Homes to Lust After
Kevin O’Connor (GRS’99) celebrates The Best Homes from This Old House

BY JOHN O’ROURKE

AFTER RENOVATING A farmhouse in Carlisle, Mass., for the PBS series This Old House in 2004, show host Kevin O’Connor had an epiphany. TOH had undertaken the project to commemorate its 25th anniversary, and rather than the usual method of working with an existing homeowner, producers bought the property outright. This afforded them the luxury of working an entire season on a single project and having a more flexible budget. And because there were no owners, once all the remodeling and rebuilding was complete, O’Connor and his colleagues did not have to decamp immediately.

“Usually, we might finish filming on a Thursday,” says O’Connor (GRS’99), “and the homeowners are back in their house by Saturday morning. It’s like any construction. They’re just desperate to get back home.”

O’Connor’s eureka moment came when he was kicking back in the beautifully renovated house. “All of this stuff that I was enjoying and experiencing sitting on the couch, I realized viewers never get to see,” he says. “We’re mostly about sawdust and process on the show. But there are a lot of people who love design, and I figured they’d probably want to linger a little bit longer on these finished spaces.”

O’Connor came up with an idea for a book that would celebrate the best of the finished homes created by the builders, designers, and craftsmen of This Old House. He knew that only still photographs—not video—could adequately capture the beauty of the completed interiors. Where the TV series devotes only the last half of the last episode to the finished rooms, a lavishly illustrated book would allow fans to study the rooms and appreciate the artistry involved in each project.

O’Connor contacted professional photographer Mike Casey, his roommate at the College of the Holy Cross and a close friend, for help on the project. Over the next six years, the two set about documenting in words and pictures the transformation of eight homes featured on the show. (Two other houses, completed before the book idea was hatched, are also included.) “The photographs here tell the story of This Old House in a totally different way,” says O’Connor.

In deciding which houses to include in The Best Homes from This Old House (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2011), O’Connor says he chose those whose transformation was greatest and finished product most impressive. Case in point: the 130-year-old Second
Empire Victorian in Roxbury, Mass., that the show gutted and rebuilt in 2009. He laughs now, recalling the project. The TOH team not only had to remove three layers of siding and rebuild the entire foundation, but the whole back of the house, which they’d initially thought could be salvaged, had to be destroyed and replaced. “This building should have been torn down,” says O’Connor, “but we had made the decision to renovate it, that was the deal we had struck.”

The stunning photographs of completed renovation reveal what is possible for even the most derelict buildings with the right craftsmen. Page after page chronicles similar before-and-after tales: a Brooklyn, N.Y., brownstone, a bungalow in Austin, Tex., and a 20th-century modern in Cambridge, Mass., among others.

O’Connor admits that his personal favorite is the Carlisle farmhouse. He was still fairly new to the show when they undertook the renovation, which required working on three separate structures—a historic Greek revival house, an old barn, and a one-story ell connecting the two. The project allowed them to demonstrate three different methods of construction: renovation, reconstruction, and repurposing. “I was unbelievably upbeat that we were able to do all this on a single project,” he says.

The book also celebrates the many craftsmen, artists, and homeowners who, in O’Connor’s words, “create these beautiful spaces”—people like Tedd Benson, a master timber framer, and plumber Richard Trethewey, both frequent contributors to the show. It pays homage to the people behind the show as well, people viewers never glimpse, like talented cameraman Stephen “Dino” D’Onofrio. “Gathering their work in a single volume is a fitting way to celebrate their efforts,” says O’Connor.

He reminds readers in the introduction that “homes aren’t renovated by ‘us’ or ‘them.’ The work is done by real people who labor for long days over many months, shaping and fitting materials, transforming pallets of supplies into spaces that offer both comfort and shelter.”

WEB EXTRA Through March, Kevin O’Connor will answer your home-remodeling questions at bu.edu/bostonia.