adds, is: "Try not to try too hard." In other words, nothing should look studied or forced — or as if a designer has





Track lighting (upper left) keeps company with antique candelabras and a variety of other decorative objects. The old and the new are juxtaposed throughout the house.

been at work. Dana's home reflects these sensibilities—where the old could be saved, it was, like the huge wooden table with a broken leg that the firemen had left behind. Dana had it fixed and it now serves as a dining room table and focal point in the main living area. When something new was needed—slipcovers, for example—she had a local seamstress create them.

A room off to the side of the main living area became a sunroom, where the idea was “to bring the outside inside,” says Dana. The original fire station sign hangs on a wall of this room that is covered in natural-stained clapboard that you'd normally see on the outside of a house. The room has a high cathedral ceiling—resembling the inside of a ship—notes Dana, that's also in natural wood.

Upstairs is Dana's simple bedroom, and another large living room with lots of seating areas. It sports a beautiful wooden floor installed by the firemen. They used to smoke cigarettes while playing pool up there, explains Dana, and worried that a



Top: A clean-lined white-and-blue bathroom is a far cry from the days when Dana first moved in and had to use a bird bath as a sink.

Bottom: A gravel walkway, stones, perennials and former rendering cauldron contribute to the whimsy and harmony of the property's landscaping.

spark from a cigarette might fall down through the slatted floorboards onto the garage floor below—therefore the carefully fitted floorboards. A large blue-and-white Oriental rug that Dana has owned for years turned out to be the perfect floor covering. A white-painted balustrade salvaged from a house in Macon, Georgia, provides interest and division at one end of the room and a generous use of mirrors help create light in a space Dana found too dark.

All this work took place over a period of years—nearly a decade. Eventually, Dana ended

up putting far more money into the house than she had paid for it to start with. “It would have been a lot cheaper to tear it down,” she says, laughing. How did she do it? She shrugs and says, “I just kept working hard and feeding it.”

At home in the world

Luckily, even though her clients are all in California, Dana has been able to move the home office of her 29-year-old business, Dakin Partners, to Wilmot Flat. Both a corner of the main living area and the solarium have been set up for office space, and Dana now has an assistant working with her.

She needs an assistant, because a year and a half ago, she began another “business”—the Women’s Trust of Pokuase Village. When she turned 60 in January 2004, she decided that she wanted to do something to help the rest of the world. In part, she was inspired by a mentor who described life in thirds: “Learn, earn, and return.” You spend the first third of your life learning, the second third earning and the third third

returning. She was also motivated because age 60 can be a time of change and uncertainty for a woman in this country: “You become invisible,” she says. Here was a way to make a difference.

“I went to Ghana because it was English-speaking, and safe,” she says. She made the most of a few contacts she had and eventually found her village—Pokuase—and started a program that lends small amounts of money—a minimum of \$30—to businesswomen who live there. (She sold her second car to fund this venture.) This money goes a long way in an economy where many people make just a \$1 a day. Current loan clients include businesswomen who sell salt, ice water, fabric and other goods. Dana also started a scholarship program to keep village girls in school. These programs have a local administrator, and Dana and her assistant travel to Ghana twice a year to work with the villagers.

Although Dana’s venture is far-reaching, she views it as a kind of extension of the community life she’s become part of in Wilmot Flat. “I wouldn’t have gone to Ghana if I hadn’t gone to Wilmot,” she says. She describes where she lives as a “hub,” because of the post office and the community center, which also has a preschool. These days, she says, “It’s rare for a town to have a hub.” As a third-generation Californian, born and raised in Berkeley, “I saw California become so spread out and lacking in community.”

She considers that hub so vital, in fact, that she donated the land next to her so that a

community center could be built, and helped raise the \$400,000 necessary to build it. On a warm day, with the windows open, the sounds of children playing in the community center playground waft through her open windows. "It's an achievement," she says proudly.

Over time, Dana's home has become a hub for all kinds of events. Yoga classes take place there on Thursday mornings. And she hosts get-togethers such as the Writers' Block party she held last winter to benefit the New Hampshire Writers Project, as well as fundraisers for various groups and community parties.

There's so much going on that Dana has just bought a new, much smaller house in Wilmot less than a mile from the former firehouse. She'll continue to use the firehouse for her work and for events—in fact, one of her motivations for moving is to separate her work and her personal life. The new home is a little saltbox overlooking a bend in a brook. In size and setting, it couldn't be more different than the center-of-it-all fire station she currently inhabits.

So, ironically, now that its transformation is complete, the building Dana worked so hard to convert to private space will return to its public origins. It's such a success as a component of the community's hub that it's not quite the quiet retreat she wants now. Or, could she also be one of those people who just loves to fix up houses and move on? (The saltbox is currently undergoing renovations.) One of those people who needs a challenge? Could be, her smile says. ■

Jenny Donelan is a freelance writer based in Peterborough, New Hampshire. She covers the arts, lifestyle issues, nature and technology for various publications.

A former civil rights attorney turned filmmaker, John Hession worked in New York City for 15 years before marrying his rock-climbing partner, Valerie Michaud, and moving to New Hampshire to enjoy country living. His portraits, architectural and food photography can be seen at Advanceddigitalphotography.com.