

# *Better Than the Original*

Thanks to a thoughtful renovation,  
a Victorian home goes from drab to delightful.

BY RACHEL STRUTT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT KNIGHT

Few would guess that the bench in the entryway, finished in Maharam fabric, wasn't a part of the Victorian staircase. But the Neisha Crosland wallpaper is unmistakably modern.







**THE LOCATION? PERFECT. THE SIZE?** Just right. But the condition of this 100-year-old Cambridge home? "It was a wreck," says architect Lisa Cunningham, coprincipal of Warner + Cunningham Architects. "After years of neglect preceded by misguided renovations and additions, all the rooms were totally chopped up. The back stairs were so steep they were dangerous; there was a cinderblock carport that was literally falling off the house; and the kitchen's backsplash was made of cork coasters!"

The home was in such bad shape that upon seeing it, the owner's mother wept. "It was such a dump," she says. "And it smelled! My daughter kept saying, 'Wait, just wait.' But I thought it would never happen."

Fortunately, when Cunningham and her husband and partner, George Warner, examined the house's lovely exterior, original main staircase, and grand, nearly 11-foot ceilings, they saw plenty worth saving. If they could rescue the elements that gave the house its antique character and "surgically excise" the problems (like that back staircase, for starters), they'd be able to rebuild the house to what it *should* have been while making it livable, contemporary, and more energy-efficient.

Their clients, a professional couple with a toddler, agreed with the architects' assessment. "We wanted to keep the feeling of a Victorian," says one of the owners, "but we also wanted something modern."

Warner and Cunningham began by salvaging as much as possible, including the brass hardware, the doors, and many of the century-old windows. They treated the original hardwood floors with water-based polyurethane on the first level, and a natural Swedish oil, for a matte look, on the second. New additions—like a limestone fireplace in the living room (with a completely reconstructed chimney) and herringbone floorboards in the foyer—were carefully chosen for their



From the grand piano to the George Nelson Bubble lights to the vintage Chinese lanterns, the living room décor reveals the owners' eclectic style.



The owners' son enjoys a gingerbread cookie in the gracious dining room, where a rustic cabinet contrasts with the room's regal crown moldings, high ceilings, and refined chandelier.

THE RULES OF  
DINING HALL

- No Talking
- No Laughing
- No Whispering
- No Gum Chewing
- No Late Homework
- the Headmistress
- ise Hand for Questions
- rive on Time
- ess Properly
- hey the Headmistress
- imals in Cages
- eport all the Tails







Where a back staircase once took up precious space, there's now an inviting hallway that links the guest suite (and laundry area) to the rest of the second floor.



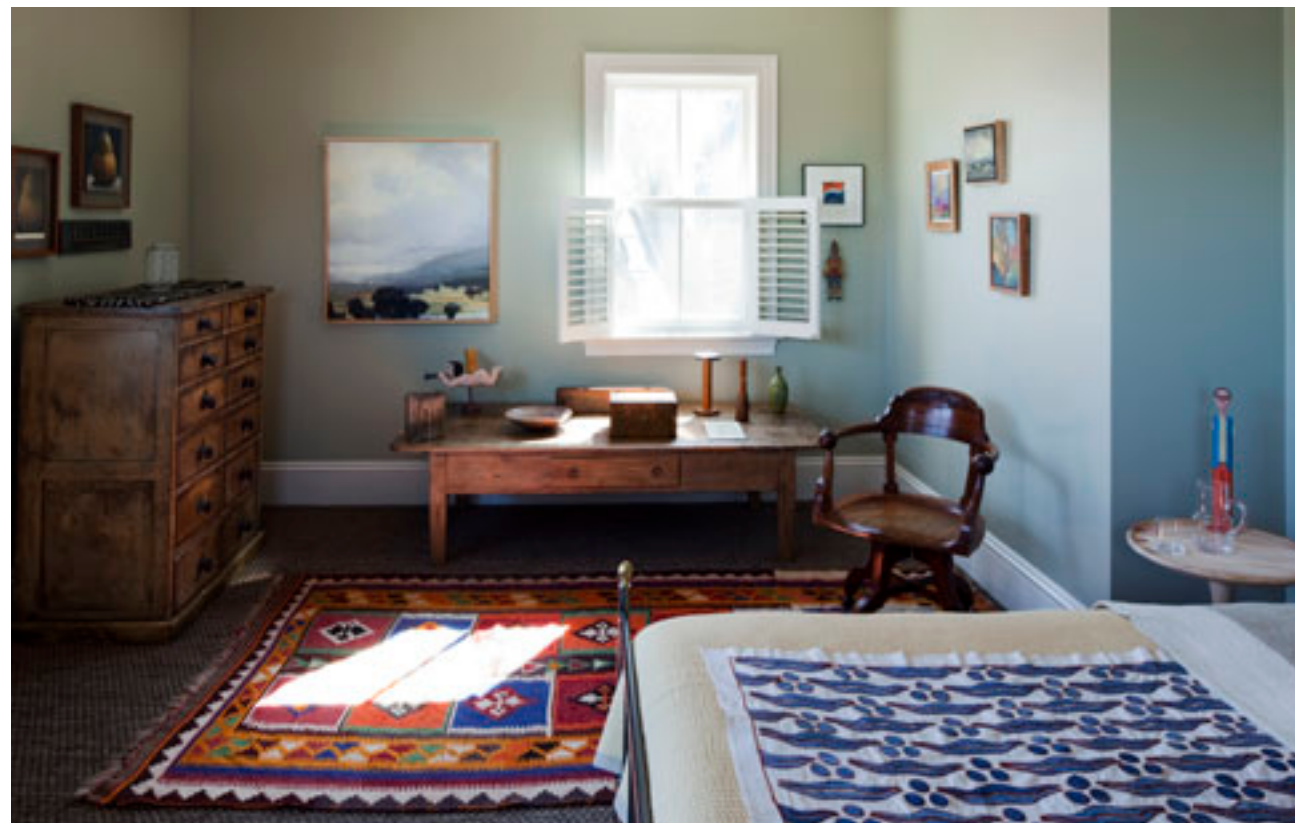
Above, new windows and French doors invite the beauty of the backyard into the renovated kitchen. Below, the third floor—once three small, dark rooms—is now the couple's master bedroom. The architects brightened the space by raising the ceiling above the joists and adding a skylight and bay window. Wide floorboards look particularly good in large rooms like this.







Above, with its unfinished pine desk, Persian carpet, and original art, this home office clearly didn't come from Staples. Below, the guest bedroom is accented by folk art and bright textiles. Painted wood shutters provide a clean, bright alternative to shades or drapes.



textural details. They also introduced period extras, such as reading nooks with window seats, built-in bookcases, and pocket doors.

But rehabbing the house required more than simple upgrades. Recalling the once-dreary first floor, Cunningham says, "There was no access to the backyard, which is really an incredible property. So we put in new kitchen windows, French doors, and a wraparound porch. The idea was to open up the house; we wanted to have all the spaces flowing."

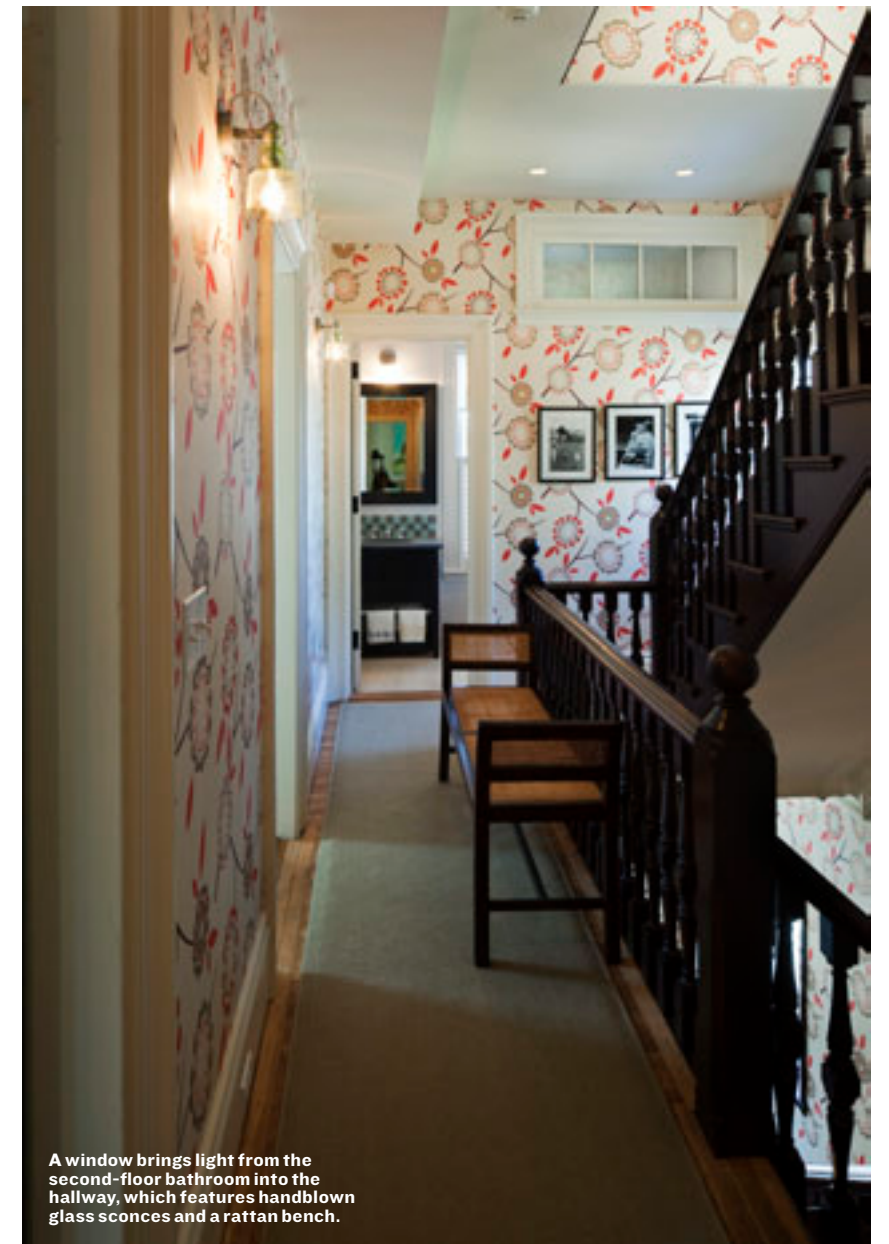
The back staircase cut off the dining room from the kitchen and took up precious space on the second floor. Warner and Cunningham removed it and continued the main staircase down to the basement. Now the kitchen, with its neutral palette and wide oak floorboards, opens to the dining room through six-foot-wide pocket doors. To camouflage their modification to the Victorian staircase, the architects designed a 10-foot-long bench along the new balustrade. Finished to match the existing woodwork, it looks as if it has always been there.

For a crowning touch, wallpaper by British designer Neisha Crosland graces the hallways. "When my sister-in-law first saw the wallpaper, she thought it was old and said, 'You're going to get rid of it, right?'" laughs one of the owners. But the paper's bold orange flowers lend the dark wood a cheery counterpoint.

The third floor, which once contained three servants' rooms with low ceilings, is now a lofty master suite with exposed beams and wide-board floors. The architects vanquished any draftiness by inserting foam insulation into the exterior walls and installing a high-efficiency heating system.

Though the family spends much time in the kitchen, a charming "sleeping porch" on the second floor is also a favorite. Completely rebuilt with period details, the ambiance is magical. "Kids love to play in it," one of the owners notes. "And it's a great place to read a book. In fact, it's so lovely, I'm thinking of moving my office in there," she says with a wink. ■

**ARCHITECT** Warner + Cunningham, Chestnut Hill



A window brings light from the second-floor bathroom into the hallway, which features handblown glass sconces and a rattan bench.

1. Entry hall
2. Dining room
3. Kitchen
4. Living room
5. Mudroom

