



OLD HOUSE, NEW HUB

A3 ARCHITECTS AND LABARGE HOMES TEAM UP
TO GIVE HOMEOWNERS MODERN SENSIBILITY
FOR THEIR HISTORIC HOME.

BY: HANNAH KUNZE



FOR CENTURIES, THIS HISTORIC HOME near downtown Chatham has observed passersby scuttle back and forth from the beach to the town and back again from its strategic position abutting the roadside. Like immense six-paned eyes, its windows have watched generations of bubbly infants grow into scolding parents and loving grandparents. They have witnessed clothing styles shift from the colonial era's heavy dresses to the floral bikinis and flip flops of the modern day. They have watched, perpetually wide-eyed and unblinking, as technology has developed and horses were replaced with automobiles, ink and parchment with sleek computers. But most importantly, its windows and walls have provided a sturdy and reliable home to generations of inhabitants. As the saying goes, if walls could speak, these ones could write a novel.

As the home has watched others grow, it too has experienced the effect of passing time. Though it has remained structurally sound over the years, changing stylistic tastes and the needs of contemporary inhabitants have rendered certain features defunct.

After several hundred years, the kitchen in particular was no longer able to meet the current family's needs. It was dark, with small windows that did not let much sunlight in, and too small to host friends and relatives. When Alison Alessi of A3 Architects was called in to design a new kitchen space, she immediately noticed that the original room was disharmonious with the landscape. "The kitchen walls face south, east, and west," she says. "There was so much light to take advantage of, but no windows to do it."

The abundance of sunlight comes from the home's uncommonly spacious backyard. Given its downtown location, the large yard is a surprising but welcome feature that largely influenced the renovation design process. Near the house, the grass is traditionally mowed to create a springy, walkable lawn. Farther away, however, the yard transforms into a meadow, a lightly manicured field of wild grasses that rustles calmly in the summer wind.

The backyard is not only pleasing to look at, but it also offers a refuge for the family to host guests or dine outdoors on warm summer nights. In fact, as part of the renovation, this dream came to fruition. A circular patio of variegated bluestone raised slightly above the lawn was installed and fitted with a firepit and wicker chairs cushioned in royal blue. The patio protrudes from a raised deck with a dining table, where the family can soak in the last rays of summer sun over dinner before migrating to the



firepit under the stars. The homeowners saw this potential even before it became a reality, making it frustrating to have neither door access nor a window facing the back.

It was clear from the beginning that the backyard was the focal point around which the kitchen renovation design would revolve, especially given the homeowners' love of entertaining and their circumstances as a family. At the time of the renovation, the owners had several children in college and one still living at home. The Chatham house was a hub where the whole family, and often their kids' friends, gathered together again during the summer. With a dark, cramped kitchen and no easy backyard access, there was no hub within the home for everyone to come together. Todd LaBarge of LaBarge Homes recalls that the original house was not conducive to entertainment. "The original structure had a lot of small rooms but no central area for people to congregate," he explains. "There was not much room for everyone to be in one place." For a family who only comes together once or twice a year, creating a bright central space to spend time together was necessary. With a backyard as promising and sundrenched as theirs, it was only natural for it to act as the centerpiece of the home's new hub.

"The connection to the backyard was the priority when we were designing the kitchen," Alessi affirms. "We wanted to simultaneously enhance the kitchen's functional space while making sure to maximize the daylight, which shines in throughout the day because of the home's Southern facing direction. The kitchen is small, so balancing these two needs was a challenge."

While it would have been possible to create more space by expanding the kitchen farther into the yard, it was important that the new room blend with the rest of the home in both style and size. For this reason, a wide, obvious expansion into the backyard was out of the question. Ultimately, only a small amount of floor area was added. This left Alessi with very little space to make the most of. Several techniques were essential to maximize the functional space while bringing in a significant amount of light: the creation of vertical space, a bright neutral color scheme, and the strategic use of windows.

The vaulted kitchen ceiling makes the relatively small room feel significantly larger by creating vertical space. Exposed wooden beams stained a soft gray stretch horizontally from one side of the ceiling to the other. They simultaneously hold the roof framing





in place while preventing the room from feeling too cavernous. As the primary objective was to maximize light, the beams also have a third role. “When you have a tall ceiling like this, layering the indoor lighting is a challenge,” Alessi explains. “The beams help organize our light fixtures. There’s recessed lighting centered between each beam, shining down on the countertops and island. The pendant lighting fixtures dangling from each beam are classic and beautiful and offer a soft glow. Sconces near the counters complement the main lighting.”

Alessi also selected a timeless color scheme of bright neutrals to reflect the sunlight. The white and cream walls and ceiling complement gray marble countertops. Pops of color are found in paintings and bright accents, such as red appliances and blue and white checked chairs.

Perhaps the most impactful technique was the strategic incorporation of large windows throughout the room. Where there was once empty wall space, there are now several 6 over 6 double hung windows that allude to the home’s original Greek revival style; however, they deviate from its uniform spacing. “We decided to stay with the same window typology but incorporate them in a more contemporary way,” says Alessi. “It allowed us to maximize wall space while honoring the original style of the home.” Every empty section of wall is used; windows are tucked between appliances and behind the island, creating a beautifully backlit breakfast nook. Triple sliding doors function doubly as expansive windows overlooking the backyard. Above the doors, a miniature six-paned window fitted into the wall provides overhead lighting. Its twin sits snugly in the opposite wall, peeking into a loft. Its intended purpose was not to provide light, but a sense of visually pleasing symmetry.

It’s small features like this that Alessi loves most about historic homes. “Little spots in a quirky old house make the space so unique and special,” she believes. “We tried to retain that charm with the features we added.”

It’s not just the windows that were designed with this mindset. The spaces adjoining the kitchen were infused with a unique, historic charm as well. One of the home’s defining characteristics is its use of more extensive connecting spaces in lieu of simple doorways. The kitchen, for instance, is attached to the dining room via a butler’s pantry. In addition to cabinets for storage, the pantry is also home to a cozy coffee corner. As the intermediate space



between the new kitchen and historic dining room, the pantry utilizes facets of each to unite old and new. With their multi-paned glass doors, the cabinets resemble the home’s historic windows, while the stainless-steel drawers provide contemporary flair.

The flooring in the kitchen and pantry is also a nod to history. Both rooms were fitted with wide pine slats that perfectly match the original pine floors in the original home. However, achieving this seamless end result was not easy. LaBarge recalls making an unexpected discovery during the building process. “In historic renovations, you never know what you’re going to uncover behind the walls,” he remembers. “In this case,

the floor framing wasn’t supported properly by the foundation. Luckily, we were able to reinforce it, and the result was beautiful.”

On the other side of the kitchen, a mudroom connects the kitchen to the living room. For Alessi, this space presented a design challenge. “Having a mudroom between spaces is difficult because it needs to simultaneously look good and be functional,” Alessi explains. “It’s a place where people enter, exit, and walk through every day. It needs to have spaces to drop bags and shoes but not look dirty.” A built-in wooden bench with hooks and shelving offered a solution. Bags and beach towels can be hung up immediately upon entering, while shoes are stacked

neatly below.

While the built-in is eye-catching and innovative, the mudroom's standout feature is its red brick floor. Arranged in a herringbone pattern, the bricks add texture and a pop of color to the kitchen's neutral tones. As the entry point of the home, the bricks also catch sand and disguise dirt from visitors' shoes.

As working from home becomes more popular, home offices are on the rise. But in a small home, incorporating a separate office is not always possible. In this case, Alessi transformed a bright, spacious portion of the mudroom into a work from home haven. Facing a window overlooking the serene meadow, a long desk with a mahogany desktop provides ample workspace and storage for documents and office supplies underneath.

The home's façade was also refreshed during the renovation. The original structure had several trademarks of Greek revival architectural style, including pilasters built to look like columns and sophisticated dentil molding lining the roof. While the slightly extruding addition adopted these same features to help it blend seamlessly with the existing structure, the original home's features had been partially covered and needed repair. "There was a time when people were covering trim with aluminum so they didn't have to paint it," recalls LaBarge. "We removed the aluminum cover on the gable and restored the dentil molding to its original glory. This greatly enhanced the visual appeal of the home's exterior."

The kitchen and its surrounding areas were the only aspects of the home that were renovated during



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this project. For some, this may have presented an undesirable challenge. For Alessi and LaBarge, it was a joyful project. "I enjoy working on historic homes," says LaBarge. "Every time you open up an old building, you learn how they constructed things years ago. It's a fulfilling experience and the end result turned out beautifully."

Alessi agrees. "I like isolating the new parts of the house," she says.

"Doing so allowed us to build a new hub for the family while keeping those historic rooms intact. Ultimately, I think it's really special to capture the time when a family is beginning to scatter by making a space where they can congregate again." 🏠

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