

The Family Home

A long-term love affair restores a gracious downtown home

By DUO DICKINSON

The 'Big Event': A bearing wall has one large opening created to unify both living spaces in the existing home — its arc-ed profile is inspired by the ubiquitous arc-ed door tops throughout the home.

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Families and houses can have a unique love relationship. When a family has the passion to make their house fit their vision, the relationship is deepened. "Helicopter" homeowners mirror their parental counterparts in their zealous hands-on love for where they live. In the pre-crash bubble, many homes became the equivalent of a one-night stand for their owners. Houses were coarsely swapped out one for another in rapid succession with an eye toward moving up an equity ladder in what appeared to be a riskless get-rich-quick scheme.

But as St. Paul would say, "Love abides." And those who viewed homes as fungible investments vs. lifelong commitments soon fell out of profit lust and quickly discovered the hate side of the love/hate relationship with where they lived. Houses that are bought to sell betray their owners when they don't sell. But homes that are acquired or built with a "til death do us part" mindset can yield rewards that resonate for decades, notwithstanding any and all economic tides.

So it is with the home of Joanne and Paul Bailey in downtown New Haven. They purchased the 1854 structure almost 40 years ago from someone who had demonstrated a similar devotion to it for some 60 years. Once a noble abode, it had become rundown and over the years adapted to accept boarders to pay the bills. When the home changed hands, the previous seller's good friend Thornton Wilder told Paul Bailey, "This house has history to it, and you can't change a thing."

Fortunately for Bailey, his family and the house, Wilder's admonition was disregarded.

This final product created over decades belies the fact that when the Baileys found the home in the early 1970s, it had a concrete block pillbox garage tacked on to one side that ran roughshod over a classic leaded glass window. The home had a kitchen and bathrooms where isolated fixtures sat in the middle of the floor and any number of layers of wallpaper, paint and ceiling tiles had been overlaid to the point where the original sensibility of the house was heavily compromised.

But that burden was not too great for a

The kitchen and family room bath in the light from a fully opened back wall are interconnected by an appropriately arc'ed opening. The fireplace was original, but renovated in the first rehab of the home by Paul Bailey.



family that fell in love with their physical harbor, literally from the moment they laid eyes on it.

The Baileys purchased the house when they were about to have their first child and spent the first year of ownership in absentia at a nearby rental as a full gut and rehab was undertaken to make the house well heated, install a 20th-century kitchen, reincorporate the space that had been rented out and open up the first-floor living spaces to “relax” the floor plan.

About 15 years later a second major renovation was undertaken when the house suddenly felt a little smaller. Inevitably children become teenagers (as did the Baileys' son and daughter) and the house was adapted so everyone could live happily under one roof. Bathrooms were renewed, and a separate third floor bedroom suite was created from fairly raw attic space. Windows were also added to make a better connection to their newly civilized back yard.

Along the way a wonderful outdoor room was created — essentially an applied pavilion. An outsized windowsill planter, small terraces and gardens were installed — and large expanses of glass in the form of windows and doors allow full embrace

of the home's patch of earth from all three floors that face the back yard. This large-scale change was embraced only where the house is unseen by the public — the facades the house presents to the street were restored to their original composed presence — and all concrete-block accretions scraped clean off.

About three years ago a renovation brought all the bathrooms up to snuff and introduced a few minor window and detail changes. Most importantly this renovation created a 21st-century kitchen to replace the well-worn 1970s iteration the Baileys had installed before moving in originally.

But this brief description leaves out the fact that one of the home's owners, Paul Bailey, is a gifted architect whose occupancy of the home parallels his practice in New Haven, a practice that sees any number of residential commissions but is perhaps best known for his diligent and inspired work for non-for profits including the design of Columbus House's new facilities several years ago as well as the renovation of Neighborhood Music School.

A house owned and redesigned by an architect is almost a timeline of that person's “take” on what residential architecture can and should be. The nuanced expressions, subtle manipulations and loving details all designed by architect Bailey are quietly evident everywhere. Virtually every part of the home has seen the touch of his hand, and yet there is none of the affect and posturing many architects bring to bear when they are allowed by a loving family to exert their fantasies without unrelated client overview.

When a home is renovated to flip for profit, or reinvented to provide a canvass for a designer's vision, it's almost unavoidably an exercise in instant gratification — an impulse purchase motivated by short-term reward. The Baileys never had that perspective. They were creating a home.

The subtle arching curves that were present in the original interior doors were echoed by Bailey in a number of places throughout the home, including an outsized arch that was created between stair hall and living areas that allows the entire front two-thirds of the house to be seen as one large social space, subdivided only by an existing chimney mass. That same light curving aesthetic echoes in

new walls in the master bath and in patio paving patterns in the back yard.

Bailey similarly manipulated the existing trim to assume new life as the framework for built-ins throughout the living room. Remnant pieces from the original home and other found objects such as fireplace fronts, salvaged bricks and a mirror were repurposed throughout as well. The jovial acceptance of spontaneous invention has the subtle flavor of the dean of Yale's architecture school when Bailey was a graduate student there — the late, great Charles Moore.

High Modern light fixtures from the Artemide line are set throughout the house in quiet counterpoint. Additionally in the living areas Bailey employed strategic suspended wall planes to allow effective lighting of artwork to be at once hidden yet very evident in its effect. A final act of visual cleansing saw the house given a wonderful continuity of dull white wall and shiny white trim finish, with an occasional accent tone.

Despite all these architectural niceties, the immediate sense when one walks through the front door is that this is a place where a family lives. The Bailey children have grown and started their own broods (who come to visit!), so now three families have accommodations.

A simple home that had been expanded over six previous ownerships by perhaps eight or ten tack-ons has at last had its potential fully met in the loving decades of work by the Bailey family. Despite the obvious creativity of its in-house re-designer-in-chief, the net effect is guileless, unpretentious and fully at ease with itself. Funny how when there is enough time in intimate contact, how a home inevitably reflects its occupants. ❖



New built-ins are designed by architect/homeowner Bailey to mesh seamlessly with the existing trim and windows.



A fully renovated master bath has a new shower as its crowning glory.