



The formal living room hosts an inventive mix of antiques and contemporary pieces.

ROOM TO GROW

*A family expands from two floors to four
in a historical Beacon Hill residence.*

BY MOLLY JANE QUINN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC ROTH



THE

woven silk tapestry that greets guests—a colorful, grinning face by Dutch artist Karel Appel that hangs above a carved marble mantel in the entryway—seems to say it all about this renovated Beacon Hill rowhouse: Contradictions are welcome.

Just look around. The elevator paneling is a cool, modern green lacquer, and the guest bath features glittering Bisazza glass tile. “We knew when we renovated we needed to do something really unique,” says the owner, who shares the space with his wife and their three children. The family’s four-year journey from living in a single apartment to renovating all four of the building’s residential floors brought with it many unexpected twists and turns, including one—well, two—very big surprises: twins.

When they first bought the property—which dates to the mid-1800s—in the ’90s, the couple lived on the second and third floors, above the retail space at ground level. But in the early 2000s, desiring more room, they faced a dilemma: Stay in the city, or defect to the spacious suburbs? When their fourth- and fifth-floor tenants moved out in 2007, the chance to stitch together all four levels was hard to resist—and the location couldn’t be beat. “We’re at the intersection of every part of the city,” says the wife. “To the right is Back Bay; straight ahead and we’re in Chinatown; the North End to the left. And Boston Common is our backyard.”



Above, vintage torchères with Moooi’s mirrored shades mix old and new; versatile white-and-chrome B & B Italia tables join to become banquet-size. Opposite, the floor is a reproduction of the home’s original parquet, which was too fragile to restore.

The pair enlisted Ruhl Walker Architects to help transform the divided building into a single home. Along the way, they became parents of three. The family’s sudden growth during the middle of the design process required Will Ruhl and Brad Walker to think on their feet. “This was a project that evolved dramatically over time,” says Walker. “When we started, our [clients were] a newly married couple. Now they’re a family of five.”

Fortunately, the couple’s wish list remained short, with three main goals: Merge the past with

the present; make the house as environmentally friendly as possible; and incorporate unobtrusive child-safe features.

“There was a lot of back and forth about whether the first floor should be devoted to formal rooms or made into a playpen,” says Walker. In the end, the team used the first floor as a parlor and a dining room, with the kitchen above, the master suite and office next, and the children’s rooms on the very top floor. The back staircase was converted into a private elevator for toting groceries and kids. »



Above, a built-in banquette outfitted with kid-friendly cushions doubles as a perch for tiny artists to reach the chalkboard above; the steps lead to the family's private roof deck. Below, a long, lean island dominates the kitchen. At one end, an Arne Jacobsen Egg chair paired with an ottoman makes a cozy spot for TV-watching.



A silk tapestry by Dutch artist Karel Appel adorns the marble mantel in the entryway.

A pair of Flos floor lamps frame a gilt Italian console table from Alexander Westerhoff Antiques.



Above, the Peter Maly bed in the master suite abuts a shower wall; the Durvair vanity is visible, with the tub just beyond. A photograph by Canadian artist Tshi Zerbina hangs above the Ann Sacks tile-clad fireplace surround.

In making the rowhouse both modern and eco-efficient, the owners never lost sight of its history. The husband delved into researching the newest green materials. (He became such a fixture at local stores that shop owners still call with hot tips about new products.) Many elements—like the tub in the master bath—were reused rather than tossed, and nontoxic items like recycled-denim insulation and low-VOC wood stains ruled design decisions. The result, says Walker, is “an exciting blend that acknowledges the grandeur of a Beacon Hill house while never disguising the fact that this is a home for a young, urban, 21st-century family.”

The kitchen boasts blond wood and glossy lacquer cabinets designed by Mercedes Farrando, then of Arclinea Boston. The 24-foot center island features a honed-granite countertop. The sleek room also highlights the building’s original windows, which offer generous views of the Common on one side and the family’s private roof deck on the other. Ruhl and Walker also maximized access to daylight and park views in the master bedroom. “The entire floor is essentially private space at treetop level,” says Walker. “The more-traditional privacy needs could be relaxed a little.”

Indeed, they are. In the bedroom, the tub is in full view. In the middle of the room is a shower cube, floating free with a full transom of clear glass at the top. Adjacent to the shower is a Peter Maly bed facing the windows; built-in closets with matte lacquer

doors, custom designed by Ruhl and Walker, provide standalone storage. “We sacrificed square footage,” the husband says of the deep floor-to-ceiling closets, which run parallel along the walls. “But it made the rooms more open.”

Decorating involved blending antiques with contemporary furniture and art from the couple’s diverse collection. A pair of vintage torchères—salvaged from a Back Bay townhouse, now ebonized and outfitted with Dutch design group Moooi’s semitransparent mirror shades—epitomize both the couple’s deference to Boston history and their forward-thinking approach. “The house is amazing for its functionality,” says the wife. “But we also feel more connected to Boston.” ■

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