Tradition and innovative thinking are not mutually exclusive. One cannot meaningfully be innovative without understanding why tradition once held sway, and innovations are most often improvements upon traditional ideas or reactions against them. No place understands this better than the Cradle of Liberty. The Boston Tea Party, you’ll recall, didn’t end consumption of this beverage in Bean Town, but it did help spark notions of revolution.

This truism informs every aspect of a circa-1807 Beacon Hill townhouse renovated by architect-designer David Hacin. When the current owners purchased the 6,000-square-foot building in 2000, “it was quirky, and not in a good way,” says Hacin, who revamped the structure with his design team: Jennifer Clapp, Kate Kelley, Katelyn Miersma and David Tabenken. Hacin cites discontinuous staircases, drafty windows and poor flow as just a few of many misfortunes. Still, his clients lived here with their three children for almost 10 years, performing Band-Aid renovations in the vain attempt to make things livable before committing to a full-scale overhaul.

Homeowners and designers, however, resisted the impulse to completely gut and start anew from a purely 21st-century perspective. “After all,” explains the wife, “it was built in 1807 and had witnessed two hundred years of American history, even housing an American president—Theodore Roosevelt—at the turn of the last century. We were aiming to improve flow, making it feel like a single-family home. We also wanted to honor its history but not be a slave to it. And, finally, we needed an elevator for the full run of the house.”
Hacin began by physically unlocking rooms from the strictures of their partitioned 19th-century proportions, starting with the gracefully spiraling central staircase. “We released it from bondage,” he jokes. “It was in its own enclosure, which separated the front and back of the house. We allowed it to spill into the room, making more of it, but also opening things up.” He tucked the elevator into a shaft across from the staircase, swapped formalities like a dining room and parlors with spaces geared toward media and at-home work, and also built another staircase in a rear hall, this one of steel and glass.

The contrasting staircases establish a dialogue between old and new that resonates throughout. That conversation starts in the entry. Visitors pass through the original front door—framed by an elegant fanlight and complementing sidelights—to find themselves in a modern foyer where the stone floor wraps up one wall, creating a cool, architecturally pristine space. There are also machined elements like an industrial stool from Good and a wall of steel Hope’s Windows and French doors. “So the Hope’s Windows wouldn’t look too sleek and modern,” explains Hacin, “we used traditional hand-blown glass that you’d find in a typical Beacon Hill home.” There is also an ornately gilded mirror and a marine painting from Childs Gallery nearby.
Past the doors we find a high-functioning family room and kitchen rather than a stuffy parlor, where built-in oak cabinetry conserves floor space and “creates storage opportunities wherever possible,” Hacin says. A long oak table tucked under the custom granite island in the Poggenpohl kitchen “can be pulled out, extended and moved toward the front of the house,” where the window banquette augments seating for up to 10. As in the foyer, 19th-century art appropriate to the home’s vintage co-exists with modern pieces such as David Weeks lighting and a chaise and ottomans from B&B Italia.

Similarly, the living room is an assortment of lean Italian silhouettes—B&B’s Frank sofa, Glas Italia mirrored tables, Artemide lamps—flanked on either side by the room’s original specimen marble fireplace and R. H. Ives Gammell’s swooning, Romanticism-inspired *Song of Lamentation*. The Nemo chandelier from Cassina overhead, Hacin points out, “has the same proportions as a traditional chandelier,” even though it could hardly be more contemporary.
This technique of rendering traditional elements in clever new ways appears again and again. “We studied the proportions of the moldings—their width and depth—and abstracted those in a more modern expression,” says Hacin. Like the chandelier, they telegraph the same scale as their traditional cousins yet sidestep the period heaviness of dentils, egg-and-dart or acanthus motifs that might have originally ornamented the space. In the home office, Creative Matters executed Hacin’s rug design, which evokes the herringbone floors of Colonial-era townhouses. And, he says, “in every room we used traditional fabrics with a twist.” So upholstered panels of lavish Rubelli silk damask impart Old World sophistication in the otherwise modern master bedroom, a custom-embroidered Fromental floral wallcovering hides the television in the media room, and Bernhardt’s Vika lounge chair in the living room is upholstered, a la Marcel Wanders, in another damask.

Hacin’s innovative, functionally modern renovation proves that an old home needn’t throw out the baby with the bath water. “You never lose sight of the fact that you’re in a historic Boston home,” he concludes.

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