

THE GILDED AGE

Newport, Rhode Island, is renowned for its maritime connections. But it also boasts some of the most spectacular examples of architecture from the so-called Gilded Age in the US. Designers often talk of making the interior of a yacht feel more like that of a residential home, but it is unusual for the reverse to happen. That is what makes the Rock Cliff project so unique. Its newest resident enlisted the design talents of Kirby-Perkins and yacht designers Langan Design Partners to transform the basement into a classic Edwardian schooner.



THE GAMES ROOM IN THE ROCK CLIFF MANSION, NEWPORT, USA. NOTE THE SHIP'S BELL.

WARREN JAGGER

Coined by the American author Mark Twain, the Gilded Age refers to the period of growth, indulgence and affluence in America from the late 1800s to around 1920. The nation's business leaders amassed huge fortunes quickly, creating a baron class with a penchant for ostentatious displays of their new-found wealth. Called 'cottages' by their owners, the mansions they built blended elements of Europe's Renaissance, Romanesque and Rococo architectural traditions.

Built in 1887, Rock Cliff is one of Newport's Gilded Age mansions. Located on Bellevue Avenue, it was originally owned by tycoon Harold Stirling Vanderbilt, winner of three America's Cups as well as the owner of the classic yachts *Rainbow*, *Enterprise* and *Ranger*. Having restored the property to its original condition, the current owner approached Jerry Kirby of Kirby-Perkins Construction to design and build a more

informal basement space for his family to use.

"With Vanderbilt being someone that raced in the America's Cup and us really knowing the history of the house, it was a fun project that was true to the historic nature of the building and also true to the design of a classic superyacht," says Kirby, who immediately thought of designing the space to feel like the interior of a traditional 1800s schooner to tie in with the Vanderbilt heritage.

As an America's Cup veteran and world-class sailor in his own right, Kirby felt an immediate connection with the project and decided to bring on yacht designers Langan Design Partners (LDP) to ensure that his vision was brought to life in a fashion appropriate for such an important piece of architecture. "Bill Langan and I grew up racing together," recounts Kirby. "For me, he was the natural person to explore the possibility of designing a land-based yacht."

Sadly, Langan passed away in January 2011 during the development of the project, but the rest of the team at LDP continued working on it through to completion.

While Rock Cliff was slightly out of the Langan design team's comfort zone, having never worked on a land-based project before, they adapted to the new location quickly.

"Though working on this project was somewhat different, at the end of the day and in the broader sense of design there was really no difference in creating this space, other than the fact that it isn't actually sailing," explains Sam Howell, a designer at LDP. "This project was every bit a 'yacht' project to us in that the design theme and historic details all tied together to convey a story larger than just the design itself."

The first year of the project involved carving out the space below the mansion to create a basement out of what had originally only been a small room for storage, no more than four feet (1.2m) in height.

"Let's just say, tunnelling under a big Newport mansion with incredibly valuable mouldings and plasterwork was a bit of a challenge," Kirby confesses. "We had to be very careful not to crack anything. The other caveat was that we had to keep the house up and running throughout ▶



ROCK CLIFF VIEWED
FROM THE GROUNDS

WARREN JAGGER

and there could be no visible evidence of the construction work that was going on. It was quite a feat.”

As you would expect on a historic building, planning regulations were stringent. There had to be no visible change to the structure or impact on the exterior appearance. Looking at the original structure, it is hard to believe that the team tunnelled 18 feet (5.5m) under the entire building. In order to bring in light without drastic additions, Kirby-Perkins made two stairwells as well as a terrace that comes out of the foundation, like a big cargo hatch.

After the excavation was complete, work could begin on the interior. The brief for the team was simple: design a space that accurately reflected the interior of a classic Edwardian schooner built during the Gilded Age. The danger of replicating the interior of a yacht on land is that it could easily slide into the realms of pastiche and nautical clichés. For Kirby, this was why it was key to get LDP involved.

“Yacht design is in their DNA,” says Kirby. “If you use a land-based architect to do a yacht-style interior, it can feel forced. Someone who has grown up racing or building boats will know if it has been faked.”

LDP knew that if the interior was to feel authentic, the detailing was all-important. The transition from house to yacht is made as soon as you descend the stairs down to the basement, which have been designed to replicate the snug companionway of a yacht.



The grandeur of the basement interior slowly unfolds, opening up into a lower-deck foyer and then into the equivalent of the main salon aboard a large yacht.

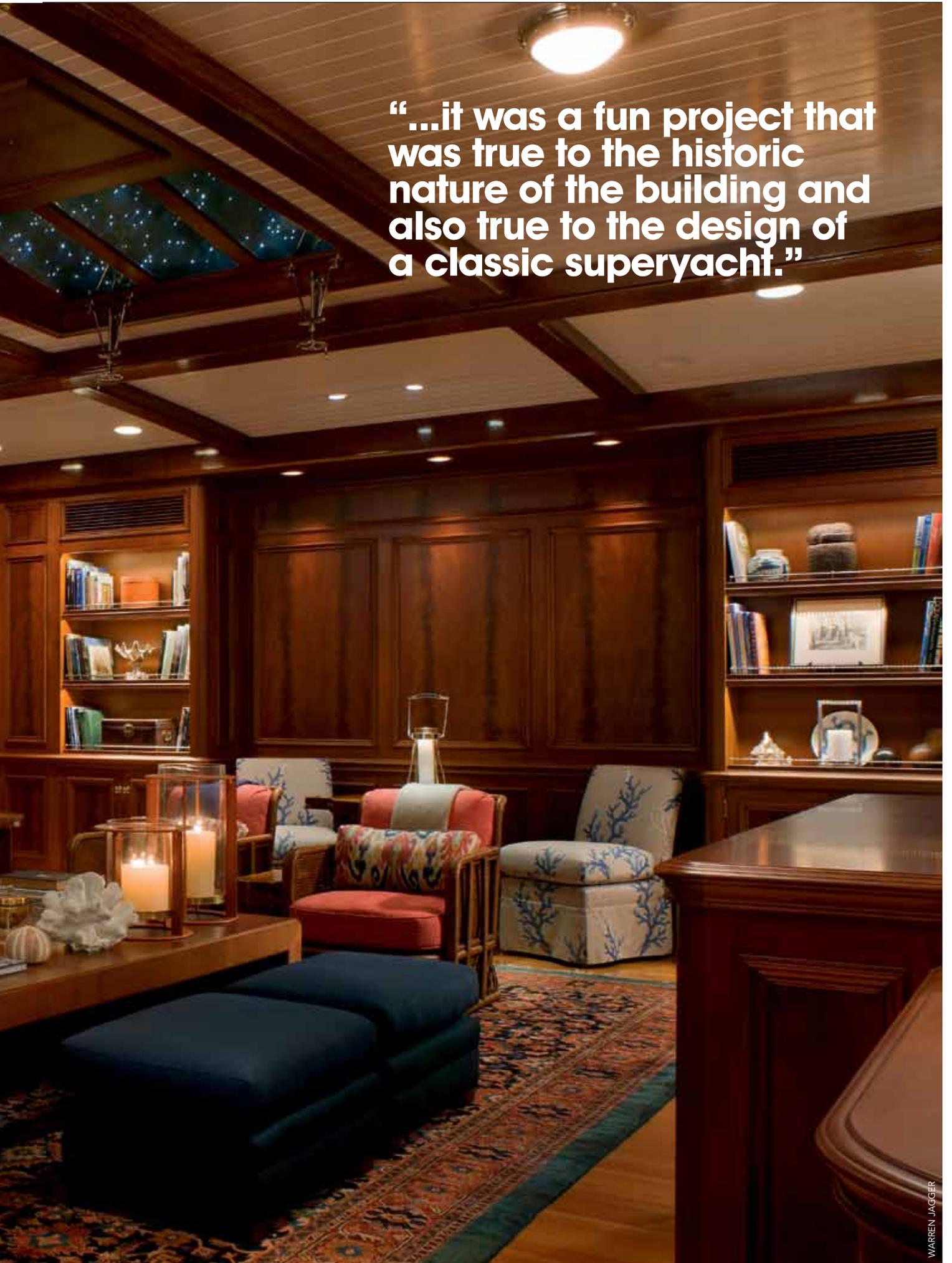
“We had to pay close attention to the overall scale of the space, because on a classic yacht there is a proportional relationship between the structural components and the overall dimensions,” Howell points out. “We put in massive African Iroko wood hull framing and deck beams, while the ceiling is made of tongue-and-groove planking and cambered to give the feeling of a classic yacht.” ▶

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THE 'MAIN SALON' WITH ITS OVERHEAD BUTTERFLY HATCHES

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To lend the impression of being below deck, two large butterfly skylight hatches were incorporated into the overhead, complete with simulated daylight. With the living room above, the team had to create a box in the floor cavity between the ceiling and the living room floor and use backlit frosted, bevelled glass to replicate daylight. One of the hatches also uses fibre-optic lighting to replicate the constellations in the night sky. Each one also features stainless-steel hardware designed by LDP's Tony Ferrer, which is fully functional despite the fact that the hatches open on to nothing.

It is this commitment to the tiniest details that makes the interior so impressive. Everything from the custom-made Bellingham ship's bell, the lighting in the stair treads, the traditional water-tight engine room door to the boiler room, a galley-style kitchen with pedestal chairs, teak counters and marine hardware, and authentic deck prisms located throughout the space, add to the feeling of authenticity.

Crotched mahogany veneers feature heavily throughout the space. Keeping true to the mansion's Newport heritage, the owner was keen to incorporate elements that tied in with Goddard and Townsend, the two Newport families of cabinetmakers. LDP's Tom Daggermont designed two art niches featuring the classic Goddard and Townsend block-and-shell design carved into different sections of the walls, which, according to Howell, took a wood carver 100 man-hours to complete. LDP also designed two other niches to display models of Harold Vanderbilt's J-Class yachts *Rainbow*, *Enterprise* and *Ranger*.

Howell believes that these models are among the most accurately detailed ever made, and the team certainly went to great lengths to ensure that they were built as true to reality as possible. They painstakingly went through 120 plans for *Enterprise* and *Rainbow* at Mystic Seaport maritime museum, shop drawings by the builder Herreshoff, countless plans for

Ranger at the Bath Maine museum and the original drawings by Starling Burgess, the naval architect behind all three yachts.

On top of this, the yachts were not all built exactly as they were drawn. Howell explains that period photographs of the yachts show some differences to the plans, so hundreds of photos were also studied to make sure they were as accurate as possible. Furthermore, the owner decided to include half models of the yachts beaten by the three victors in the America's Cup, so each niche displays both winner and challenger—a nice touch. The model-maker behind the miniature replicas is Bart Otter from Otter and De Roos in the Netherlands who, according to Howell, has built more J-Class models than anyone else.

Kim Kirby of Kim Kirby Interior Design came in to manage the interior styling, selecting the stone countertop in the 'dayhead', ceramic tiles, warm wood tones and various linen, silk and leather fabrics in a manner that combines contemporary lines with antique elements for timeless appeal.

"We have definitely accomplished making this area fit, feel and look like a superyacht," claims Kirby. "You could take somebody down there blindfolded and they wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

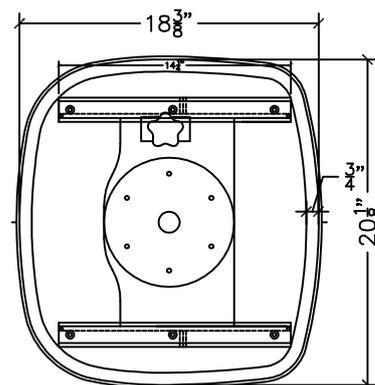
The only space lacking a superyacht feel is the 2,500-bottle wine cellar, which was instead designed to replicate the classic wine cellars of Italy and France with its arched stone ceiling, reclaimed French Barr limestone flooring and a sink from an antique limestone fountain.

For Kirby, what ultimately made this project such a success were the clients. "They really understood the concept from the outset," he says. "They made quick decisions and they trusted the design and construction teams implicitly, meaning that the whole place could come together amazingly smoothly considering the amount of detail and the technical challenges."

The owner was so pleased with the results

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he asked LPD to work on the interior of a historic boathouse he owns in Newport Harbour. "This is another amazing space with nautical ties," says Howell. "It was owned by Arthur Curtis James who was given a three-masted schooner on his 25th birthday called *Aloha*. It is a beautiful, small stone structure right on the water... but that's another story." ■



Underside of Wood Seat

