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INTO THE LIGHT

*A couple transforms
a 19th-century Beacon
Hill townhouse into a
contemporary masterpiece.*

BY RACHEL SLADE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL STAVARIDIS



A sitting area on the second floor overlooks the kitchen and features a see-through fireplace. Opposite, a detail of the stunning steel-and-glass staircase reveals Hacin + Associates' meticulous design work.

JENNIFER CHAYES AND CHRISTIAN BORGS

knew exactly what they were looking for when they moved to Boston from Seattle a little more than four years ago. The mathematical physicists were seeking a home as sophisticated as they are—one with plenty of light, advanced sound and climate systems, and a bright, clean interior. “We wanted a place where our art and furniture could coexist in a contemporary setting,” Chayes says. What surprised them was that this city of predominantly 19th-century architecture didn’t offer many options to match their vision. “We always thought of Boston as being cutting edge,” Chayes says. But after a year of fruitless scouting, they realized they’d have to build their vision themselves.

Fortunately, a tabula rasa appeared at just the right time, in the form of a gutted five-story townhouse in Beacon Hill. Abandoned by a developer, all that remained was a hollow shell and some basic framing. Chayes and Borgs agreed that they could handle a major construction project. So with design help from Hacin + Associates architects, they set about turning the pitiful construction zone into a completely contemporary home in the heart of the city.

Project manager Matthew Manke says the couple’s two Bengal cats inspired a piece of the design. Chayes and Borgs’s mischievous felines would thrive in a home



A thoroughly modern kitchen, designed by Hacin + Associates and built by New Hampshire's Trinity Design, opens to an eating area and garden. The oversize window openings were already in place when Chayes and Borgs purchased the house.



Clockwise from top left, a full bathroom on the garden level gets the glass-tile treatment; the couple needed a space wide enough to accommodate Chayes's exceptionally large Persian rug, a family heirloom, so Hacin's team designed the entire dining room around it; the clutter-free master bedroom features a Spark Modern hearth clad in Luce di Luna stone from Stone Source, plus a nightstand that cleverly folds up flat (designed by Borgs's brother Martin, an industrial designer).



PHOTOGRAPH BY JARED LEEDS (PORTRAIT)

where they could see and be seen, which is how the elaborate steel-and-glass staircase became what he calls the "world's best cat toy." To create the five-story run, Joe Holland of Holland Construction recommended that Chayes and Borgs remove all the existing framing and start fresh. It was a difficult decision—especially given the high cost—but it was the right one. The new framing was strong enough to handle a suspended staircase, enabling Hacin's design team to create a smarter plan.

The new approach gave the super-narrow (13-foot-wide, to be exact) house more room to breathe. It involved cramming everything—including the ducts, plumbing, and wiring—into the two long side walls of the home, allowing all the interior walls and floors to be as thin as possible. With the high-tech staircase taking up much of one side, the design team decided to stack the bathrooms and closets opposite it, creating generous, open rooms on either end of all five floors.

Another bold decision: forgoing solid walls for glass. When it was a barren construction site, Chayes and Borgs relished being able to see all the way from the basement to the roof. Without walls and ceilings, the house felt incredibly spacious and open. Hacin attempted to re-create that effect with glass partitions, rather than framing and drywall, and glass transoms wherever solid walls were needed. All rooms get light from the sun-filled stairwell, and from the home's many windows. A motorized shade system provides privacy when necessary, though the couple has found that they rarely use it.

Hacin's team also gave Chayes and Borgs some double-height space—the floor of the second-level sitting room cuts away to reveal



Above, Chayes and Borgs enjoy a moment in their living room with their two Bengal cats, da Vinci and Cassatt; below, the master bath, outfitted in glass tiles and spa-white quartzite, is a study in restraint.





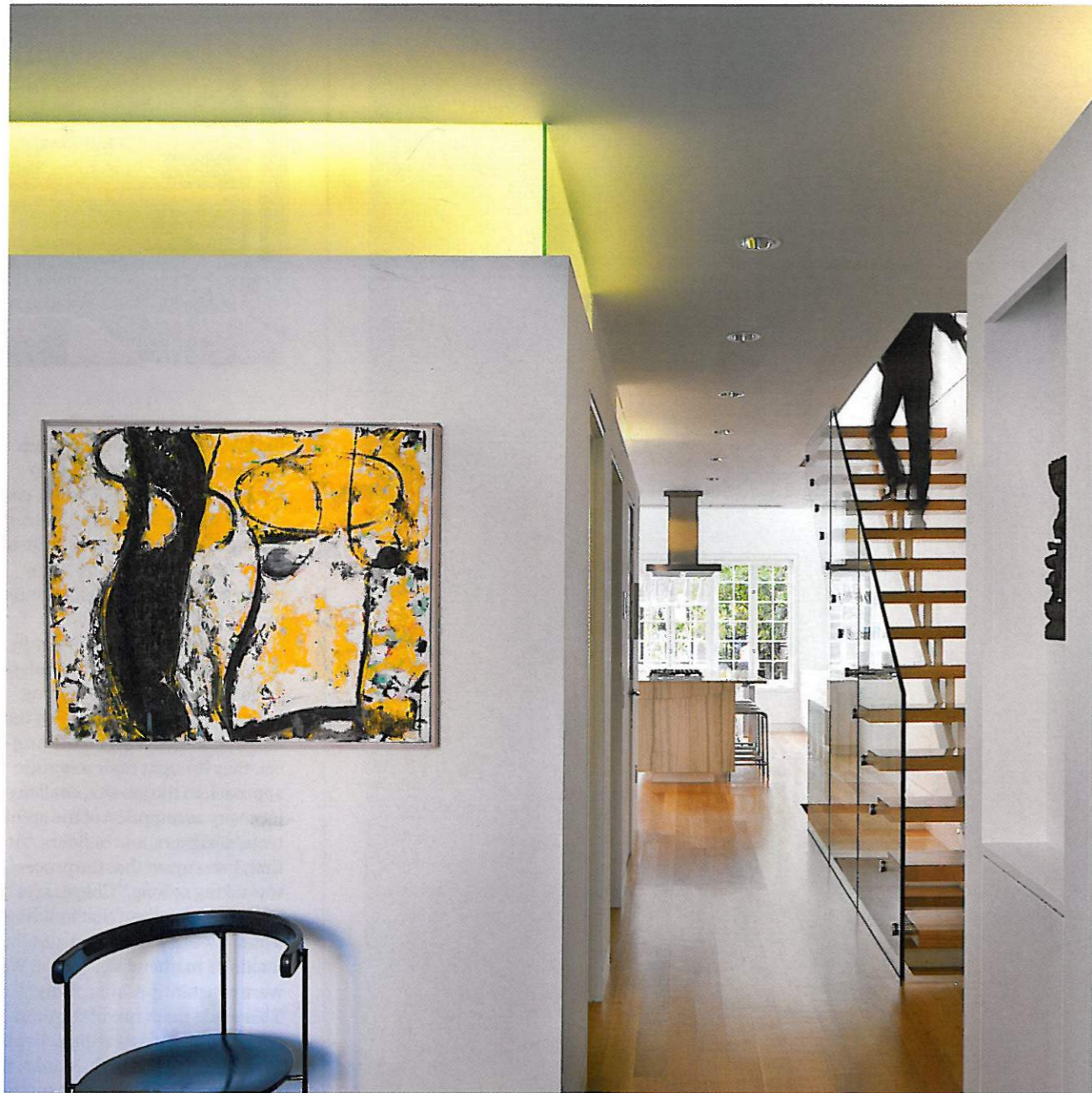
With two offices and plenty of built-in shelving, the third floor is reserved for work.



the kitchen below. And to match the openness of the home, they installed see-through, natural-gas custom fireplaces built by Malden's European Home. Copious built-in shelving houses the pair's many books and objects d'art while minimizing visual clutter.

Chayes and Borgs, partners in both life and work, have a tendency to talk over each other, refining their thoughts and enhancing their ideas. While working on the project, they brought their scientific approach to the job site, challenging every assumption of the architects, designers, and builders. "At first, I was upset that the process was taking so long," Chayes says. "But then I realized that building a house was a creative act, just like making a mathematical proof. We were constantly asking, 'Why?'" This made them two of the most challenging and rewarding clients Hacin has worked with, Manke, the project manager, says. "It's soothing to be in a home where things make sense," Chayes says. "There's no wasted space, and everything has a purpose." ■

ARCHITECT Hacin + Associates
GENERAL CONTRACTORS Holland Construction
ENGINEERING Souza True & Partners
Structural Engineers



The house's rigorous design rules are laid out starting in the entry foyer—from the suspended open-tread staircase to the translucent glass transom above the closet, bathroom, and elevator core. Opposite, the eating area off the kitchen overlooks a diminutive garden, which is accessed through custom patio doors built by Somerville's Architectural Openings.

