



The Bucks County Chateau

This 10,000-square-foot residence features an asymmetrical staircase, handcrafted wrought-iron and brass railings, distinctively plastered walls, and hand-carved and -etched cherry-wood trusses that are in perfect proportion to the great room's high ceiling. The D'Alessio team created a distinctive stone façade by shaping a variety of local boulders into facing stones; the random pattern simply can't be reproduced. Three functioning chimneys, including one that tops out at 60 feet, echo Old World designs. And the wealth of custom-cast limestone detailing—including window surrounds, arches, and decorative panels—was itself a major task, taking a year and a half to design and install.

D'ALESSIO INSPIRED ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS

CREATING HISTORICALLY ACCURATE CASTLES, CHATEAUX, AND MANSIONS WITH OLD WORLD ARTISANSHIP

By Frederick Jerant

Building castles is a specialty of D'Alessio Inspired Architectural Designs (DIAD)—an international residential building design and construction company. Nestled in the tiny borough of New Hope, Pennsylvania, the company creates elegant castles, European chateaux, mansions, and luxury town homes. "I had worked for years as a stone mason," owner Andrea D'Alessio Jr. says. "And after completing work on a high-rise project in Atlanta, Georgia, in '96, I'd had enough and started my own company."

D'Alessio noticed that, after working on sumptuous mansions and other multimillion-dollar projects, he was often invited to client receptions and other events—the builders weren't. "I had built strong personal relationships with those clients," he says, "and realized that they valued the one-to-one contact. I decided that my company would be built on that kind of foundation." D'Alessio prides himself on his continued personal involvement. He will visit proposed sites himself and make detailed sketches of every aspect of the property to understand fully what the site will allow, and what will look best.

Those sketches are revised and sharpened in collaboration with the client, and then the firm finalizes them in 3-D renderings.

D'Alessio thinks the renderings can communicate beautiful and abstract details better than flat drawings can. A project that demonstrated this perfectly is a 10,000-square-foot chateau in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, D'Alessio recently completed for an entrepreneur and his family. A key feature is the spiral grand staircase connecting the first and second floors; its gentle asymmetrical curves seem to float as they rise. A graceful and ornate black wrought-iron balustrade with a brass handrail offsets the stairs' smooth whiteness, and the risers and stringers—encased in sleek imported Italian marble—are unseen. "It's practically a piece of sculpture," D'Alessio says, "and it would be impossible to depict accurately in 2-D."

Although the renderings are incredibly detailed, they still remain flexible, reflecting the company's organic approach to design. "Ideas often evolve during the construction phase,"

D'Alessio says. "This way, it's easier to adapt to situations as they arise." At the Bucks' County chateau, D'Alessio collected interesting scraps of limestone, travertine, and granite and fashioned them on-site into an elegant medallion for the foot of the back staircase. "When we see something that will work," he says, "we just do it."

D'Alessio also stresses the use of natural, sustainable materials whenever possible, as in the building's façade. It's made from over 200 tons of fieldstone hand-chiseled by the firm—an activity that occupied a crew of five for about six months. The massive stones are broken and chiseled into their final shapes, then arranged to form a unique mix. "We don't use quarry stones

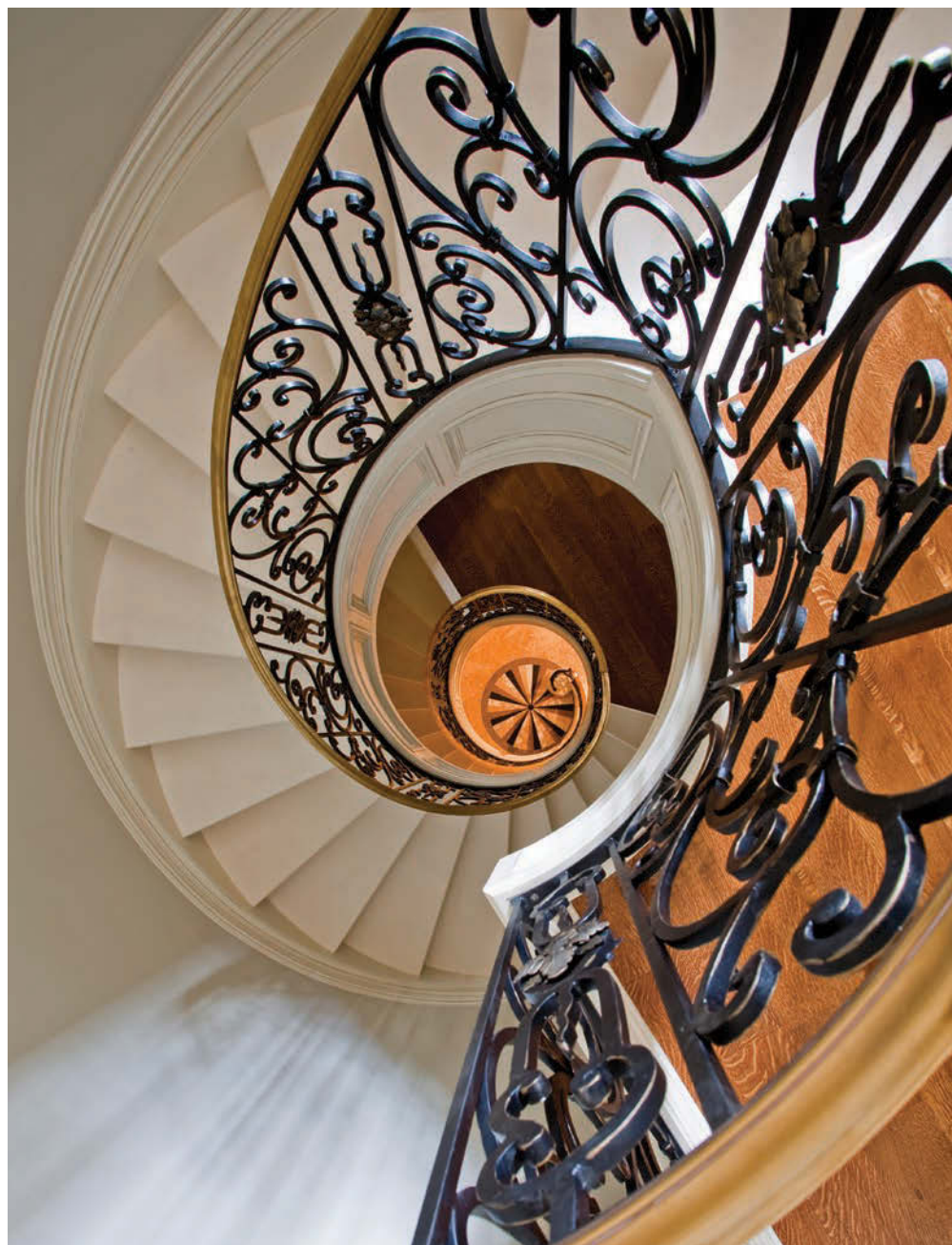


that have come from great distances,” D’Alessio says. “We prefer to explore the property and local quarries [for a lower carbon footprint], and use whatever boulders we can pull out of the ground. By using several types of fieldstone, we attain an appearance that no one else can match. It’s truly one-of-a-kind.”

The chateau’s exterior is dramatic with three functioning chimneys, the tallest of which tops out at 60 feet. They are formed from handmade clay bricks and hand-chiseled bluestone, accented by hand-molded limestone pots that stand over six and a half feet high. Window surrounds, arches, decorative panels, and other details were crafted from custom-cast limestone. D’Alessio says the design process alone took over six months, and a full year passed while the pieces were constructed and installed.

Although other designers might take a “close-enough” approach to historical detail, the D’Alessio team is dedicated to providing authentic appearances. A perfect example of this is the firm’s New Canal Village in historic New Hope, Pennsylvania, a cluster of four 4,100-square foot, four-level townhomes surrounding a garden and central courtyard and overlooking the Delaware Canal.

Using the nearby Parry Mansion (the family home of Benjamin Parry, “the father of New Hope”) as a template, DIAD created exteriors to match the original’s late 18th-century Federal style. The New Canal Village homes are made from more hand-chiseled stones, and the roofs are slate with cornice crown moldings, soffits, and dormers; copper snow guards and functioning wood shutters accented with finely crafted wrought-iron fittings complete the timeless look. In the end, D’Alessio’s dedication to accuracy paid off after all exterior work was reviewed and approved by New Hope’s Historical Architectural Review Board.





Cote d'Azur

This 6,500-square-foot residence for six includes handcrafted Austrian crystal chandeliers, hand-carved marble sinks from Spain, an oak-paneled elevator, and a massive front door made from a 3-inch-thick slab of alder wood. The distinctive home office was finished with nearly 300 pieces of hand-sanded and hand-stained cherry wood. And the kitchen, great room, and master bedroom open onto a 40-foot-wide stone balcony with wrought-iron railings; it gives the family and their guests an unobstructed view of the lush landscape.



Another historically accurate space is Cote D'Azur, a 6,500-square-foot private residence for a family of six, also in New Hope. The romantic home is infused with the classic European elegance of centuries past. Take the structural walls, for instance. Made from hand-cut limestone, ordinary mortar just wouldn't do. "Classical architecture styles are derived from Old Europe," D'Alessio says, "and the mortared joints of those buildings are weathered and worn. To get the proper aged appearance, we add a special type of aggregate to the mortar. After curing, we wash the stone with a special solution;

it exposes the aggregate and ages the color of the mortar. It's a small thing, but it lends more authenticity to the overall appearance."

More European elements can be found throughout the home. There are handcrafted crystal chandeliers from Austria, a reproduction of a French movie theater with Corinthian capital columns, hand-carved marble sinks from Spain, Rumford fireplaces (a design dating to the 1790s) with Herringbone patterns, and a laboriously finished cherry-wood home office. "We brought in a craftsman from Ireland for that task," D'Alessio says.

"He spent a full month just sanding and staining nearly 300 pieces of cherry wood for that room."

Taking such time and care with each project is how D'Alessio stands his firm apart from the crowd. In many projects, he says, if a problem emerges, it often leads to finger pointing, but D'Alessio circumvents this by keeping himself involved at all levels. "Everyone blames everyone else, and the project's cost can continue to climb because no one person is in charge of the entire project," he says. "That's why I take charge of everything." ■

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