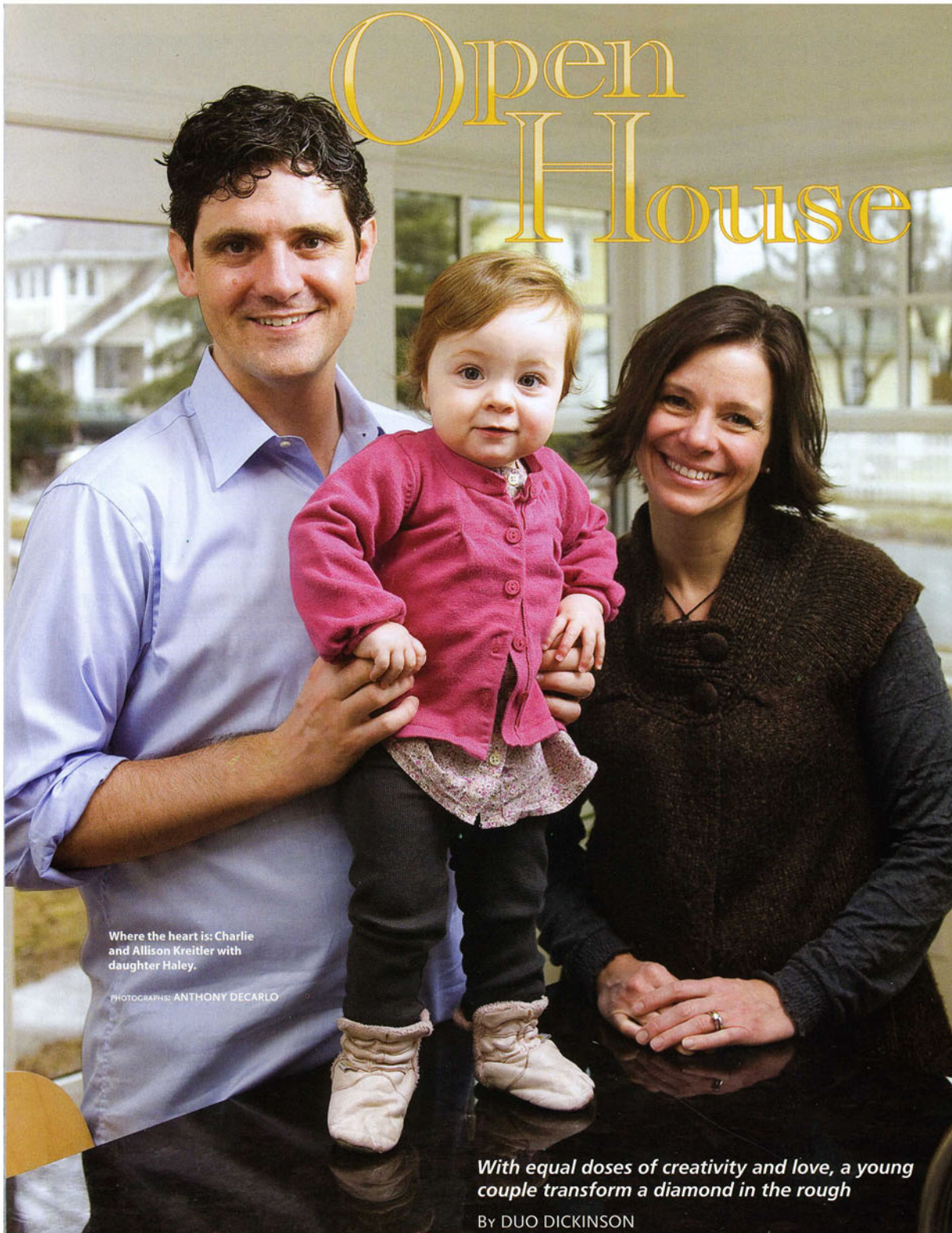


# Open House



Where the heart is: Charlie and Allison Kreitler with daughter Haley.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DECARLO

*With equal doses of creativity and love, a young couple transform a diamond in the rough*

By DUO DICKINSON

When Allison Ehri Kreitler and her husband, Charlie Kreitler, went looking for a house, the timing couldn't have been worse. The year was 2006, when real-estate prices were still peaking and houses that went on the market were often thrown into a bidding war that ended up north of the asking price.

As Charlie recalls, "The 800-square-foot farm [Westport] cottage we lived in started to feel cramped, so we began the search for a larger home. Our goal was simple: It needed to be large enough for a growing family, in a location we could walk to the beach and town, and be within budget."

Desperate times called for a broad vision, and they found a Milford home that was well situated: close to downtown and across the street from a large park with athletic fields near Milford Harbor. The 1910 house they discovered might be called a "quiet Victorian," or perhaps an "elaborated Federal" — a lovely simple home on a nice corner lot. In the 1920s the home had a flat-roofed two-story addition tacked onto its rear to create a new staircase that allowed the home to be

bisected into a two-apartment home (one apartment per floor).

The creation of two homes out of a simple single occupancy compromised virtually every aspect of its interior — creating a rabbit warren of walls, an arbitrary location for staircases to the second floor, and a second-floor space that had once been the kitchen. Charlie describes it as "bare — no cabinets, just a drain remaining from a sink sticking up from the floor and a live 220-volt cable left over from the stove. But the stained mustard yellow carpet was lovely!" No wonder this home was affordable to the Kreitlers.

Despite those shortcomings, the house and its site had a number of positive elements: The lot has great exposure — the long side of the home faced the sunshine of due south and opened up to a yard along the side street.

Also, much of the original flooring and trim were preserved beneath layers of applied surface treatments. And the home's simple oblong structure (not counting the oddball rear addition), was an open book and relatively easy to work with.

Beyond these pluses, the critical positive attribute that made all the difference in creating a full family home out of a hodgepodge apartment house was the Kreitlers themselves. They were newly married with the full energy of established careers — Charlie working as a financial advisor and Allison as a food stylist and recipe developer for Taunton Press's *Fine Cooking* magazine. They had the can-do attitude of unlimited opportunity that bled over into how they approached renovating a house.

With only a dog or two to take care of, they set about removing layer upon layer of applied coatings, wall-to-wall carpeting, Masonite "paneling," non-load-bearing partitions, absurd decoration and other refuse that could easily fit into a dumpster. As Charlie recalls, "We invited friends to help with demolition, hosting two weekends of 'demo parties' where we took out aggression on old plaster walls and filled dumpsters." Creative destruction, indeed.

Once the eight decades of ill-conceived appliqué were scraped off the home's original bones, the Kreitlers prevailed upon Charlie's brother, Paul, an engineer



The kitchen is divided by function into three spaces: The island and cook top beyond comprise the 'cooking' place; cleanup is around the corner at the window (rear right) and pantry/ovens are behind the wall upon which the range hood is mounted — extreme versatility, storage capacity and visual delight in a carefully crafted design.



specializing in advanced heating and cooling systems, to draw up the house on his computer. With those baseline drawings in hand, Allison and Charlie began the head-scratching task of deciding what they could do immediately to make the house livable, and what to plan for but defer until the budget permitted.

Given Allison's predilection as an inveterate "foodie," the kitchen took center-stage for her, while the wonkier aspects of construction — energy conservation, contracting and scheduling — became Charlie's domain.

Reviewing the plans of their existing house they both soon realized that if they wanted to have full access to the finished attic the existing stair would have to go. The previous owners created access to their DIY finished attic with perhaps the most dangerous staircase in the history of human vertical ascent — one with no side railing and head clearance that might (or might not) allow an Oompa-Loompa safe passage.

After discussions with city zoning officials, Charlie ascertained that he could expand of the house's footprint modestly to allow a new stair to extend to the north by a few feet and have its headroom augmented by a simple extension of the north-facing gable. A new entryway could be tucked under the home's existing front porch roof. Not having the budget yet to fully draw up this tightly circumscribed design, a preliminary layout was aggressively reality-checked in the field — where it proved out — allowing code-compliant passage to the attic.

In its infinite wisdom, the city also required that even though no reasonable person would deem this house "coastal," the 2005 edition of the Connecticut State Building Code required that the entire house be restructured to resist a 110-mph wind shear. With that in mind, the Kreitlers brought in a local structural engineer to determine how the house's structure would respond to that code requirement as well as to the third great "design imperative" the Kreitlers intended to impose upon the house.

After it was determined that Allison could create a legit kitchen and that a new stair could extend out to the north, it then fell upon the structural engineer to determine how the two main bearing walls on the first floor of the house could be removed. Three separate spaces (living, dining, den) could be combined to create one open area — a very significant visual bang for

The long south wall of the newly opened first floor (the dropped beams in the ceiling above replaced bearing walls) accommodates living space, the far corner (left) has an array of new corner windows, while the bar (far left) backs up the kitchen up the kitchen.







The master bedroom takes full advantage of the upper floor's south- and east-facing corner window array.



The home's exterior has its new stair tower meshed with the existing north facing gable (upper left), while a new front door eases under the existing wraparound porch. Note the special round window at the top of the first-floor stair run, and oversized window array at the stair landing.

the buck. Thus when three walls gave way to three beams, the home's ground-level interior became remarkably open, informal and bathed in the light of its oversized south-facing windows.

Beyond these large gestures, smaller ones addressed functional necessities and helped to create visual delight. Almost no home built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a "mud room," and so in the wake of removing the rear stair that facilitated the house's subdivision into two apartments, the Kreitlers found they could create a real "back door" oriented to a planned garage and with enough space to allow for 21<sup>st</sup> century-style storage.

By taking over the whole northeast quadrant of the home for Allison's extraordinary kitchen plan, the Kreitlers then complemented that functional focal point with light — creating a corner array of windows to the southeast affording the greatest exposure to the most open part of their property (and the best light, as well).

The Kreitlers' home was, at best, a 2,000-square-foot, 2.5-story residence that needed, ultimately, to house a full family. That tightness meant that certain intricate planning decisions had to be made. The first was to fuse a bedroom with a home office creating a guest bedroom laid out to accommodate a future built-in desk. The second was to move the washer/dryer upstairs and nest it with the extraordinarily tight (but now code-compliant) stair to the third floor.

The full access of the attic as "overflow"/informal space planned for the inevitable transition from "couple" to "family" — providing a place where children could hang out safely at home. Additionally, insulation was added everywhere, caulking aggressively applied, and the lighting and high-efficiency HVAC system were carefully designed within the limits of this tight home. The Kreitlers



also used only non-toxic paint, drywall, adhesives and floor finishes.

Even with all the care paid to other aspects of the renovation, the jewel in the crown of this house is Allison's kitchen design — not surprising given her career focus. Her layout creates an ensemble of three "places" within a single kitchen. Its most public space (the east) has a prep island to keep wine-sipping guests at bay. The island is cast off from an existing wall where a large-scale industrial stove dominates, almost as an altar to the culinary gods. Tucked discretely around the corner from this open area are separate 30-inch refrigerator and freezer units. The area housing the island/prep sink, stove and refrigerator/freezer form the cooking side of the design.

Set to the outside north wall is the middle section of this kitchen trifecta, an oversized farmhouse sink oriented to a window with ample upper cabinets flanking it and two dishwashers — effectively the clean-up connecting third

of the ensemble. The last element of this three-way culinary design is the westerly portion completely around the corner from the social/cooking side, set behind the stove, an area with ovens, a storage/larder closet and a second access to the dining room.

This design is distinctive in several ways: It is completely open functionally, but its layout is divided into three discrete components. Every dimension was carefully considered, drawn and redrawn, and mocked up in the field by Allison and Charlie, and the design was informed by Allison's lifelong focus on food.

Amid all the career and house focus, the Kreitlers also found time to realize the dream of most couples — starting a family. Once Phase I of the renovation was complete, they found themselves blessed with the home's best-loved addition of all: a beautiful baby daughter.

While parts of the master plan (built-ins, decoration) remain undone until the "out years," the Kreitlers decided to spend strategically on furnishings. They had a dining-room table made by Hansen Fine Furniture and found a wonderful side table and lamp from dbO Home.

Given all the time and attention invested, it's hardly surprising the Kreitlers are delighted with the built product. "We love the result," Charlie Kreitler says. "The windows bring in enough sun that we frequently don't use the lights during the day. The house is warm and inviting, making it easy to be social or find a quiet space tucked away."

The best homes are the embodiment of all the things their families cherish. In the Kreitlers' case, that included efficiency, food and love. Here a young family finds shelter, a future and great joy in a place called home, a place where not everything is finished — but everything is perfect. ❖