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

BY RACHEL SLADE | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL STAVARIDIS

A string area on the second-floor roofline of the kitchen and features a see-through fireplace. Opposite, a detail of the stunning steel-and-glass structure reveals Heath's exquisite design.
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 site 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 Borg’s mischievous felines would thrive in a home...
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 Fiacco’s design team to create a smarter plan.

The new approach gave the super-narrow (10-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. Fiacco 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.

Fiacco’s team also gave Chayes and Borgs some double-height space—the floor of the second-level sitting room cuts away to reveal
the kitchen below. And to match
the openness of the home, they
installed see-through, natural-gas
custom fireplaces built by Malder's
European Home. Copious built-in
shelving houses the pair's many
books and objects d'art while mini-
mizing 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 proj-
ect, they brought their scientific
approach to the job site, challeng-
ing every assumption of the archi-
tects, 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. Maske, the
project manager, says, "It's sooth-
ing to be in a home where things
make sense," Chayes says. "There's
no wasted space, and everything
has a purpose."

ARCHITECTS/Hacin + Associates
GENERAL CONTRACTORS/Ikepod Construction
ENGINEERING/Sauaia 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 room above the closets, bathroom, and elevator core. Opposite, the eating area off the kitchen overlooks a diminutive garden, which is accessed through custom patio doors built by Serrano's Architectural Openings.