



# A Modern Home With History

An architect and his wife pour their love of history and design into a personal renovation project in Back Bay.

BY DAVID SHARFF



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, my wife and I decided we were ready to create our dream home. As a professional architect with nearly 30 years of experience restoring and renovating historic homes, I wanted a place with genuine historic character. I also wanted to learn as much as I could about its origin and evolution.

We searched for a property in Back Bay that would allow us to mix modern architecture and interiors into an historic structure, with the goal of restoring the exterior and renovating the interior to suit our living, working and entertaining needs. In 2018, we found the perfect structure: a four-story brick townhouse with windows on three sides and a courtyard between it and the next brownstone. The house had abundant natural light and magnificent views of Boston from the roof deck.

As part of our preparation for the restoration, which required a

review of the project by the Back Bay Landmarks Commission, I researched the history of the property and became fascinated by how the building had changed over a century and a half.

My source was BackBayHouses.org, which draws from the ultimate source on houses in Back Bay: Bainbridge Bunting's *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History, 1840-1917*, published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, in 1967. The book, which was still in print as of 2015, is accurately described as "required reading for anyone interested in Back Bay houses and architecture."

## DISCOVERING THE BACKSTORY

Our house had an intriguing history. It was designed by Ware & Van Brunt Architects and built by contractor George Martin Gibson in 1872 as a three-story townhouse with a mansard roof and turreted bay. Ware & Van



**Opposite:** In the living room, the original plaster and wood moldings were preserved and now serve as a contrast to the owners' modern fixtures and furnishings.

**Above:** The original living room had good architectural details but needed work.

**Top right:** Architect David Sharff

*Photographs by Michael J. Lee*



**Left:** The dining room as reimagined by David and his wife—it's now a lush space for entertaining.

**Above:** The original dining room design was standard but dull.

Brunt was active from 1863 to 1881 and was known for High Victorian Gothic designs, which contributed significantly to the architectural landscape of the Boston area.

The firm's notable projects include Memorial and Weld Halls at Harvard University and First Church in Boston, as well as the Ether Monument—also known as The Good Samaritan—located in the Boston Public Garden. This monument was completed in 1868, and is considered the

oldest in the garden.

George Martin Gibson was a builder and contractor active in the early 1870s as Back Bay was being developed. In 1871, he purchased land on Marlborough Street and constructed 11 contiguous houses for speculative sale. These homes were designed to be symmetrical and identical in façade, contributing to the cohesive architectural character of the area. Architects Ware & Van Brunt designed seven homes for Gibson.

The first series of renovations of our building occurred from 1910 to 1911, when the original mansard roof and turret were removed, and a fourth floor was added to include staff quarters.

#### FROM HOMES TO SCHOOLS AND BACK

The next evolution took place in the mid-1950s, when the property was acquired by the Newman School and used for classrooms. Originally known as Newman Preparatory School, it was established in 1945. Classes are still in session in another structure in the neighborhood today.

From 1968 to 1988, the Northeast Broadcast School leased the structure as a space to hold its classes. Floor plans archived at Boston Public Library show a series of walls that would be removed to allow for the creation of larger spaces. Our demolition prior to renovations exposed steel beams, asbestos tile floors and the remains of plumbing for multiple sinks in what might have been a common restroom. I also believe the original entry with leaded glass sidelights was altered to install a wider door. An archival photo shows the original and we were able to recreate it.

The last renovations, before we put our stamp on the house, took

place in 1996 when the property was converted into three condominium units. One of these owners left behind an album documenting the mostly cosmetic work that had been done. Fortunately, many of the original details had been preserved. One surprise was that the kitchen and dining room had been one large drawing room with beautiful paneling, dentil molding and an impressive fireplace and mantel that stood at the far end of the great space. Though left intact, much of this detail was obscured by the kitchen cabinets that had been installed in front of it.

#### **PRESERVING ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS**

Excited to begin the renovation, we started by researching how to restore the front door and paneled entry to its original form. The brick exterior punctuated with large double-hung windows, a distinct copper eave and balustrade was repaired and restored while the interior was demolished to the studs and rebuilt. What was left of the original, traditional interior details was stripped away to accommodate pared down, minimal detailing. My wife and I identified the architectural details that felt most important to us; we preserved the original plaster and wood moldings in the kitchen, as well

as in the living and dining rooms. They now serve as a contrast to our modern fixtures and furnishings.

Our most significant architectural change is the addition of unexpected curving elements such as the sculptural staircase that winds its way through the main floors in opposition to the brick and limestone orthogonal facade. I designed minimal detailing and trim around the doors, windows and baseboards so that the beauty of the new wood and metal finishes as well as the contemporary art could take center stage. Several family heirlooms, including 19th century French tables, are interspersed to reinforce the integration of old and new. We chose a De Gournay wallpaper with custom colors in the living room that covers a “secret” doorway leading to the former butler’s pantry, now a back hall with a closet and powder room.

Now, our house is a showcase for my architectural design work and a comfortable, beautiful living space for us.

*David Sharff heads a small, award-winning architectural firm—David Sharff Architect—that has been working with clients for 25 years to deliver timeless, individualized designs for new homes, whole house renovations, additions and interiors.*



**Left:** A modern staircase with a sensuous curve adds an element of surprise in the traditional setting.

**Above:** The original staircase