

# *A Grand First Impression*

BY ANDREA E. MCHUGH

Before breaking ground, legendary architect Ogden Codman, Jr. had a vision for Bellevue House – the Newport home he designed in 1910 for his cousin Martha. An admirer of renowned woodcarver cum self-taught architect Samuel McIntire, Codman intended Bellevue House to celebrate his affinity for merging traditional European influences with classic Federal revival style.







LEFT: West facade. ABOVE: South facade. The exterior of the house is Federal revival, based on the style of three mansions in Roxbury, MA. Among the home's owners was Jane Pickens, for whom the theater in Newport is named. The lead of the successful Pickens Sister trio, Jane was a star of stage, radio and screen, who sang in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1936, and later in life, embraced philanthropic endeavors. She lived in the home from the mid-1960s until her death in 1992.

*“It was originally called Berkeley Villa”*

explains Ronald Lee Fleming, who has owned the home since 1999. It wasn't renamed Bellevue House until the 1950s, but the name is seemingly apropos as it is one of the first century-old mansions in sight as one strolls down Newport's most famed avenue. The home was Codman's last project in the City by the Sea and his grand finale epitomizes the principals set forth in *The Decoration of Houses*, published in 1897, an interior design manifesto he wrote with Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and Newport summer resident Edith Wharton. In the book, the authors, and good friends, emphasize the critical importance of space planning. Symmetry and proportion, they explain, play key roles in achieving architectural balance. Adhering to those same principals, when Fleming first walked through the door, he already knew he was home. >

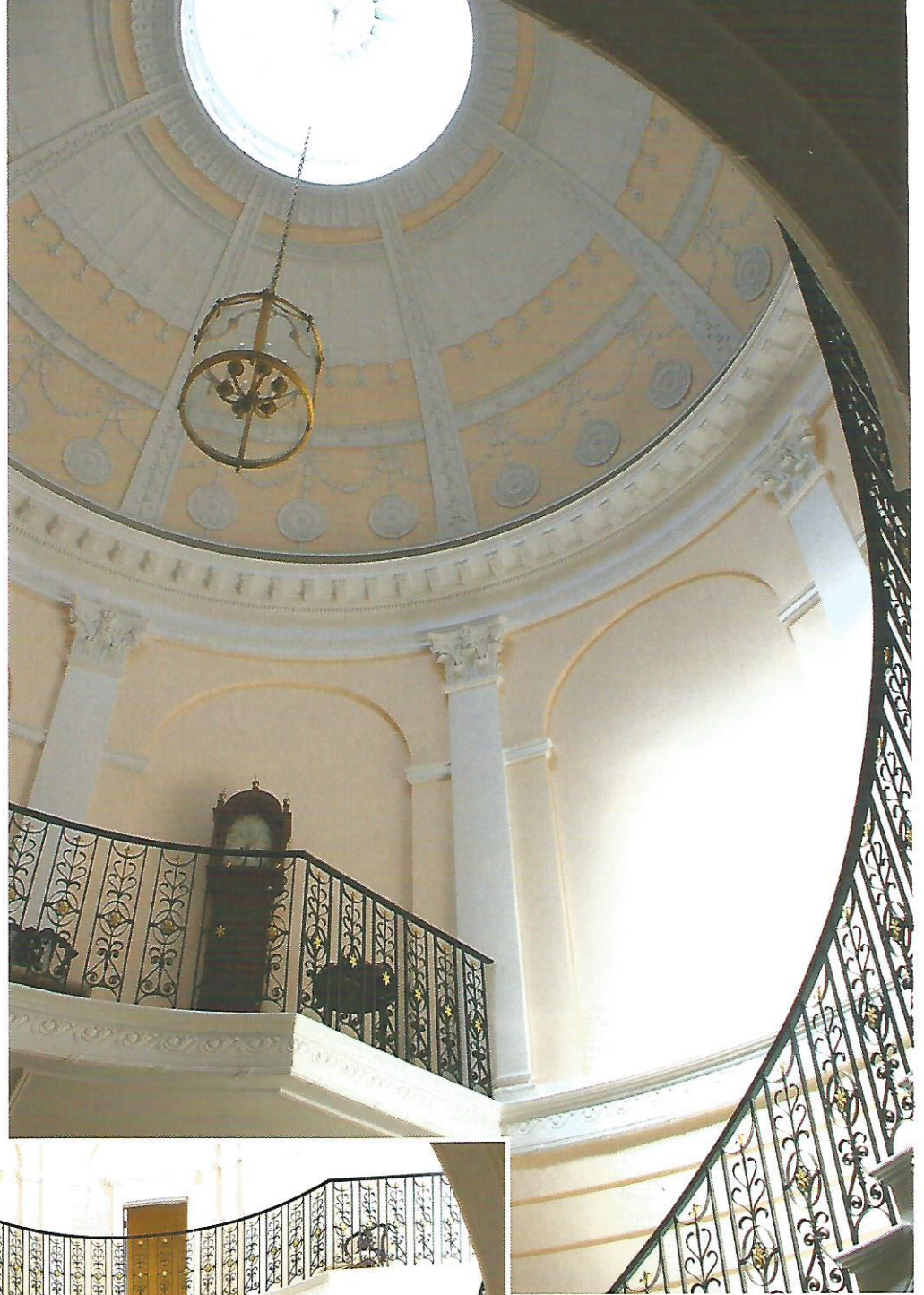


“My friend, Ainsley Gardiner, said, ‘There is only one house you can look at here in Newport.’ ... When I came in, I knew it was one of the most superior houses in the U.S.,” he says. Fleming knows more than his fair share of exceptional houses. A historic preservationist, accomplished author on the subject, and an authority on urban planning, Fleming is as well-regarded in these matters as he is passionate about them.

Bellevue House made an indelible first impression. The front entry is composed of two pairs of ornate, monumental Corinthian columns punctuated by a double-story portico and a balustrade set just above the eave line. The front door is equally impressive with sidelights capped by a classic Federal-style elliptical fanlight.

But the entry was just the beginning. The best, in Fleming’s experience, was yet to come: a 44-foot tall, triple-storied grand rotunda featuring a spiral stairwell with a wrought iron railing and inlaid marble floor. The space is crowned by a sun-filtering dome with, as the Society of Architectural Historians put it, “Adamesque ornament derived from published eighteenth-century English antecedents.” The Italian Renaissance-style architectural influence is palpable.

“The rotunda really knocks people’s socks off,” acknowledges Fleming, who’s casually dubbed it the “Oh, my God” room. Its grandeur explains why this was



Despite the home settling into a state of disrepair by the time Fleming first saw it, the rotunda still made a lasting impression. Fleming bought the home, furniture included, in 1999.  
ENTRY PHOTO: COURTESY OF RONALD LEE FLEMMING



the perfect space to introduce the new 24-room mansion to his three children, all under 13 at the time, soon after he bought it. "I had blindfolded the children and said we were going to a party at Mrs. Gardiner's," Fleming says with a Cheshire grin. When he unmasked the trio, they were awestruck.

But not everything was in superb condition. Fleming says that in the 1950s, the kitchen was renovated in the iconic style of the day. "It was a trilogy of plywood, linoleum and vinyl," he says with a snicker. "Pretty awful." He turned to Jon-Paul Couture, principal of Couture Design Associates, Inc. in Providence, to properly reinvent the space while being sensitive to the existing fabric of the home and its historic context. "Back in the old days, no one cared how the kitchen looked. It was only utilized by staff," Fleming explains. "For the renovation, the idea was to take inspiration from the other parts of the house and bring that elegance into the kitchen." The result is a marble masterpiece with modern conveniences, including an expansive island, chef's grade appliances (take the coveted Le Cornue range, for example), and vintage-inspired touches. The breakfast room – an elegantly appointed cupola in a soft pink hue – was formerly the broom closet, and today merges formal dining with a delightfully casual approach.

As splendid as Bellevue House may be, the surrounding 3.5 manicured and meticulously-designed acres it is nestled on may command the most attention, with eight distinct garden areas that incorporate more than two dozen smaller gardens. Fleming designed the narrative garden, also with Couture, as a metaphor of his life and family. "There's wasn't anything tying the entire property together," explains Couture, who has been working



A thoughtful design plan ensured all renovations, including a broom closet-turned-dining space, would blend seamlessly into the original structure.

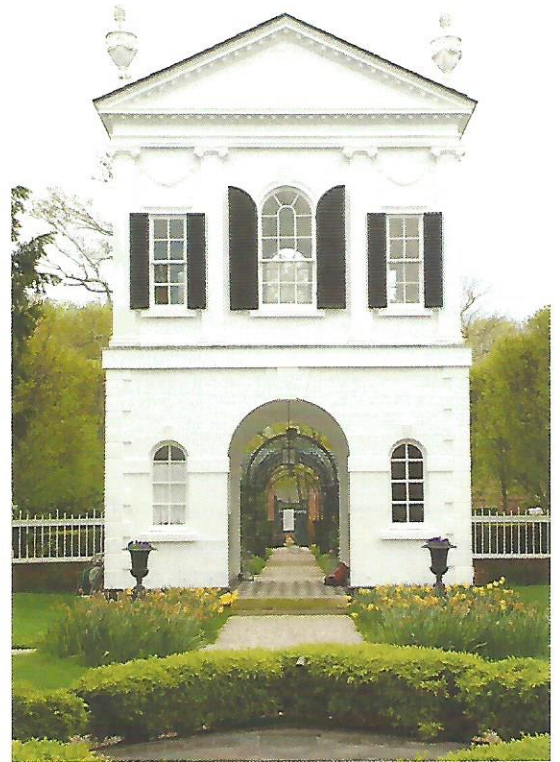
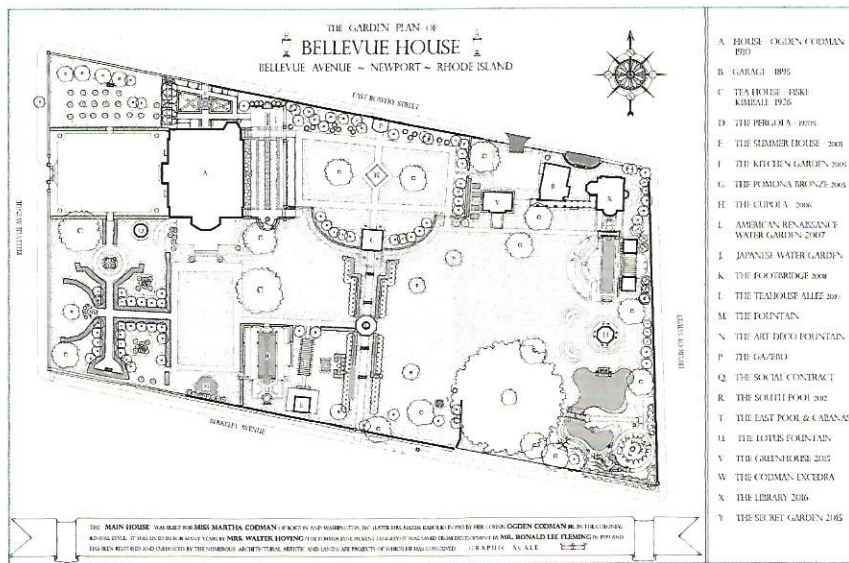


The original kitchen (*left*) was renovated in the 1950s. Couture was tasked with creating a new space that reflected the home's origins while offering modern conveniences (*above*).



with Fleming for more than a decade. “The goal was to create a property that was interesting from corner to corner in the tradition of English country houses.... We started on a master plan to tie the whole garden together.” That plan has materialized into what Fleming calls a “pattern language,” an organizational method where smaller gardens fit into a greater context. “So everything relates to everything else,” explains Fleming. “There’s a nice sequence that goes all the way through.”

A nod to the home’s origins, the grand exedra (an ornamental trellis panel) is a replica of the same one Codman designed for Wharton’s Newport estate, Land’s End. The goddess sculpture – the centerpiece of



the exedra – was modeled after one of his daughters. Flowing water rushes from the installation through a fountain sculpted to Fleming’s likeness, and through a stretch to a sculptural “children’s fountain” which bears engraved details that represent his offspring and their respective interests.

The two-story Tea House, built in 1926 by architectural historian Fiske Kimball, is a reproduction of the Derby Summer House designed by McIntire. Its large arched opening, grand Palladian windows, and decorative carved wood keystones celebrate McIntire’s penchant for classic

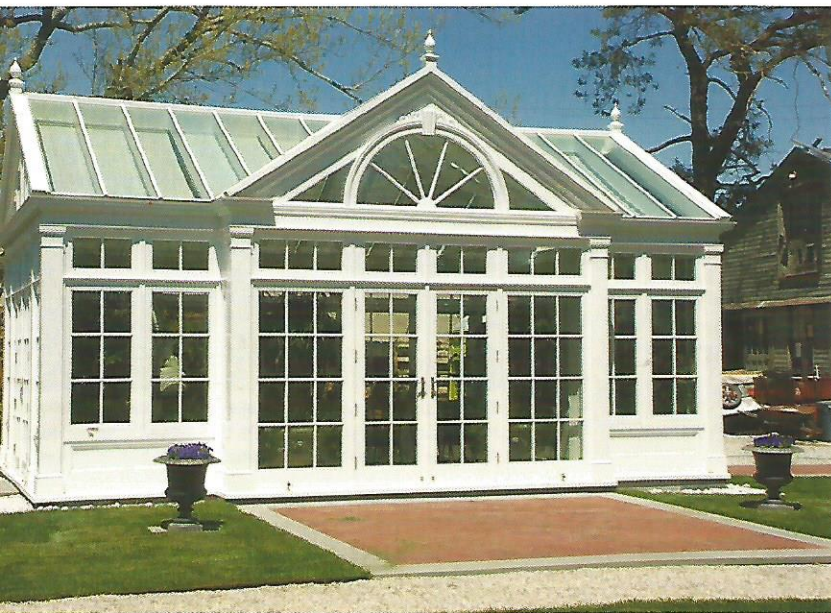


ABOVE: The Tea House, built in 1926, is a reproduction of the Derby Summer House, built in Salem, MA by Samuel McIntire in 1894.

ABOVE LEFT: Family history is immortalized in waterscapes, ornamental pools and sculptures in the narrative garden, as well as throughout the grounds.

LEFT: Fleming’s likeness was captured for this stone fountain which spews water in the warmer months.





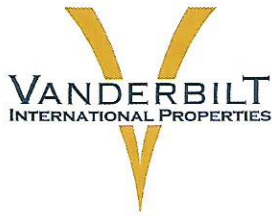
Fleming marked the debut of the conservatory, *(above and below)*, by welcoming friends to enjoy a private performance of classical music.

Federal style architecture. The cupola, also inspired by an original McIntire design (modeled after one he designed for a church in Salem, Massachusetts), was the first garden structure Couture worked on with Fleming. "It's intended as a place to stop and rest," Couture explains. Its dynamic locale, bordered between the serene Oriental water garden dotted with lilies and the East Pool, cabanas, and "Pavilion of Pleasure," is thoughtful. Couture and Fleming have forged an uncommon bond, deeply rooted in a fondness for architecture, preservation, relevance, and context. "I trust his sensibility and he trusts mine," explains Fleming.

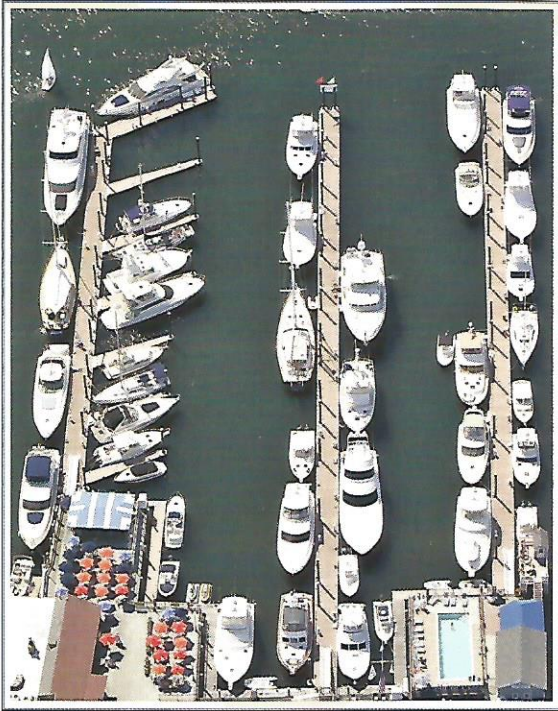
The recently completed conservatory is a glass-encased space positioned to capture as much sunlight as possible. The dichotomy of colorful, temperature-sensitive plants including rare orchids and rich green trees with white stone and neutral surfaces lets Mother Nature take center stage. It's precisely why Fleming imported a sizeable stone table from Agra, India, specifically for the space. "It's like the River Café in New York, where the lights hit the flowers," Fleming compares. ➤







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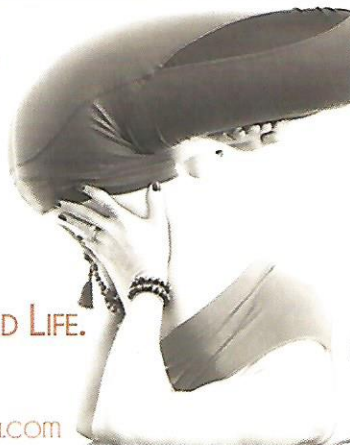
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The cupola was Couture's first exterior project at Bellevue House. Thirteen years later, he describes Bellevue House as "a dream job," and calls Fleming "a great patron of the arts, architecture and culture." The Oriental garden incorporates both Chinese and Japanese influences, says Fleming.

The addition of the conservatory was purposeful. "It was an important step in ultimately linking the main house to the library," explains Couture. The library project, arguably the garden's *pièce de résistance*, is expected to be completed by the fall of 2017 and despite Newport's embarrassment of riches when it comes to extraordinary homes, gardens and architecture, one can say there is nothing quite like this for miles. The entry is being built to echo the entry in the main home, complete with a condensed version of the grand rotunda and spiral staircase. But the most unique space is the Roman-style nymphaeum—traditionally a monument consecrated to water nymphs with grottos, sculpture, flowers and plants. "In the 18th century, various aristocratic families had them," Fleming insists. "This will be the first one in Newport." Fleming's subterranean version will have all of the standard nymphaeum accoutrements in addition to a semi-circular theater (similar to amphitheatres from ancient Greece and Rome) with tiered seating, a soaking hot tub and stream room. An army of workers are on site five days a week and you can almost see the light at the end of the tunnel. "More like the light of an oncoming train," Fleming jests.

With a desire to share the contemplative space to which he's devoted his time, energy and capital ("Escalating costs, uncertain outcome," he says with a laugh), Fleming regularly opens the doors of Bellevue House and its unforgettable gardens to various philanthropic organizations, including Newport's Island Moving Company, NewportFILM, Aquidneck Land Trust, Newport's Daffodillion Campaign and more; and in 2013, the City of Newport proclaimed July 11 "Ronald Lee Fleming Day," acknowledging his beautification efforts both at home and throughout the coastal city. For Fleming, the pleasure is all his. "It's just given me a lot of joy." For those who have been to Bellevue House, the feeling is mutual. \*