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A Home Renovation Down to the Studs



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From the outside, the Haskett-Murphy home is just an ordinary New England clapboard needing a little work on its exterior. Left: The architecture of the kitchen was designed around the cabinets, not the other way around.

An early 20th-century home on Providence’s East Side emerges from a “deep energy retro-fit” and a stunning “to-the-studs” makeover embracing both the old and new.

From the outside, Joe Haskett and Kirsten Murphy’s 1901 light yellow two-story home in Providence’s Fox Point neighborhood is a quintessential New England clapboard structure.

Apart from a triangular corner notch above a diagonally-set, first-floor bay window and a rough-hewn wood porch, the unassuming residence doesn’t stand out from other buildings on the street, except that, yes, its exterior could use some TLC.

Stepping inside, however, presents a decidedly different picture.



ABOVE LEFT: An original load-bearing wall, stripped down to its original wood, stands in the living room as built-in “found art,” a reminder of the home’s past.

ABOVE RIGHT: A “to-the-studs” renovation transformed the Haskett-Murphy home into an elegant, modernist, light-drenched space with a deep energy retrofit. Pictured here is the master bedroom.

LEFT: For energy savings, the Haskett-Murphy home has a Samsung mini-combination boiler for supplying both hydronic heat and hot water.



On the other side of the front door, a transformation has brought about an elegant, modernist, light-drenched space for the couple and their young son, Finn. The home recently underwent what Haskett, a Providence-based commercial and residential architect, calls a “deep energy retrofit” and a “to-the-studs” gut renovation.

The then 1,532-square-foot home, which had not been updated since it was built by the previous owner’s father — the place still had its original lead pipes — had been on the market for a year before Haskett and Murphy bought it in late 2009.

“When we walked into the house,” says Murphy, a graphic designer, “even though it was divided up into all these small rooms, we could just picture what was possible.” In other words, the first floor’s maze-like eight rooms were on their way out. But not everything old was given the boot.

From the outset, Haskett and Murphy wanted the new and the old to define their home. Believing that it didn’t make sense aesthetically or financially to squander the building’s character and history, they planned and budgeted accordingly.



Before taking down all the original doors, baseboards, and window frames, they meticulously labeled and numbered them for later re-installation. They also kept the original pine floors throughout, including planks sporting round holes— now filled in — from the old pipes passing through. The plugs came courtesy of sliced-up baseball bats.

Most strikingly, Haskett and Murphy left an original 20-foot-long load-bearing wall in place in the living room. Stripped down to its original wood timber, this reminder of the home's past has arguably become a built-in "found" sculpture — architectural art, as it were. "We want to let the materials tell their story," says Haskett. "We want the house to have its say."

At the same time, where new flooring proved necessary, they installed the pine perpendicular to the existing wood to offset the new from the old, letting the new speak for itself. Haskett also took advantage of the openness and flexibility that full-on gut jobs allow. In the kitchen, for example, he designed the architecture around the cabinets, and not the other way round, meaning that they got, as Haskett puts it, "the look of 'custom' for the price of 'stock'." And, indeed, the Ikea kitchen cabinets do appear more than standard issue. That said, Haskett is quick to point out that he did have a carpenter add a bit of framing trim to some of the cabinets to make them thicker, stronger, and unique — an instance of minimal customizing.

The resulting discrete kitchen doesn't disappear completely, but does tastefully recede into the background. Glimpsed across the room, from the living area's turquoise mid-century sofa,

only the faucet's upward curve asserts the kitchen's presence; a similarly subtle doorless nook of an office space, glowing in the afternoon sun, is just off the main room.

On the sunny second floor, what had been six rooms became five: the master bedroom/bath suite, Finn's room, a bathroom with the original clawfoot tub, a guest room, and a reading room.

The formerly raw space of a basement was turned into a recreation room/family media room, adding 712 square feet of space to bring the home's new square footage to a total of 2,244 square feet. "A small home can be spacious," says Haskett, reflecting on the difference between where they live now and their previous home, a 3,000-square-foot loft in Pawtucket's Schaffer Furniture Building. "Rooms don't have to be big to feel big. It's all about scale — and knowing you don't need all that room."

To make the re-do a reality, Haskett took his plans to Josh Brandt, a partner and founder of Stack Build Design, a three-year-old, Providence-based, sustainability-focused commercial and residential construction firm.

Haskett and Brandt had successfully worked together on Providence's Box Office, an innovative office complex comprised of reworked shipping containers, opened last year. Haskett and Brandt also took the same approach used at the Box Office of bringing all the players together from the beginning. "Collaborating upfront just taps all the potential that exists

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