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**below:** Traditional farmhouse elements for the exterior, from gables and dormers to a wraparound porch, have a spare, contemporary treatment, with shiplap cladding and cleanly profiled clad metal windows. **opposite:** The foyer opens to the center of the house, with textiles in a range of blue-grays.



INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON, MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON HOME | PHOTOGRAPHER JANE BEILES

# house of blues

Michelle Morgan Harrison uses paint and paper to **BRING COLOR** to a custom build

**Where is this house?** It's in town in New Canaan, on a road that goes between the town's two main thoroughfares, so it's a very convenient location, just a short walk to school or downtown.

**It's a wonderful modern take on a New England farmhouse. Who designed it?** It was built by Coastal Luxury Homes, a Westport based design/build firm. Joe Feinleib and his team came up with the design. It's a familiar form, but with a contemporary twist.

Coastal finished the exterior using some of their signature elements. For this house, the siding is shiplap with a one-inch channel. From a distance, it looks like clapboard, but like the design itself the material is technically advanced and very durable. They did the architecture, and I did the architectural interiors as well as the fittings and furnishings.

**How did you meet the client, and develop the design?** We met at a New Canaan Cares house tour event. She toured one of the houses



“The most important thing we did was **WORK WITH TEXTURES**, created with paneling, wallpapers and natural materials”

—MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON



**this page, clockwise from top left:** A blue-gray leather Ngala Trading chandelier provides a stunning focal point in the high-volume space; full-height paneling in a deep channeled grid pattern conceals a closet and powder room that open into the foyer; wallpaper on the ceiling—a custom Bradley USA pattern—is a decorative gesture used throughout the home; glass tile and pendant add shimmer to the foyer powder room.



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**this page:** Kitchen stools from MONDO, covered in steel blue vinyl from Brentano, tuck neatly into the breakfast-table end of the T-shaped island, leaving the U-shaped traffic pattern workable and clear. A conversion finish varnish on the oak eating surface resists stains and damp rings. Open shelves of white oak contribute to the spacious feel of the design's efficient layout.

**opposite:** Bianco Carrara marble is used for the backsplash cladding and the two-inch mitered countertops in the work areas. The openings provide plenty of natural light, amplified with the clear glass melon-shaped pendants from Tech Harper.



**this image:** The live-edge, natural oak-topped dining table with its large, glowing chandelier from Ron Dier creates a focal point for the multifunctional living area. All surfaces are simultaneously glamorous and durable. Dual textiles—backs from Bradley USA and fronts from Fabricut—cover the Jessica Charles dining chairs.

“She wanted a beautiful space that is also **HARDWORKING**, so we chose the surfaces and seating for durability, **IN ADDITION TO THEIR AESTHETICS.**”

—MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON

for which I did the interiors, which was another Coastal-built project. We clicked. She is the wife in a family of five, with three young boys, and had some specific ideas about what she wanted in her new home. She’s from California, and a lot of the ideas we decided on came from her style—she wanted things casual and relaxed, not formal.

**What were some of her priorities?** She and her husband didn’t want a huge house, they wanted a livable, functional home. They’re a very active family. I joined when the floor plan was done and they were doing framing. They had already decided that they were going to use the room that would traditionally serve as a formal dining room as a study-homework-craft room on the first floor. And they wanted the living and dining area—that one large room—to be everything. They wanted it to look a little different than the standard. In addition to an island where they could have breakfast and instead of a dining room, they wanted a central table that was usable, accessible and not precious. Everything needed to be family friendly. And while the design came together, there was a big debate: TV or no TV in the main space?

**And how did you solve that dilemma?** The family room is the room that’s in the front, accessed through the living room area. In a lot of houses, this space would be the library. I wanted to make it really cozy, in deeper, darker tones. I wanted to design it so that you could use it as a library and also give it an enveloping feel, a getaway from the large bright spaces in the living-dining-kitchen area—someplace to curl up and read, or watch television.

**Why did you use that beautiful blue barn door instead of a conventional opening?** The door closes off the room, and we really filled it for maximum comfort. It’s a wonderful warm space for the family. By sliding the door open, the family room and the living room work together to make more seating for a larger gathering.



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**For you, what are some of the home's keynote features?**  
The most important thing we did was work with textures, created with paneling, wallpapers and natural materials. I joked to the photographer that it's almost like you want to call this house "Look Up" because there are so many great lighting fixtures and paper patterns that complete the design and make it unique.

**Those hidden doors are a fun feature. What other surprises does this house hold?** Starting with the foyer, the clean, straightforward and natural look of the space made its details very important. The textiles and papers we used throughout the house were chosen in tonal variations of steel blue from the lightest to the darkest, and the entry chandelier was certainly a critical detail. It's made with beautiful, pale gray-blue leather.

**Can we start at the front of the house—and the main entry?**  
In the foyer, we wanted to do something other than a standard horizontal shiplap paneling, a popular treatment that we do use elsewhere—although we used a couple of panel widths to make it interesting. For this space, we used paneling in a large grid pattern overall—all the way to the ceiling of this double height space. The doors for the coat closet and powder room are hidden by the pattern, and so the paneling appears to be an uninterrupted wall surface.

**How does this pattern of clean lines and eye-catching detail progress through the house?** As you move from the entry toward the dining and kitchen area, we created a vestibule with two cased openings for a wet bar and wine space. We brought the color of the kitchen island into this transition point. But then, we gave it a special treatment with a fabulous wallpaper on the ceiling and midcentury-style light fixture. That is your gateway in. Then directly—dead center—in front of you is the live-edge oak dining table and its grand, rectilinear selenite chandelier.

**opposite, top right:** Well designed for its many functions, the mudroom hall is an axis for the family's busy life. Its back entry door opens to the children's play yard and an outdoor shower. But it is carefully appointed; hallway doors lead to a large closet and a powder room. As a crowning touch for the space, Michelle added custom hand-painted shades by Marie Burgos Designs for the ceiling fixtures. **below left:** the front entry offers a bench, hooks and plenty of storage, plus a low-maintenance gray porcelain plank tile floor. **below right:** the powder room is well equipped for the washing of small hands, with painted cabinetry and dramatic Samburu Nocturne wallpaper from Peter Fasano, also used on the ceiling of the front mudroom entry.



**above left and bottom:** The family moved into their home in mid-2019, so the home's layout, and particularly this dedicated children's workspace, became an ideal setup for the 2020 school year. A playful Blue Watercolor pattern from Schumacher for the ceiling and shades with a whimsical Agatha pendant by Luis Eslava Studio for LZF enliven the clean-lined space. Quartz desktops and white-painted homasote board for pinning art and to-do lists create easy-care workstations for three active boys.



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**this page:** Designed as a quiet and cozy space for reading and watching films and television, easy-care comfort fabrics in deep tones create an enveloping feel. The space is lit with Palecek's Beacon chandelier; touches of brass and a warming hearth add glow.

“When there’s a need for **OVER-FLOW SEATING**, the barn door can be opened to the family room, and the blue chairs swivel so that they can face the **ACTIVITY WHEREVER IT’S HAPPENING.**”

—MICHELLE MORGAN HARRISON

**That’s quite a centerpiece. As you turn right, you’re in the kitchen. What informed your choices there?** The client wanted to maximize the seating, so the T-shaped island achieved a large dining surface out of the path of the main work area of the kitchen. Along with the dining table, it’s natural oak, finished with conversion varnish so that this wood stands up to the client’s high-energy family. She wanted a beautiful space that is also hardworking, so we chose the surfaces and seating for durability, in addition to their aesthetics. Vinyl upholstery on the kitchen stools, and stain- and wear-resistant fabric were all must-haves. The natural oak open shelves all preserve the lightness and brightness of the space, and we chose tableware and accessories for the shelves that complement the overall palette and make an attractive display.

**And beyond the kitchen?** There’s another barn door that can be closed between the kitchen and the mudroom hallway. Just beyond the kitchen is a pantry for more storage, and the entry to the children’s space for work, study and crafts. That kitchen barn door can be open to keep an eye on the children’s activity, or closed to create a sound barrier.

**What was the idea behind the lovely contemporary textile choice for the children’s space?** The children love art—one of the boys is quite a talented artist—and the home’s wallpapers and decorative textiles capture some of that freehanded use of color and pattern, what I’d call a “painterly approach.” In the children’s space, the wallpaper on the ceiling and the same design for the fabric shades add some texture and energy, and the blue light fixture—it’s wood—is a perfect punctuation point for this room.

**Back to the main living area—the everything space. The fireplace wall of the living room space is simple, spare and beautiful. What is that single slab of stone?** It’s Siberian White marble. Even though this living room is not huge, like the rest of the house, it’s hardworking, and there’s a nice energy in this arrangement. I love the shape of the armchairs in front of the patio door—they are just as



**top:** A blue sliding barn door creates an enclosed family room or enlarged living area; the living room’s Mr. & Mrs. Howard swivel chairs in blue textured velvet enable conversations in all directions. **bottom:** The living area’s floor plan is modest in size, but comfortable seating, great natural light and a functional layout create an ideal spot for relaxation and conversation.



**top:** The living room's focal point is a stunning fireplace wall of Siberian white marble, punctuated with a white-framed convex mirror and flanked by long windows curtained with a painterly Zoffany fabric. Twin custom T3 coffee tables anchor the seating area. **below right:** A pair of Taylor King wood arm chairs are a star element.



**above:** Patio doors expand the open feel of the living area. The sofa, from Highland House in a pale blue-gray performance velvet, is accented with pillows in a Kravet fabric that coordinate with other soft and artful patterns seen throughout the home.

stylish as they are comfortable. When there's a need for overflow seating, the barn door can be opened to the family room, and the blue chairs swivel so that they can face the activity wherever it's happening.

**Before we go outdoors, we wanted to ask about the mudroom. What was your goal with this space?** A family with three children means lots of movement in and out of the house, and the way this area works and looks was very important to the client. On the agenda were storage space for all the stuff, plus a clean and relaxed aesthetic with the same surprising accents that characterize the rest of the house.

**And how did you make this happen?** The mudroom is a hub for lots of activity. One end is at the foot of the back stairway, which leads to the second and third floors, and the space can be accessed from the kitchen and the children's study. It also has three separate entries from outside the house: from its own door at the front of the house, from the back of the house where there's a large open expanse of backyard and outdoor shower and from the garage. It's doing quite a bit of work with a lot of style. There's blue cabinetry, a built-in bench and a great wallpaper pattern on the ceiling and powder room walls. The space is lit by fantastic fixtures with hand-painted blue ombré shades. I love how it came together!



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**In addition to a big yard for three active boys, how did you work the back of the property for the grown-ups and for entertaining?** We continued the home's relaxed aesthetic outdoors, with the landscape designed by Odd Job Landscaping. The furnishings and mechanical components are on the cutting edge, technically. We did this really fun, metal pergola design; press a button, and its louvers can be automatically opened and closed. Built-in heaters extend the season for using the outdoor space, and the outdoor fireplace was designed with an automatic pop-up television. The plan checked all the boxes of their wish list. —INTERVIEW BY JUDY OSTROW

**Resources:**

Architectural interiors and interior design:  
Morgan Harrison Home, New Canaan;  
203-594-7875; morganharrisonhome.com  
Design/Build: Coastal Luxury Homes, Westport;  
203-984-6869; coastal-lux.com  
Landscape design: Odd Job Landscaping, Norwalk;  
203-655-3332; oddjoblandscaping.com

**this spread:** The patio was designed with a sheltering pergola, fireplace and built-in heaters to expand its useful seasons. The Cane-line sofas provide comfort in the lounge area, with a pop-up television accessible at the touch of a controller from its slot in the masonry surround for the outdoor fireplace. In the open dining area, Cane-line Lean dining chairs are a modern take on traditional wicker.

