

Love at First Sight

Story by Matt Freeman • Photos by Tom Crane

EVEN FOR HOUSE-HUNTERS, THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS.



SOMETIMES A HOUSE-HUNTER JUST KNOWS—IT'S LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT. The house may not include every item on your wish list, but suddenly that seems less important—something that can wait until you're settled in and can update the house exactly the way you'd like.

That's how it happened about twelve years ago at a historic home in Flourtown—the current owner walked in and knew fate had led her family to the right place. “The minute we went in it,” she says, “we knew that's where we wanted to be.”

The kids had made themselves at home already—they were running up and down the stairs. She turned to her husband and said, “We have to have this house.” And they did.



GOOD BONES

And certainly the house as it presented itself when the owners bought it had much to offer. Generously sized, it was framed by mature trees on a nearly four-acre lot that backed up to the Wissahickon Creek.

There were two main structures joined together. One was of stuccoed Colonial-era fieldstone, with the smaller rooms typical of the time. The other was larger, with larger rooms, done in the more formal Federal style, dating from the early 19th century.

There were seven fireplaces, 11-foot ceilings, millwork their architect calls “spectacular,” and distinctive touches like a floor-to-ceiling mirror in the dining room so massive it requires special supports in the basement.

And yet it wasn't overpowering or museum-like. “It was so grand and yet warm,” the owner says. “It's just a really great-karma place.” It was also well cared for. “You can tell when a house has been loved,” the owner says.

But like any home, historic or otherwise, that hasn't been renovated in decades, there were things missing that the owners wanted. It didn't have “a fabulous modern kitchen,” the owner says, it didn't have a master bath and dressing room, nor a mudroom. There were any number of features missing from the house and needed for an ideally updated incarnation.

TIME HAD COME

After living in the house for a few years, the owners decided to go forward with the wish-list renovation. They started looking for architects they felt would make the project a “labor of love,” and decided Devon-based architect John Toates was the one for the job. “Very quickly, his vision was similar to ours,” the owner says.

That consensus was not pure serendipity—Toates says his process involves interviews to learn about the homeowners' basic requirements and desires. He then refines the plans as he learns more about how they live, sifting and refining the myriad options until the new version of the house is a near-perfect fit.

He doesn't like to call his designs “custom” homes, he says, a term he thinks is overused to the point of meaninglessness. He borrows the term “bespoke” from the world of tailoring to express the goal: a home not just unique but uniquely suited to its particular owners.

CHALLENGES

At the top of the wish-list, the house had a general problem—it was hard to move about freely in it. Many historic homes are like that. “Rarely are the pieces linked together in a way that makes sense as a holistic package,” Toates says.





The house had a living room the family liked to use, but it was a dead end. “Once people got down there, they were trapped,” Toates says. The dining room was a similar cul-de-sac.

So the redesign project included the creation of a butler’s pantry with a wet bar off the dining room that connected to the sunroom that connected to the living room. “This gave a release from that space,” Toates says. “There was another way to enter and exit the space and it felt more natural.”

Other large-scale changes involved taking the stucco outer layer off the original Colonial-era section of the house to help distinguish it from the later Federal section. Both the outside and the basement walls of the Colonial section were done in handsome fieldstone that turned out to be in good condition, so the project added a basement wine room with a set of stairs to make it easier to reach.

A mudroom and family entrance were also added, along with a solarium that opened out to the pool area, making life easier and more convenient for the family. The project also involved an addition to the Federal section with an open porch on one side and a sunroom on the opposite side. “It’s just much more functional than before,” the owner says.



MODERN, YET ...

The kitchen is an example of larger goals and meaningful details woven together. The owners very much wanted a beautiful, modern kitchen, and the modernity shows in the expanses of black marble countertops and gleaming stainless-steel appliances. But past and present are intertwined: The cabinetry, furniture and flooring all evoke the past, and the fireplace is a focal point.

Toates, who cultivates sources of antique furnishings as part of his work, found a period fireplace crane to replace the long-gone original and recreated other elements of that fireplace and the history of the house, he says. He also found the antique cast-iron air duct grills that matched similar arch-top pieces in the front hall—another uniquely bespoke sort of touch—matching that was more meaningful to this house than it would be anywhere else.

The house may be more functional and uniquely tailored to the way its current owners live. But the team who made those changes also respected the house's history as they worked, and this was part of the current residents' vision too. Ted Trethewey, president of E.C. Trethewey Building Contractors, says projects like this require not just experience in historic renovation but the help of a superior architect and clients who share the building professionals' goals. "It really allows us all to do what we do best," Trethewey says.

The owner says her family and the former residents became good friends, and they've talked about their sense of the house's long history. It's a thing you hear from many owners of historic homes—they're writing a new chapter in the house's history, but other chapters will come, and they feel a sense of responsibility toward the future owners and the larger story.

"We're caretakers," the owner says. ♦



RESOURCES

Architect John Toates, Architecture and Design in Devon
 Builder E.C. Trethewey Building Contractors Inc. in Downingtown
 Designer Patty Bullock of PMB Designs in Ambler
 Downingtown architect Jennifer Baxter supervised the construction phase

