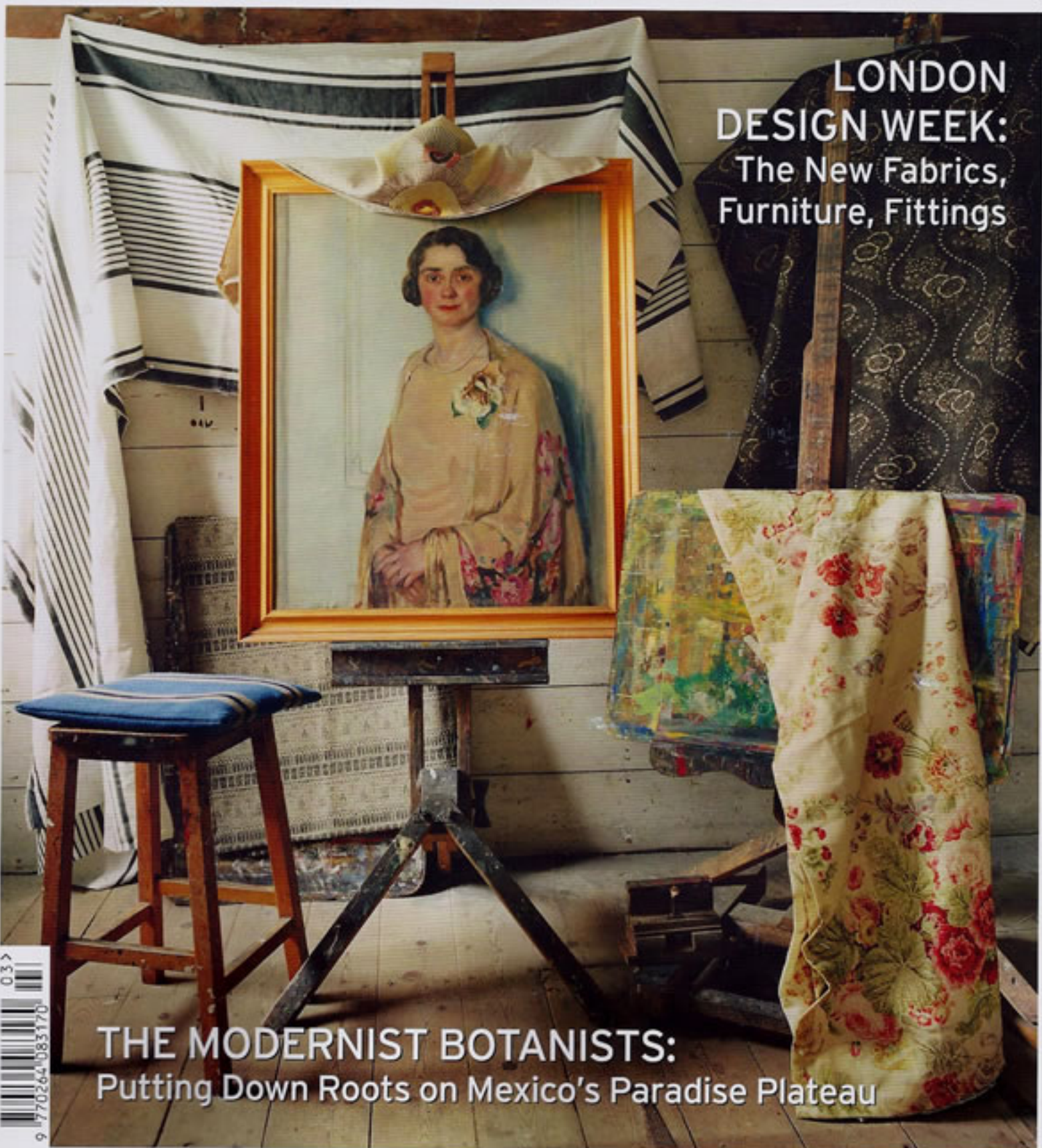


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This page, clockwise from top left: the east elevation is framed by a huge tulip poplar, probably part of a large purchase from AJ Downing's nursery in 1839; a fragment of the guilloche-work used in architect AJ Davis's 1839 east veranda sits atop a radiator inside the front door; the river-facing tower addition was designed in 1849. A veranda with trellised posts originally ran across the entire ground floor of this block; the mid-19th century newel post on the staircase dates to a later remodelling. Opposite: a view of the original c1812 Federal-style arched door surround. Davis embellished the door and transom panels with round arch carvings as part of his 1839 transformation



## Open Bracket

In the grounds of a prison in New York State a derelict villa, the earliest example of the Hudson River Bracketed style, is being resuscitated by a local preservation group. Will their efforts stop the place becoming one of history's parenthetical asides? ask Amanda Harling and Peter A. Watson Jr. Photography: Andreas von Einsiedel



## Open Backet

This page, clockwise from top: the semi-octagonal northeast parlour, with its projecting bay just large enough to stand in, was part of Davis's 1849 addition; also included in the redesign was an octagonal gallery, which is just visible beyond the arched door that connects the original hall to the veranda beyond; a section of the decorative porch trim (in the form of a Norman arcade) that hung below the roof of the 1849 west veranda sits next to a leaf border trim that was part of the edging for the earlier east veranda



Still the glory of the Plumb-Bronson House, the soaring three-storey elliptical staircase is part of the original c1812 design. It is thought that the original architect was Barnabus Waterman, whose James Vanderpoel House in Kinderhook, New York, contains a strikingly similar example. One of the ways in which the preservation group Hidden Hudson is raising funds to restore the Plumb-Bronson House is to hire it out as a film location – it recently featured in a chase scene in *The Bourne Legacy*



'I was astounded by its beauty,' says Timothy Dunleavy, recalling his first glimpse in 1997 of the dilapidated Plumb-Bronson House situated on the southern edge of Hudson in Columbia County, New York. As the founding president of the preservation group Historic Hudson, Dunleavy had become aware that tucked away in the unlikely setting of the grounds of the city's 'correctional facility' was a fine early-19th century Hudson River villa.

'As the door cranked open, before us was a hallway with a three-storey elliptical staircase as grand and monumental as any we'd seen. Picking our way through the debris, we were amazed to see that much of the authentic detail had survived decades of neglect.' Dunleavy discovered that the original Federal-style house and grounds, built in 1812 for Samuel Plumb, had been completely transformed by the architect Alexander Jackson Davis for a new owner, Dr Oliver Bronson, in two separate campaigns in 1839 and 1849.

It is now accepted that the Bronson house is the earliest surviving example of Davis's Bracketed style – a style that, according to Dunleavy, 'became irresistible to affluent and cultured New Yorkers, who, in the mid-19th century were building country retreats along the Hudson Valley'. These days, the house is approached through the gates and grounds of the prison. Built on a west-facing escarpment above the river, the dramatic setting was in keeping with the romantic vision of Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, both of whom owned villas nearby.

While the architect of the original 1812 Federal house is unknown, there is conjecture that it was designed by Barnabas Waterman (1776-1839), who played an active part in

Hudson's development. He is reputed to have also built the James Vanderpoel House in Kinderhook, New York, where the similar soaring elliptical staircase suggests the two houses were designed by the same person.

Bronson, the scion of a wealthy banking family, bought the house in 1838 and a year later commissioned Davis to update it. As a partner in a successful New York practice with Ithiel Town, Davis had designed a number of government and academic buildings. However, by 1835 he had set up on his own to concentrate on designing buildings more in keeping with his taste for the picturesque and romantic. In 1837, he published *Rural Residences*, a house pattern book that adapted the English villa book tradition to North America, illustrating how US country houses could be harmoniously integrated with the native Hudson Valley landscape.

Davis recorded several visits to Dr Bronson's house in 1839 and it seems the improvements were completed by the end of the year. Davis believed no house was complete without a veranda to soften the line between house and landscape. For Bronson, Davis created a splendidly theatrical one that spanned the east elevation. Beneath the concave metal roof was an elaborate wood trim in a guilloche pattern with a leaf border supported on four trelliswork posts. The eaves above the ground floor were extended at the same time and the all-important brackets adorned with acorn pendants.

Bronson, clearly delighted with his picturesque country house, commissioned Davis ten years later to design an extension that virtually doubled the size of the house. The new west front featured a bold three-storey bracketed tower and another elaborate veranda slightly different to his earlier

Above left: the delicate ornaments on the original Federal-period staircase are made from chalk, resins, glue and linseed oil.

The round-turned balusters are later-19th-century replacements – those previously propping up the stair rail were probably square. Above right: a second-floor room in the 1849 addition may have been used as a schoolroom for Dr Bronson's children



work. Outside, it looked like an entirely new house, but inside Davis carefully linked the old and new spaces. An octagonal gallery connected the new enfilade of rooms running across the house with the original centre hall running front to back. The new 1849 reception rooms continued the play of octagonal forms. Each of the parlours featured a semi-octagonal room-end inset with a second, smaller semi-octagonal bay. This intricate design magnified the architectural sense of space and, even on the north side of the house, allows the light to penetrate rooms until the sun drops below the trees.

Dunleavy's involvement with the city of Hudson began some 20 years ago when he and his partner bought an old farmhouse in Columbia County; it became their weekend retreat from New York City. Four years later, they moved to the country full-time and Dunleavy opened a clothing store in nearby Hudson. He explains: 'Hudson was founded in 1785 and like others we were attracted to the city's historic architecture. During the boom years of the 1990s, its relative proximity to New York combined with cheap rents made it a magnet for antique dealers. Soon, they were joined by restaurants, coffee shops and art galleries catering for the influx of creative, style-conscious types who were moving into town.' In due course, Dunleavy's interest in fashion was overtaken by his passion for architecture and interior design. The clothing store morphed into Rural Residence, which stocks all the requisites for a well-dressed home. 'Needless to say, the name was inspired by Alexander Jackson Davis's book.'

As Dunleavy delved even deeper into the architectural history of his adopted city and learned more about Davis

and the Plumb-Beanson house, he became increasingly determined to safeguard the building from falling into further disrepair. That it is now fully protected is almost entirely due to the efforts of him and his colleagues at Historic Hudson. 'We felt it was important that the house should be seen and preserved. Not over-restored, but to conserve the romantic spirit of the house - romantic because that was the original intent of the architect.'

In 2003, as a result of Historic Hudson's advocacy, the house and estate became a National Historic Landmark, the highest designation afforded to American architecture. The restoration began in earnest in 2008 after a long fight to obtain a lease on the house from New York State. Over the last few years, Historic Hudson has completed the first phase, including making good all the historic window sashes, replacing the roof and gutters and rebuilding part of the north wall. The work has been funded by New York State Environmental Protection Fund grants with matching funds provided by foundations and private donors. Photo shoots, events, fundraisers and even the occasional film shoot has supplied the rest. Historic Hudson is currently raising \$125,000 to complete the funding for the next stage of the project, which involves stabilising the south side of the house. One feels that, way up there on his splendid bracketed rooftop, Alexander Jackson Davis must be glowing with justifiable pride. 'Watching the house come slowly back to life makes each heart-skipping moment worthwhile,' says Dunleavy. 'Beauty is its own reward' ■

For more information on Historic Hudson, ring 001 518 828 1785, or visit [historichudson.org](http://historichudson.org)

Above left: the top of the three-storey staircase seen from a doorway. After being used as a penal institution for girls in the first half of the 20th century, the house was abandoned in 1972. Above right: the sinuous form of the main staircase can be seen from the first-floor landing. A sitting room beyond the glazed door surround connects a pair of spacious bedrooms that were added in 1849