

All the Comforts of Home

This 1896 house was so historic it boasted lead pipes, drafty windows, and no garage. Then along came new owners with kids, cars, dogs—and a preservation-minded remodel plan

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BY CONCORD STANDARDS, the house was practically new. It had gone up a mere 115 years earlier, long after the town was incorporated and British redcoats had put it on the Massachusetts map. But with its stalwart gambrel roof presiding over a busy corner in a high-profile historic district, the Victorian-era house had its own kind of period style, and no one—least of all its new owners—wanted to mess with that.

Inside, the handsome front rooms and center staircase looked as if they'd been preserved in amber. "Not much had been done," says Alex Allen, recalling the first time he and his wife, Andrea, saw the honey-colored floors and cozy inglenook. The black-cypress woodwork and heavy quartersawn-oak newel posts had never seen paint and showed no signs of wear. During her 60-year reign, it turned out, the previous owner had restricted her kids to the rear of the house.



The front-entry inglenook and quartersawn-oak floor needed only a little TLC.

Back there, the new owners could see room for improvement. "It was really run-down," Alex says. "There was a chimney that once served a coal stove, but it was sealed up and did nothing." The rest of the kitchen and pantry weren't exactly carrying their weight either.

And, um, where to put the car?

"That's why it sat for so long," Alex says, recalling how the house and its dirt drive lingered for months in for-sale limbo. "No garage."

The couple had been raising their two kids in Vero Beach, Florida, while working for a family-owned business that manufactures bike racks for cars. Concord was a draw because the schools are good and both sets of grandparents live nearby.

"Never having owned a house there, we didn't have any idea how hard it would be to get a garage approved," says Alex.

And that was just one item on a redo list that ended up keeping the family in Florida a year longer than planned.

As many pros like to say, administering to a house of a certain age can be tougher than building from scratch. Getting this 1896 dowager back on her feet would require a team of crack "gerontologists" able to update without altering the spirit of the place or raising the neighbors' hackles. (This is no ordinary neighborhood. It boasts a fence designed by Henry David Thoreau.)

"It's not a flagship property, but it's prominent," says John Battle, the architect who took charge of the redo and ended up running interference with the local Historic Districts Commission. "It's on Main Street and highly visible, so the commission was going to give it a lot of scrutiny. We knew we had to be responsible."

Translation: Many late-night meetings, and forget about erecting an attached garage.

Halsey Platt, the general contractor who waded in next, was similarly aware of the need for kid work gloves. Every system would have to be replaced, while making every effort to preserve the good stuff. It would be like dragging a house into the 21st century by horse and buggy. "A house like this, with very few modifications and repairs since it was built, is quite rare," he says, adding quickly, "I thought it was wonderful."

The interior designer, Janice Battle, architect John's wife, realized the challenge lay in knitting together the redesigned back of the house, and its inevitable family-size show kitchen, with the quainter front half. "The owners wanted to keep the Victorian feel of the house but not to make it look like Grandma's parlor," she says. "That was a little tricky because the house has a dark quality from all the wood." Finding the right stains for new flooring, woodwork, and window frames alone

RIGHT: The living room's original black-cypress woodwork had never seen paint. Soft neutrals and red accents flow from this room to other living spaces.

BELOW: The living room's now-working fireplace has a screen made from a refurbished cast-iron fireback. *Paint:* Benjamin Moore's Lenox Tan (walls). *Spindle chair:* Century Furniture. *Fabric:* Elanbach. *Rugs:* Steven King Decorative Carpets. *Curtain fabric:* Kravet





LEFT: The dining room has new William Morris wallpaper and an original built-in bench with storage for table linens. The existing windows were mirrored after a bumpout at the back of the house blocked the view. *Light fixture: Visual Comfort. Tables and chairs: Woodbridge Furniture Co.*



“was a huge project,” she says. In spots, the crew had to patch, borrowing casing and trim from other rooms with varying sun exposure. Tinkering with stain colors, she says, “went on for many, many weeks.”

At the same time, however, there was virtually no lead paint to hassle with. Restoring the inglenook, with its fireplace and bench seat, required more finesse than heavy lifting and included bringing in specialists who love old things. “There were two old sconces that ran on knob-and-tube wiring,” Platt says. “The electrician came up with the wonderful idea to rewire them to be low voltage and put the transformer in the basement, so we could keep them and meet code.” Then there was the skilled mason who not only relined the inglenook chimney—using an intricate process called the Ahrens system,



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which leaves the brick unscathed—but also was able to seamlessly swap in replacements for cracked terra-cotta hearth tiles. A blacksmith stepped in to repair the living room fireplace's cast-iron fireback.

Before he could get to these satisfying details, Platt had to open up walls to replace all the wiring and plumbing, including lead waste pipes so old and eccentric that one plumber asked if he could take pictures.

An unusual type of “back plastering” in the front exterior wall had created air pockets for insulation but no way to blow in the closed-cell foam that Platt had planned. To help cut drafts, he placed rigid foam in the portions of the weight pockets that served the upper sashes of the old double-hung windows. “We permanently fixed the upper sashes, which allowed us to remove the window weights and add the foam. Then we reinstalled the weights for the lower sashes. It’s a great

RIGHT: Andrea and Alex Allen gather with kids Gabby and Jimmy in the new kitchen. **BELOW:** A marble-topped island dispatches breakfast and homework at one end and dinner at the other. *Cooktop: DCS. Sink and faucet: Rohl*





ABOVE: In the windowed pantry, beadboard panels, patterned tile, and wide oak floorboards add cottage charm. Cabinets: Platt Builders. Wood stains: Old Masters

DIY fix for old houses.” New triple-track aluminum storms added another buffer, as did a “hat” of closed-cell insulation on the third floor.

Dragging away the hulking cast-iron Burnham furnace in favor of two stainless-steel wall-hung Buderus boilers was one thing; harder was threading air-conditioning ducts and hot-water lines for the forced-air system up through the dining room walls to air handlers added on the third floor. To make way for more lines over the foyer, Platt says he had his crew pull down the plaster ceiling and cypress box-beam trim and put it back. How’s this done? “Very carefully,” he says.

The big challenge for the architect was reinventing the mainly original back of the house to suit a household more interested in kitchens than front parlors. The rear was narrower than the front and crammed with small, closed-off spaces, and “there was no flow from front to back—it was severed because the help

floor plans

Bumping out the first floor of the house added 300 square feet, and an upstairs porch became part of the new master suite. The kitchen, which now opens to the front rooms, and the master suite and baths are new. The freshly painted clapboard-and-shingle house is now a roomy 3,818 square feet, which includes a third floor (not shown) with a guest room and a TV room.

FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR





LEFT: Polished quartersawn oak adds presence to the original center-hall staircase. Runner and Oriental rug: Steven King Decorative Carpets

went to the back," Battle says. After working out several options in some detail, he won the historic commission's approval to gut this section and bump out the sides, aligning the back with the front.

All this allowed a spacious kitchen with openings to the dining room, living room, and foyer. The new porous connection allows air and light to flow and sets up ideal traffic conditions for working parents with equally busy kids—Gabby, age 14, and Jimmy, 12—bird-dogged by two energetic French pointers.

Above the kitchen, Battle created a master suite. It, too, absorbed a cluster of spaces, including a sleeping porch suspended precariously off one side. The kids scooped up the handsome rooms fronting the street, but "ours is in the quietest part of the house and gets morning sunlight," Alex says.

Along with the kids' rooms and two new baths, the second floor now has a laundry room and an office for Andrea, while the bonus third floor was remodeled to

hold a TV room and overnight guests. "The house is fairly sizable," says John Battle, "but inside it's cozy, especially the public rooms, which have an intimate feel."

The one large, open space is the kitchen, where Alex, the household's top chef, put in a request for room to cook and hobnob. "I thought of my parents' house," he says. "The kitchen is where you always hang out." When Andrea put in her own request for an island that could handle homework and breakfast as well as dinner prep, John Battle studied appliance needs and traffic patterns some more before working out a one-island-fits-all design, with a 48-inch cooktop planted at the business end and a bulbous gathering spot with seating at the other.

Alex also wanted thick marble countertops. Platt accommodated all that stone by reinforcing the floor. To warm up the open space, Janice Battle painted the island red, with a softening ochre glaze.

"This was a fabulous project because each member of the team cared enormously about the finished product,"



RIGHT: In the new master bath, a marble-topped double vanity and glass-front shower enclosure reflect light from the new west-facing window. *Sconces: Visual Comfort. Sinks and faucets: Kohler. BELOW: New floorboards and casing in the master bedroom were stained to match those in the original rooms. Bed: Grange. Lamps: Visual Comfort. Bedside table: Minton-Spidell*



says Platt. “We also had the luxury of 11 months and the budget to do the things that needed to be done. Oftentimes those things don’t all come together.”

As for the garage, one neighbor just plain didn’t want it, and the historic commission balked about its looks. “It was stressful,” says Alex. “I went to the first hearing, then we decided to let John work it out.”

The end result, which Battle calls “a sweet little gem,” proved pleasing to homeowners and neighborhood preservationists alike. While smaller than originally planned—and detached from the house—it still manages to squeeze in two cars, three bikes, and a second-floor office for Alex. “I have nothing but good things to say about the process now, even though it wasn’t a whole lot of fun,” Alex says. “The architectural integrity is there, and that’s what’s important.”

“In the end, everything worked out well,” he continues, not least the luxury of a kitchen that is big enough for a crowd and nearly as sunny as a Florida room. “For us, this house turned out to be a perfect fit.” ■



ABOVE: The new garage has a home office upstairs and echoes the lines of the house.