



ARCHITECTURE

Design and Architecture of Kent Village Barn Shops Conceived as Organic Extension of Existing Village

When Matthew Preston first began work in 1999 on what is now known as Kent Village Barn Shops, the former farm just off Main Street in Kent, Connecticut was overgrown with brush and its six barns were close to collapse. It wasn't long, however, before he and Nils Wiesenmüller, his partner in Bridgeport Design Group, had a vision of how they could transform the site into the complex of buildings for retail and professional offices that their client, Rock Hill Associates LLC, wanted.

"Our concept was simple," Mr. Preston recalled. "We wanted to expand the existing village of Kent as opposed to create some sort of new appendage. I grew up seeing the Connecticut landscape transformed in a way that was pretty tragic. Whenever a new development went up, it never had any relationship to the town or landscape around it. What we wanted to do with this project was to get back to more organic growth so the new complex would be a true extension of the old village."

Today, the enclave seamlessly blends the historic barns with six new buildings that have influences ranging from New England to the American West to Asia. Modern flat-roofed structures in vibrant shades of ochre and green sit side-by-side with buildings clad in rough-hewn siding painted deep red and weathered gray. Everywhere, the painstaking attention to detail is evident – from the high-quality materials used throughout to utility structures morphed into pieces of art.

To achieve the goal of organic growth, the site plan began with the

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creation of Old Barn Road, a new road that ran parallel to Main Street. "We chose to create a new road because historically that is how cities or towns developed," Mr. Preston explained. "We also made sure that the road could be extended, rather than remain a dead end, if the village of Kent grows over time."

The site is also closely linked to Main Street from a pedestrian viewpoint, with multiple access points to the village. "All too often developments and strip malls are fenced off from one another and there's no where for people to get from one to another without getting back in their cars. We wanted this to be very pedestrian friendly."

Barns Saved As Link to Village's History

The design team was next confronted with what to do with the dilapidated barns. "We had two avenues: we could keep them or raze them," Mr. Preston recalled. "Our feeling was that they were pretty unique historical remnants and that they should be retained as a link to the town's history. We decided at a very early stage to keep them as a physical reminder of the town over time and to tackle the challenge of how they could be converted into utilitarian structures for commerce."

As the project unfolded, it became clear that three of the five barns were beyond hope, with the frames damaged and the roofs collapsed. These were torn down and rebuilt on the same footprint at the same size and proportion. The other two barns were preserved. They were jacked up and moved so a new foundation with modern heating, air conditioning and ventilation systems could be installed. They were then re-skinned leaving the original frame, siding, beams, doors and hardware in tact.

"We tried to be as conservative and sensitive as possible," Mr. Preston said. "The massing and arrangement of the barns around the maple tree was significant and we kept that true to the past, too."

As the work on the barns progressed, design of the first new building got under way. The 7,000 square foot building that now houses the Morrison Gallery was originally conceived as a retail space for Backcountry Outfitters.

"Restrictions with the site called for a relatively long and low building and we took our inspiration from the railroad depots of the mid to late 19th century," Mr. Preston said. "We liked the proportions, but we didn't want to slavishly copy a railroad station. We wanted to create a modern retail environment with lots of natural light and an open, column-free interior for maximum flexibility." To achieve these objectives, the building has soaring ceilings topped by a long monitor that allows light to filter in, concrete walls and wood and steel trusses that give the structural integrity required to have large expanses of open space and large picture windows across the front wall.

When Backcountry Outfitters decided to consolidate into smaller space elsewhere in the village, Morrison Gallery moved in during the Fall of 2006. "It worked out beautifully, Mr. Preston commented. "The building is fantastic as a gallery. The art and architecture really complement each other."

The next phase of the project centered on the two buildings that now house Lily's Florist, with a spacious apartment on the second floor, and the Center for Progressive Medicine. "The florist building is a very simple building, formally" Mr. Preston said. "It is as high and narrow as our first new building was long and low. Once again, the form was a reaction to the surroundings. It picks up a rhythm from the barns and allows the site to gain height in a subtle way to build to the Progressive Medicine building."

Progressive Medicine Met Multiple Needs

Recalling the evolution of the Progressive Medicine building, Mr. Preston said that its design was extremely challenging because the doctors' needs changed as the project progressed and what was once a single tenant really evolved into three tenants. "In addition to their medical offices, they decided to add both a yoga studio and a retail space for selling natural foods and nutritional supplements," he noted.

What resulted is an "extremely dense" building that accommodated the complex spatial arrangements required for the three related operations.

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Mr. Preston said. "Because the owners of Progressive Medicine are very interested in Asian medicine and prevention through the whole body-mind experience, we felt that they needed a beautiful environment to do what they wanted to do. It was almost as if we took the Hippocratic oath ourselves to do no harm with our design."

The result is stunning spaces with a decidedly Asian influence. The waiting rooms and examination rooms are sheathed in rich black walnut, with custom-made cabinetry, slate counters and architectural glass laminated with rice paper for privacy in several of the rooms. Mahogany frames with willow fencing form the guard rails around the terrace outside the light-filled yoga studio. A small Zen garden wraps around one side of the building.

"It's a commercial building, but we didn't want it to have a cold, commercial feeling. So we went to extraordinarily lengths to give it a more elegant design with an organic feel to the materials we used," Mr. Preston said. He also employed designer Janis Melone to help with interior design details and material and finish selections for both the interior and exterior.

"For the exterior of the buildings, I took my cues from historic colors, but ramped them up a bit," Ms. Melone said. "The architecture plays with historic concepts, but has a very contemporary bend, so I felt that the colors needed to be torqued into a more progressive palette."

Third Phase Incorporates Two Buildings

The third phase of the Kent Village Barns Project constructed two buildings on the south end of the site that now house Ober Gallery, Essentials Day Spa, The Bedford Studio and Head-to-Toe Chiropractic.

"These buildings were originally conceived as one big long building, but along the way, we discovered that we needed to open it up and have a connection to the back, so we broke it into two buildings connected by a porch," Mr. Preston recalled. "Because the long, low shape of the Morrison Gallery building creates a kind of visual momentum as you move down the street, we thought we needed to slow that down. The classical, cubic form of these buildings helps slow the eye down and settle this corner of the site."

Reminiscent of the kind of façade that once appeared on the Main Streets of old cowboy Western movies, these buildings have flat roofs, a front porch and shuttered windows on the second floor.

"We initially took quite a bit of heat for all the flat roofs we have on these buildings," Mr. Preston said. "But from a design and aesthetic perspective, as well as for functional reasons to achieve what we wanted to achieve with the interior spaces, several of the buildings demanded flat roofs."

The final phase of the Kent Village Barn Shops involved a transitional building that brings together elements from buildings on the Main Street of Kent with traces of both the restored barns and new buildings on the site. Clad in rough-sawn pine siding and painted a lively red, the building also incorporates two public bathrooms. Even these spare no expense with beautiful tiled floors and slate countertops.

Another testament to the meticulous attention to detail at Kent Village Barn Shops is that even the most utilitarian of structures were turned into works of art. John Scofield, a local artist whose work is in the permanent design collection of the Museum of Modern Art, created beautiful wood and stone sculptural enclosures for air conditioning units, irrigation controls, gas meters and even trash containers. Likewise, he concealed electric meters behind concrete reliefs that drew inspiration from the surrounding countryside and nearby Housatonic River.

Project Exceeds Expectations

"I always knew that Matthew was incredibly talented, but giving him this project was a true leap of faith for me," said James Preston, his father and principal in Rock Hill Associates. "It was his vision and his plan on how to use the site to best advantage. Although there were times that I couldn't visualize what he had in mind and I thought it might be too modern for Kent, now that it's done, I see how it all fits and works. The end product is everything I hoped for and more," he added.

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"Our goal was to intervene in the landscape in a way that is positive and beautiful," commented Matthew Preston. "I like our work to speak for itself, but I believe we accomplished that goal."

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