

The living room is traditionally formal with its Gustavian 22-karat gold leaf chandelier, circa-1770 mirror and eighteenth-century Louis XVI fauteuil armchairs. *Facing page:* This photograph by Candida Höfer is part of the couple's contemporary art collection.





# City Slick, Country Quiet

*All the amenities of life in the suburbs—from parking to privacy to peace and quiet—find their way into a townhouse tucked in the heart of Boston's Back Bay.*

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PARTENIO • ARCHITECTURE:

DELL MITCHELL ARCHITECTS •

INTERIOR DESIGN: CAROLINA

TRESS BALSBAUGH, MANUEL

DE SANTAREN, INC. • BUILDER:

PAYNE/BOUCHIER • PRODUCED

BY KYLE HOEPNER



City living isn't always conducive to raising a family: noisy streets disturb a peaceful night's sleep, cramped living quarters leave little room for privacy and parking often seems like an urban myth. Not to mention that dark back alleys make a poor substitute for a grassy backyard. No wonder many families make the move to the suburbs. • Having lived in Boston's Back Bay for more than seventeen years, the owners of this townhouse wanted just such luxuries, but they didn't want to uproot their young family. Together

with their Boston-based team of professionals—architects Dell Mitchell and Jeffrey Heyne, designer Carolina Tress Balsbaugh and builder Payne/Bouchier—the homeowners embarked on a complete gut renovation to create a suburban oasis in the heart of the city. • The owners wanted to retain the traditional elements of their home, designed by Peabody & Stearns in the late nineteenth century, but update it with modern amenities and flexible, functional space for both family living and entertaining friends. The





home's 5,600-plus square feet stretch over four floors, and its slightly fatter footprint gives it a roomier feel than the typical narrow Boston town-home. Mitchell expanded the ceiling heights, relocated the stairwell and added a skylight to bring in as much natural light as possible.

With its elegant oval shape, rich red carpeting and warm mahogany handrail, the graceful new stairway spills out in welcome as you step inside the front door. In addition to the stair, Mitchell and her team designed all of the home's woodwork, paneling and plasterwork, as well as most of the cabinetry and built-ins. "There are a lot of classical influences in the things we selected," says Mitchell, citing the traditional rosette motif on the stairway and the string moldings and cartouches in the dining room as just two small examples. "We had an idea about making it feel graceful, using a lot of curves that are incorporated in both subtle and more obvious ways," she notes. "It took a very fluid, very detail-intensive design to accomplish that."

*Fluid*, in fact, describes the overall layout; rooms on the first floor are connected by massive, mahogany pocket doors that slide smoothly in and out ("like butter," quips Mitchell). Closed, they create privacy between spaces; open, they allow for a continuous loop of circulation. "We wanted to create a lot of spaces that worked for different scenarios," says the owner.

*The owners, contemporary art enthusiasts, wanted the house to serve as a backdrop for their collection.*



Now, the family can host large soirées that flow from room to room, intimate dinner parties centered in the dining room or casual get-togethers that take advantage of outside areas.

A warm, inviting yellow—the owner calls it “a happy color”—coats hallway walls, and white molding ties every room together. The only exception is the library, which is done entirely in figured anigre, a contemporary take on the more traditional mahogany usually found in such spaces. Balsbaugh was attentive to the owners' love of color; rather than painting the entire house different shades of vanilla, she incorporated red, sage green, indigo and gold.

Pops of color accent the formal living room, where a reproduction Coco Chanel sofa upholstered in gold and pearl-gray bouclé fabric and accented by rose-colored silk velvet pillows sits beneath a photo by Candida Höfer that depicts the plush red seating and opulent neo-Baroque architecture of the Palais Garnier in Paris. The owners, contemporary art enthusiasts, wanted the house to serve as a backdrop for their





The starburst pattern on the dining room floor is made of three types of wood: bubinga, wenge and white riftsawn oak. Facing page top: A foyer wall is lined with 144 monoprints from *The Shapes Project* by Allan McCollum. Facing page bottom: Architect Dell Mitchell designed the graceful, oval shaped staircase.



A circle intersecting rectangular lines within the woodwork on the library ceiling is one of many classical details throughout the house. *Facing page top:* Kitchen cabinetry was custom designed by Dalia Kitchen Design. An iron door leads to the adjacent courtyard (*facing page bottom*).





collection, and plaster moldings conceal art lighting throughout the house.

In striking contrast to the light palette of the living room, the octagonal dining room has walls cloaked in a deep aubergine glaze. Balsbaugh hired an artist to paint the room as if working on an oil painting; it took seven layers and about three weeks to dry. White sheers block the alley views, and mirrored shutters can be closed to reflect the entire room. "It's like being in a jewel box," says the owner.

Above the living and entertaining spaces, the master suite is a serene refuge with its luxurious taupe and blue velvet-upholstered walls, creamy damask wool-silk carpet and blue embroidered curtains. Nineteenth-century Chinese vase lamps sit atop mirrored nightstands on each side of the bed, and a silk velvet chaise invites midday lounging.

The owners' two daughters share the top floor, their bedrooms connected by what Balsbaugh calls a "Jill and Jill" bathroom. Each room is decorated in the girl's favorite colors—one celadon and lavender, the other yellow and pink. The older girl's room has an eighteenth-century canopy adapted to fit a queen-size



*The owners wanted to retain the traditional elements of their home but update it with modern amenities.*

bed, while the younger sleeps under a custom candy-striped silk baldachin.

Sweet dreams come easy in this house: bedrooms are outfitted with blackout shades (which Mom can open from her bedroom to slowly wake the girls each morning), and the entire house is soundproofed to muffle city noises, making it as quiet as evening in the suburbs.

As part of the renovation, the kitchen was moved to the lowest level; the architects excavated a foot down in order to give the room loftier ceilings. The stairway leading downstairs was carefully constructed to help incorporate the kitchen into the rest of the house, with a small oval window cut into the side that allows people sitting at the kitchen table to see who's going up or coming down. "The fact that they had children is the reason we worked so hard to make the kitchen feel connected," says Mitchell. "We wanted it to feel



Soft velvet wraps the master bedroom's walls. *Facing page top:* A built-in designed by Mitchell surrounds a Louis XVI desk in the older girl's bedroom; Mitchell also fashioned the ceiling niche with its custom-painted sky mural. *Facing page bottom:* French wallpaper and matching curtains bedeck the "Jill and Jill" bathroom.



like the heart of the home, even though it's down on the lowest level."

Beneath cream-colored cabinetry, the backsplash boasts hexagon-shaped honey onyx tile, while the

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kitchen island is topped with Costa Esmerelda granite. A laminated stripe fabric cushions oak barstools, and faux-leather chairs gather around the kitchen

table. "I wanted it to be beautiful but sensible," says Balsbaugh. "I didn't want someone to go hysterical if you spilled something."

The ground-floor kitchen affords the homeowners another suburban luxury not often found in the city: the ability to drive right up to the door to tote groceries inside without having to trudge up and down stairs.

The large driveway pulls double-duty as a favorite play area for the owners' daughters and their neighborhood friends, and a courtyard garden off the





kitchen gives the family plenty of room to grill outdoors. High above the city, their roof deck offers beautiful views of the Charles River. And parking? The owners actually have more than enough; they turned their garage into a home gym.

An elegant aesthetic, plenty of square footage, guaranteed quiet nights, family-friendly outdoor spaces and even private parking—all in one of Boston's best neighborhoods. This suburban-like city dwelling truly has it all. •

**Resources** For more information about this home, see page 140.

