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HISTORY MAJOR

A historic Providence house gets a handsome redo that puts it firmly in the twenty first century.

BY MEGAN FULWEILER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAT REA

Once the master bedroom, this chic space has now become guest quarters. The clever owner, who enjoys a brand new master suite across the hall, mounted an Andy Warhol print of gun-packing Elvis over the mantel and the setting was instantly enlivened. Already painted gray, the lofty room lent itself to a see-through Lucite lamp and a contemporary carpet. Dashes of gleaming silver interject pizzazz. And since a dull headboard would have lessened the edginess, interior designer Kathie Wheaton transformed the Pottery Barn headboard with black paint and gray flannel, a classy foil to pristine linens and noir lamp shades.





No surprise, the kitchen (this page) is the hub of all activities. "The room was fairly new so we didn't want to rip it out and start over," Wheaton says. "Instead, we determined to basically clean it up and get rid of the jumbled feeling." Everything that wasn't absolutely necessary? Gone! Order was restored and walls were painted "Sahara," a dynamite C2 color that pulls the kitchen and, thanks to the disappearance of a wall, nearby family room together. At the same time, the terra-cotta-like shade, grounded with white trim, complements the wood. "I picked it and just asked the owner to trust me," Wheaton says with a laugh. The existing porcelain-tiled floor stayed put as did the generous counter where everyone hangs, especially at game time. Stellar checkerboard tiles give the cooking zone an extra bit of memorable sizzle.

The new owner had to be young to wake this house from its slumber. Granted, since 1835 when the house was built, it's always been handsome. But years spent as a bishop's residence (the place was given to the Episcopal Diocese in 1898) demanded seriousness. And with time's toll and various alterations, the house had sagged into limbo. Now, it's back straddling the best of two worlds, at certain angles cool (like the fabulous guest room, opening page) and regal where it's expected, like the entry (facing page).

Today's owner saw beyond the awkwardness, and along with interior designer Kathie Wheaton, principal of Pawtucket's Design Collaborative, he's made the 9,000 square foot home livable. "I don't need all this space," he admits, "but it's great for entertaining." In his case, entertaining easily translates into giant fund raisers for the wide range of worthwhile community causes he diligently supports throughout the year.

The extensive rehab was launched in the kitchen. Rather than gut the recently remodeled room, though, Wheaton reinvented the spot, adding color and editing. The East Providence based firm Parker Thompson removed a wall so an adjacent space could be integrated as a family room. They also constructed a soffit to hide the huge projection screen that drops down, covering the windows. There's a flat screen TV in every room, but when it's game time, it's here that the owner and his buddies watch life size football players.

When the house was home to the Episcopal bishop, this small area at the end of the long entry hall (facing page) was consecrated. It was unconsecrated when the house went on the market. To make the space more practical (it's a super nook to tuck a robust Christmas tree or a bar for large gatherings), furnishings have to be easily movable. Wheaton nabbed the matching chairs in Stamford, Connecticut. The handsome table is one the owner found. Frosted glass at the windows diffuses natural light.





Since 1835, the house has had only a small number of owners (today's occupant is number four), but each has made his mark. Gilt mirrors and moldings appeared during an 1867 redecoration. When Wheaton arrived on the scene, the front parlor was wearing an overhead light fixture with a naked bulb. Today's reproduction chandelier is far more suitable for the architecture and décor. In direct contrast, the inviting family room (facing page) with its comfy sectional sofa and come-as-you-are tone is the most lived-in area of all — no surprise as it opens off the kitchen. The coffee table was salvaged from the owner's prior residence. The flat woven wool carpet defies stains and traffic.



“What we did was fashion an apartment inside the large house,” explains Wheaton. “The owner is able to use the kitchen and relax in the family room, then take the back stairs up to his newly minted master suite and office above.” This savvy strategy also allows the owner to turn down the heat and shut off portions of the house when they’re not in use.

Take the twin parlors (one shown this page), for instance. Ideal settings for a crowd, the elaborately detailed rooms are far too genteel for stretching out with your feet up. During the refurbishing, all the window shutters were removed, stripped

and either stained or painted. Wheaton devised period appropriate sheer jabots, too. “They have a little bit of gold thread to lighten things up,” she says.

Unlike the spicy hued kitchen and family room (facing page), the parlor walls are painted a serene blue/green, a color that complements the architecture and respects the home’s character without being overly staid. The chandelier may be classic but the furnishings mix it up with styles both sleek and traditional. With such consistent contrasts, new versus old, casual abutting formal, the vibe is infinitely fresher.



Of course, the butler's pantry is a favorite feature. Previous tenants had tweaked the room with a handful of quirky cabinets. To recapture the bygone flavor, the original woodwork was stripped and refinished. Newer components were swapped for a more suitable granite topped wet bar. There may be a wine cooler, but you'd be hard pressed to find it on first glance, never mind the newly added beer tap and soda gun. All the former elegance is back and the pantry is a hundred times more functional, too.

Casual get togethers, though, often gravitate to the third floor, formerly the attic and now referred to as the crow's nest. A rec room/bar area with a nautical theme, the nest includes a billiard table, bunk filled guestroom, bath and sitting area. "We designed

one large cabinet for storing liquor. Turn the key and it's locked away, making this upstairs area safe for even twelve year olds," says the smart and thoughtful owner.

Of all the rooms, maybe none gathers more praise than the butler's pantry (facing page). Redolent of an age gone by, the pantry maintains its integrity but—who would guess?—without forfeiting life's best party inventions: a beer tap system and an eight-button soda gun (soda and beer are stored in the basement). The bar/rec room (this page) has these accoutrements, too, along with a teak and holly bar crafted by Providence-based Thompson Pistocco. The owner covered the bar with nautical charts overlaid with epoxy resin. Walls are painted C2 "Red Diva," a color that meshes happily with leather furnishings.







To Get the Look

Spin the color wheel. The owner re-searched historic colors before choosing Duron's "Russell's Gold" for the exterior, a color, it turns out, named for a relative of past owners. For help in choosing a color to enhance your old home's architecture (and for referrals on contractors, artisans or materials) contact the Providence Preservation Society.

Dress the floor. Often the starting point for a room's decor, a floor looks warmer sporting a rug. Great places to investigate include Regal Rug, Warwick, and Rustigian Rugs, Providence.

Marry old and new. A few choice antiques speak volumes. Scope out Leonards New England, Seekonk, Massachusetts; Benefit Street Antiques, Providence; and Wickford Antique Estate Liquidators, North Kingstown.

Splurge on light. If you have your heart set on an age-patinated chandelier, scoot to Renaissance Antique Lighting, Newport, a good bet for old overhead fixtures in all styles.

Think green. Incorporate healthy plants in rooms you inhabit frequently, but stage a quality pretend-topiary in a seldom used space. Look for the former at Briggs Nursery, North Attleboro, Massachusetts; The Farmer's Daughter, South Kingstown; and Schartner Farms in Exeter. For the latter, head off to Mundy's Flower and Gift Shop in Slatersville.

Elegant and easy going by turns, the large house now lends itself to all sorts of happenings. Until temperatures force people indoors, the welcoming porch is a popular gathering spot. Not original to the house, the porch with its spectacular Ionic columns was added around the mid 1800s when the home's entrance was also relocated. For greater privacy, the owner and designer incorporated a graceful lattice screen at one end that enhances the pleasure of this outdoor room.

Should anyone feel like strolling, the grounds are equally charming. To maximize the more than one acre property, the owner has diligently planted and added a great amount of hard scaping like stone terraces and walls. This may be city living, but the abundance of trees and flowers conjures a pleasing country estate ambience.

Still, guests hunkering down outdoors or grabbing seats in front of the cozy parlor fireplace have no idea how far this splendid house has traveled. No doubt about it, the owner and designer

got the rhythm just right. Colors and textiles (that's chenille on the matching Mitchell Gold sofas on this page) are in keeping, brighter and unfussy but never jarring. And that dreaded treat this as a museum air is non-existent. If the resident cat naps on a pillow no one is going to mind. Certainly not the inspired owner, who has successfully made what could have been an intimidating showcase a welcoming home.

"This entire house is a play on textures and colors," says Wheaton. Bland walls would have done little to highlight the back parlor's fantastic architectural details. Heavy drapery, something the owner wanted to avoid, would also have derailed attention. Wheaton looked to similar barely there jabots for both parlors, adding sheers where necessary for privacy. A see-through coffee table delivers an airier demeanor than would a solid piece. And where the gilt mirror is formal, the nimble ottoman is all about today. A variety of fresh flowers come and go regularly.