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HISTORY IN THE MAKING

A brownstone in the Back Bay gets new
life while preserving its history.



Interior designer Manuel de Santaren incorporated some of the homeowner's existing pieces, and she and he traveled to Paris to find standout additions.





“Our team loves both restoration work and modern design. The goal here was to hold everything together, to have the new and old details coexist in an intentional way, and to focus restoration efforts on what is special and original.” –WILLIAM RUHL

When one moves into a new house, two stories collide. There is the building’s history, its years of inhabitants reflected in the layers of architecture and design. And then there is the new homeowner’s personal narrative, the experiences, travels, memories and dreams that shape their vision of home. Sometimes the two plotlines converge to form a new tale, but sometimes the building’s history is ignored, plastered over and begun anew. In the story of this Back Bay brownstone, the new owner brought great familiarity with residential design, a family and a vision. Although she wanted to mold her new home to reflect her personal aesthetic, she wasn’t going to do so at the expense of its history.

The brownstone was once built as a private home before being turned into dormitories for a local university. On some floors were precious Adamsesque architectural details like elaborate plaster work, decorative ceilings, pilasters and neo-Gothic accents. Other floors had been entirely stripped, their histories erased into blank canvases. Wherever possible, the homeowner sought to preserve

In the formal living room, or salon, Vladimir Kagan sofas sit alongside art deco details. The home’s magnificence is honored while also becoming more playful, chic and elegant. Opposite page: The glass elevator, which runs through all five floors, had to be fitted into the space alongside the existing staircase.

the building’s past and used the expressionless walls as backdrops for contemporary additions. She enlisted a team who had served her well in the past and had the skills and ingenuity to align seemingly disparate styles: Sea-Dar Construction, architect of record Anne Snelling-Lee of a+sl Studios and interior designer Manuel de Santaren. Architect William Ruhl and his team at Ruhl | Jahnes Architects were hired as associate architects.

Notwithstanding the historic architectural elements that the homeowner wished to preserve, the brownstone underwent an almost complete gut renovation. Sea-Dar spent months restoring the entire facade. “The facade was in bad shape. We basically rebuilt it to preserve the nature of the brownstone and to maintain its longevity,” says Tony Salem, vice president and principal at Sea-Dar. In addition to a great deal of invisible work that was necessary to make the house safe and functional, Sea-Dar also pulled off distinctive structural gymnastics to create a large roof deck and install a garage with lifts

to accommodate four cars, plus an open glass elevator running the length of all five floors. “The most challenging part of the project was creating the two-level garage. We had to dig deep, about 15 feet down, and manage water tables, so that cars can be put on top of each other,” says Salem. The elevator, made entirely of glass to bring in daylight and minimize its impact, had to be fitted into the space alongside the existing staircase. “It took a lot of engineering to implement the elevator in such a limited space where there is zero room for mistakes. It had to be perfectly plumb, perfectly supported,” says Salem. Now, not only is it a special feature of the home, but it acts as a ride through time and space. As one travels between the floors, their distinct personalities are revealed—the contemporary travels to the historic and back again.

It was this order, this organization of floors, that the architects had to figure out. To establish continuity from the unique ground-floor entry to the upper levels, the architects reimagined the original ground-floor straight-run stair in favor of a more gracious, curving stair that would be more welcoming and better accommodate the elevator by almost encircling it. It seamlessly integrates into existing columns in the upstairs foyer.

The kitchen was placed in one of the stripped spaces, which allowed it to be open and modern, and a space with existing coffered ceilings and a majestic fireplace became the grand family room. The architects discovered existing light wells that ran from top to bottom and utilized them to bring natural sunlight to the lower levels. Taking advantage of the views they also provide, Snelling-Lee and Ruhl placed the primary bathroom’s tub directly beneath one, so while bathing, one can also soak in the sun and look all the way up to the roof. “Our team loves both restoration work and modern design. The goal here was to hold everything together, to have the new and old details coexist in an intentional way, and to focus restoration efforts on what is special and original,” says Ruhl.

De Santaren provided the language through which the new and the old could speak. Beginning with the entryway, he immediately whisks one from the city into the varied world the home inhabits by adding an

In the family room, interior designer Manuel de Santaren used two different glossy lacquered paints on the coffered ceiling to add unexpected interest and reflectivity, making the space feel taller and loftier.

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unexpected abstract design on a stone floor. Modern cabinetry faces the new plastered stair and glass elevator. Accent pieces and artwork inform what is to come. A home that, despite its formal facade, isn't stuffy or stuck in one era. There is lightness and fun. De Santaren was able to use some existing pieces from the homeowner's previous house, and she and he traveled to the Paris markets and shops on the Left Bank to find standout additions. A cocktail table in Florence made its way into the home's salon. "We saved all of the original architectural details because we didn't want to eradicate the history and feel of the house, even if we took the design in a contemporary direction," says de Santaren. In the formal living room, or salon, there are Vladimir Kagan sofas alongside art deco details. The home's magnificence is honored while also becoming more playful, chic and elegant. The stair runner has a border only on one side, an accent that breaks from the norm. The dining room has mismatched chairs at two tables, which can be joined together if needed. Custom rugs created by Marc Phillips in New York are placed on original wood floors pushing the envelope even further. New light oak flooring in place of narrow boards from the late 19th to early 20th century lightens and brightens. High-gloss paint throughout provides a liquid, glossy, reflective finish that helps accentuate natural light. In the family room, de Santaren used two lacquered paints on the coffered ceiling, a warm brown-gray on the beams and a light brown on the panels. Not only does it add unexpected interest, but the reflectivity also makes the space feel taller and loftier. These modern finishes and furnishings, in the context of the home's original features, allow the homeowner to exist seamlessly in both worlds.

It is to the homeowner's vision that everyone on the team gives credit. De Santaren says that "working with this client has always been a delight because we tend to finish each other's sentences, and that doesn't happen very often. I cherish that." And Salem describes her as "very experienced and decisive. She was able to guide the process and allow the project to progress smoothly and on budget." Now a third story has been added. There is the one of the house, the one of the homeowner and the new iteration of how both came to life.

From top: A tub sits under an existing light well, bringing in natural light and a view all the way to the roof; the modern kitchen was placed in a space already stripped of architectural details.

Opposite page: Modern finishes and furnishings, in the context of the home's original features, allow the homeowner to exist seamlessly in both worlds.



Design Details

Type

Single-family home

Location

Back Bay

Architect of Record

Anne Snelling-Lee

aslstudios.com

Associate Architect

William Ruhl

ruhlahmes.com

Builders

Sea-Dar Construction

seadar.com

Interior Design

Manuel de Santaren

manueldesantaren.com

Elevator

Savaria

savaria.com

Kitchen

eggersmann

eggersmannusa.com

Millwork

Herrick & White

herrick-white.com

Flooring

Jeff Pello Hardwood Floors

978.580.7633

The Portland Group

Plumbing fixtures

shop.theportlandgroup.com

Car Lift

Harding

hardingaps.com

Façade Restoration

Fragale Building Corp.

fragalebuildingcorp.com

RESOURCES

Marc Phillips

Custom rugs

marcphillipsrugs.com

Vintage

Cocktail table, salon

Vladimir Kagan

Sofas, salon

vladimirkagan.com