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An impulse purchase leads to unexpected headaches, but some much-needed style updates prove to be the perfect cure for a case of buyer's remorse.

By REGINA COLE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM GRAY

GREEN THUMB
A carved figure stands watch in the garden. Opposite, the Newbury home is enveloped by lush landscape.



Labor of Love

“We bought the house on sort of a whim,”

says homeowner Chuck Christensen. In 2003, while he and his wife, Beth Welch, were driving to Plum Island for a family visit, an “Open House” sign prompted a detour. “There are very few Victorian houses in Newbury, and this one had always caught our eye.”

Beth and Christensen, who have apartments in New York and Boston, were smitten.

“We were especially taken with the carriage house and with the back lawn,” recalls Welch, whose family has deep roots in this part of the North Shore. (Her grandfather was Newburyport-born Pulitzer Prize-winning author John P. Marquand; Marquand himself was first cousin to Buckminster Fuller.) “In a densely populated area like this, it’s very rare to have a view that doesn’t include another house,” she says.

The 1896 American Foursquare’s deep back yard abuts protected farmland that flows into the Plum Island marshes; views include orchards, woods, and fields, with glimmers of Plum Island Sound.

But while the house faced the road with Victorian aplomb, an ungainly 1970s kitchen addition disfigured the back. It also separated the interior of the house from its surroundings. “There wasn’t even a door to the back yard,” Christensen recalls.

Their initial infatuation evolved into a love-hate relationship. “After we bought the house, I suffered terrible buyer’s remorse,” Christensen says. “We thought, ‘We’ll live there for a year, then we’ll decide what to do.’ One day we came over and sat in the kitchen to see how it felt. We decided that we didn’t want to live here.” Welch adds, “There was not much wall space, and we have an art collection,” his wife says. “And then there were our books...”

So the couple decided to renovate. “If we fixed it up, we’d put off moving,” Chuck laughs. “I didn’t want to move, and I sure didn’t want to move here.”

Mutual friends linked them to Newburyport architect Andrew Sidford, who helped them sort out their mixed feelings. “They loved the elegance of the historic house,” he says. “There’s a lovely formality to Victorian rooms that’s represented by the original parts of the house.” Sidford gets his clients to talk about what they want.

“My main objective is always the same,” he says. “I try to imagine what they are after, totally apart from any given limitations.” But it can be tricky. “People are taught to think within a framework,” he continues. “I want my clients simply to articulate what they want, not to think about style, or how any new construction might relate to what’s already built. I find that most people know exactly what they want; it’s my job to figure out what it is and to turn it into reality.”

Welch, whose self-professed therapy is cooking, wanted a modern kitchen while her husband wanted a library, and both wanted to integrate the outside with the inside.

Sidford replaced the 1970s addition with a graceful new back entry that leads into a functional, light-filled kitchen and adjoining sunken sitting room. Stairs lead down to a subterranean library



HOUSE BEAUTIFUL
From top, a library teems with countless volumes, best enjoyed in a pair of oversize chairs; keeping company in the spacious kitchen; a sunny sitting nook. Opposite page, the marble-topped island in the country-chic kitchen neatly conceals all the necessities while ramping up preparation and serving space.





HOLDING COURT
Landscape architect Kimberly Turner's two-level courtyard garden filled a void between the home's new kitchen and its carriage house.

that houses the couple's collection of more than 8,000 volumes. A new central hallway connects the Victorian front rooms to the new rear section.

Six tall double-hung windows wrap around the corner of the building, creating a home for the breakfast table while flooding the kitchen with light. Diners gaze into an atmospheric enclosed garden.

"The corner glazing is what gives this room its indoor/outdoor quality," Sidford says. "It provides a view of the length of the backyard for Beth while she's working at the sink, and it is a tie between the original Victorian house and the way we like to live now." "The proportion of the new windows are like those of the old ones, and they are true divided lights," Sidford points out. "On the exterior, this provides continuity in shapes and the play of light. On the interior, the row of windows works for the historic house in the way that a modern, 10-foot expanse of glass never could."

The area between the new kitchen and the carriage house was featureless before landscape architect Kimberly Turner created the design for a two-level courtyard garden, its two sections an echo of the kitchen and parlor levels. The upper level is organized around a massive maple tree.

"Stately and beautiful, it was the only thing there," Turner says. "We built the bluestone terrace to provide entertaining space. The pavers, laid over stone dust, protect the tree and funnel rainwater down to its roots. The focal point of the lower area is a fountain that Chuck, Beth, and I created out of antique pieces... Their art collection is important to them; we placed pieces of sculpture so they'd see them from the kitchen table." Sidford adds, laughing, "They've been adding sculpture ever since we finished." Together with several antique lead planters, Turner's color palette speaks of the house's history.

"White flowers and leaves provide light, while cool tones in dark blue and purple have an almost Victorian feel," she explains. "They play against rich tones of green in hostas, ivy, and rhododendrons."

She balanced the long, dreamy view toward Plum Island with new apple trees that mimic an ancient orchard. Below a leeching field planted with roses, a croquet court looks back at the house. Turner took care not to obscure a ribbon of windows with plantings; needed for light in the new basement library, they are at exterior ground level.

"The basement is a great place for the library because it's the one place where there are lots of windowless walls," says Christensen. "However, the clerestory windows give a long view of the backyard that, as you come down the stairs, makes the ceiling disappear," says Sidford. "This is not just a space to store books: it's a room you actually want to use. One's perception of a space is always more important than the actual space," he adds.

The perception of this house is that it has clearly stood for close to 115 years, but functions for today's living.

"Andy and Kim saw a vision for our house that we never could," Welch says. And in the process, they cured their buyer's remorse.