



SOULTHIE STYLES

A Kastall shag and a Cassina sectional sit atop a raised bamboo floor in the living room.

FORMER SUBURBANITES GO
METROPOLITAN IN FORT POINT CHANNEL.
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STYLING BY TUI STARK/ENNIS

When is a wall not just a wall? When it's the focal point of an entire home. Such is the case in Tom O'Brien and Barbara Beck's South Boston loft, where a cold-rolled steel wall subtly divides and defines the couple's living space. O'Brien, who works in Newton as the CEO of TravelCenters of America, and Beck, a beekeeper and retired healthcare company vice president, were looking for a way to organize their 1,800-square-foot apartment. The brainchild of architects William Ruhl and Grant Scott, the multipurpose steel wall acts as a minimalist sculpture, entertainment center, bar, and storage space—a clever solution in a city where closets are as valuable as square footage.

"Like many of our clients, Tom and Barbara struggled with their desire to define smaller areas without losing that open feel that makes lofts so desirable," says Ruhl, whose firm, Ruhl Walker Architects, has designed several Boston lofts. "Their goal was to have light throughout and establish separate places for sitting, eating, and entertaining."

O'Brien, who conjures Jerry Seinfeld with his neat appearance and humorous quips, refers to the dark steel-paneled wall as the Monolith. "He called it that from the beginning," explains Ruhl. "He had flashbacks to the Stanley Kubrick movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where that monolith floats through space."

But unlike Kubrick's foreboding obelisk, O'Brien and Beck's wall has a lighter side, including fluorescent up-lights that illuminate the 12-foot-tall ceilings and concealed lights in all of the display areas. The end result is a soft, ethereal glow that bounces off the condo's bamboo and concrete floors.

The fortysomething couple also own a house in Stow, but bought the Channel Center loft to reduce O'Brien's lengthy commute to Newton. The large, industrial space was a welcome contrast to their more traditional, Colonial-style home, which Beck says is "much more family-friendly," with furniture from Pottery Barn and Ethan Allen. "We were very involved with the concept of the Stow house," Beck remembers. "We drew the layout before we hired an architect and builder. This space was fun because it was more challenging than creating a house from scratch. We had to work with constraints, like the irregular shape and limited natural light."

No strangers to design, the Boston transplants knew what they wanted in their new urban nest. A big fan of midcentury modern, Beck planned to furnish the condo with mostly vintage pieces, but was detoured by the



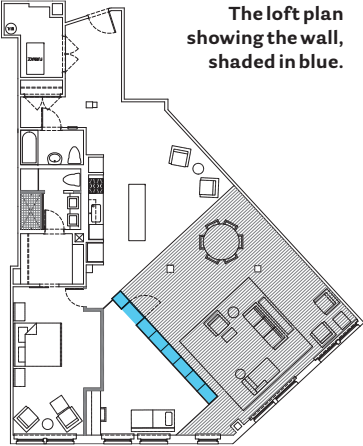
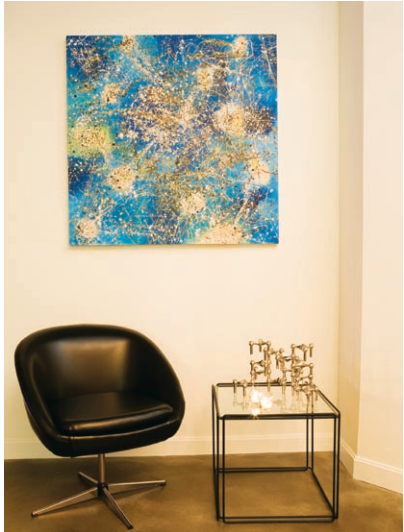
This page: The brightly upholstered chairs and the original wood beams in the master bedroom radiate warmth. **Opposite:** From top, the freestanding wall, made of waxed, acid-blackened steel, divides the living room from the study; a built-in dry bar; below a backlit acrylic niche sits a Lunar sofa by B&B Italia.



The only material the owners insisted on using were these glass tiles. “We were a little worried,” says architect Grant Scott, “but were wonderfully surprised that it turned out so bright and comfortable.”



This page: From left, Beck in the open kitchen with her favorite ceramics; the entryway has a stained concrete floor. **Opposite:** Bisazza glass tile walls and floors light up the master bath.



The loft plan showing the wall, shaded in blue.

sales team at Montage. “Meryl Thompson worked with us and was dead-on with her recommendations,” she says. “Meryl suggested two B&B Italia chairs for the space behind our sectional sofa. We told her we’d pass. We then went back two or three months later with hat in hand and said, ‘You were right.’”

Still, Beck continues to haunt vintage furniture shops and online sellers for pieces like her Lucite lamps and Heywood Wakefield dressers. She doggedly tracked down a set of Eero Saarinen dining room chairs—from the Brimfield Antique Show, eBay, and more vintage stores—and had them reupholstered in a leafy green fabric. Her aesthetic criteria remain more important than design pedigree: To wit, she found lampshades at Target and a rug at TJ Maxx. Overall, the final mix of designer, vintage, and bargain pieces is deft and playful.

O’Brien is also flexible when it comes to the furnishings. He points out the vintage green Formica cubes—bought at A2Z Modern in Worcester—that serve as stools in the kitchen. “We were using them as night tables in our bedroom,” he says. “I thought they’d look good in the kitchen, but it’s really because I didn’t want to carry them out to the car. I can be inventive when manual labor is involved.” Fortunately for him, his wife’s keen eye and the loft’s massive wall do most of the heavy design lifting at home.



Clockwise from left, a view into the master bedroom; O’Brien in the living room; the La Rotonda by Cassina dining table; a patterned glass panel divides the study from the kitchen.

