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BY THE PUBLISHERS OF *BOSTON COMMON*

The homeowners wanted their historic house in Cambridge to be more reflective of thier personalities—international, timeless and cosmopolitan.

TALL, DARK and HANDSOME

Celebrity designer Nate Berkus helps a New York City couple call Cambridge home.

By Abby Bielagus
Photographed by Heather Talbert





From top: The white oak coffee table was a find on Etsy and the Danish curved sofa on 1st Dibs; the fireplace is a Keen & Co Louis XVI burgundy hardstone surround.

This house's story begins with a trapeze. Celebrity designer Nate Berkus (nateberkus.com) was auctioning off a trapeze lesson with himself to support an initiative for New York City's riverfront. "I thought it was such a weird thing for somebody to buy and do with me, like what's wrong with these people? But we met and it turned out nothing was wrong with them. They were interesting and fun and we had a beautiful afternoon," says Berkus. Fast forward several years later and Berkus and his husband are looking into New York City schools for their children. About 20 minutes into one tour, the guide turns and asks if the couple remembers him. He said, "Let me just hook my knees on this bar 30 feet into the air and job your memory," says Berkus. That man had just bought a historic home in Cambridge and asked his former trapeze instructor to be the interior designer.

Although he's a world-renowned designer who started his own firm at 24, calls Oprah a friend, has starred in numerous eponymous television shows and has multiple home collaboration collections, Berkus gets Boston. He attended Cushing Academy in Western Massachusetts, spent formative years at legendary locales like the old Howard Johnson bar and Rathskeller and grew up visiting family in Wellesley, Nantucket and Weston. He understood what it meant when the homeowner said he was moving his family from New York City to Harvard Square, to the neighborhood where he and his husband met as undergraduates at the illustrious crimson university. He understood the typical local aesthetic that leans toward "Scully & Scully meets LL Bean, meets some English fabric, meets fussy draperies, meets early 80s classic Northeastern preppy," which is how he described the homeowner's house when they initially purchased it. Berkus stepped in to ensure the new design would be in line with the new occupants; international,

The custom, modern, oak pedestal dining table was crafted by IK Studios, LLC

Nothing could be too precious for the energetic family and materials had to be hearty and durable, while still aesthetically pleasing.

timeless and cosmopolitan. “I’ve always believed that our homes really should tell the story of who we are, where we’re been and where we aspire to go,” says Berkus.

He joined a team with Steve Hart and Jennifer Lyford of Hart Associates Architects—a team whose praises he sings. “It was such a pleasure interfacing with all of the vendors in the area. It was all so seamless during the multi-year undertaking,” says Berkus. There was one moment in the project though that found him lying on his back on the floor with a single tear streaming down his face—when he was confronted with the home’s staircase. “I give full credit to the architects because it is such a unique and beautiful design that’s consistent with the flavor of a historic home, but I could not figure it out. It had lots of turns and lots of landings. I finally told the team, ‘I have a four-year BA from a school that didn’t require a single math or science class, I have no idea what anybody’s talking about, can I see a rendering?” says Berkus. “When that came together, it unlocked a lot of the flow issues that we were trying to contemplate in a home of that age.”

The homeowners did want to pay homage to the home’s history and the historical neighborhood requires it. Nothing can be done to the exterior without going before a committee. However, it was a free-for-all in the interior, which had been updated in perhaps some questionable ways. “It wasn’t a time capsule, an immaculate Gilded Age

perfection. It had drop ceilings, updated mechanicals and weird lighting. It had probably been renovated more than once. For us, it was a careful dance between restoration and using materials that would have been around in its original era—oak, bronze, iron, glass, English-painted cabinetry, and millwork. But it was also a real opportunity to take a look at an incredibly energetic family that has never, in any of their homes, felt beholden to their material possessions. They've never dictated how they move through spaces. A rug couldn't just be beautiful but it had to be cleanable. Kids happily and with full endorsement of their parents, climb over the backs of furniture. Materials had to be heartier. There's great stuff in the house, everything from midcentury modern Italian lighting to new upholstered furniture to an English sofa from Rose Uniacke but nothing feels precious or dear," says Berkus.



Antiques contrast and mingle with custom millwork. Opposite page: As evidenced in the primary suite, many materials that would have been around in the home's original era were utilized in the design like oak, bronze, iron, and glass.

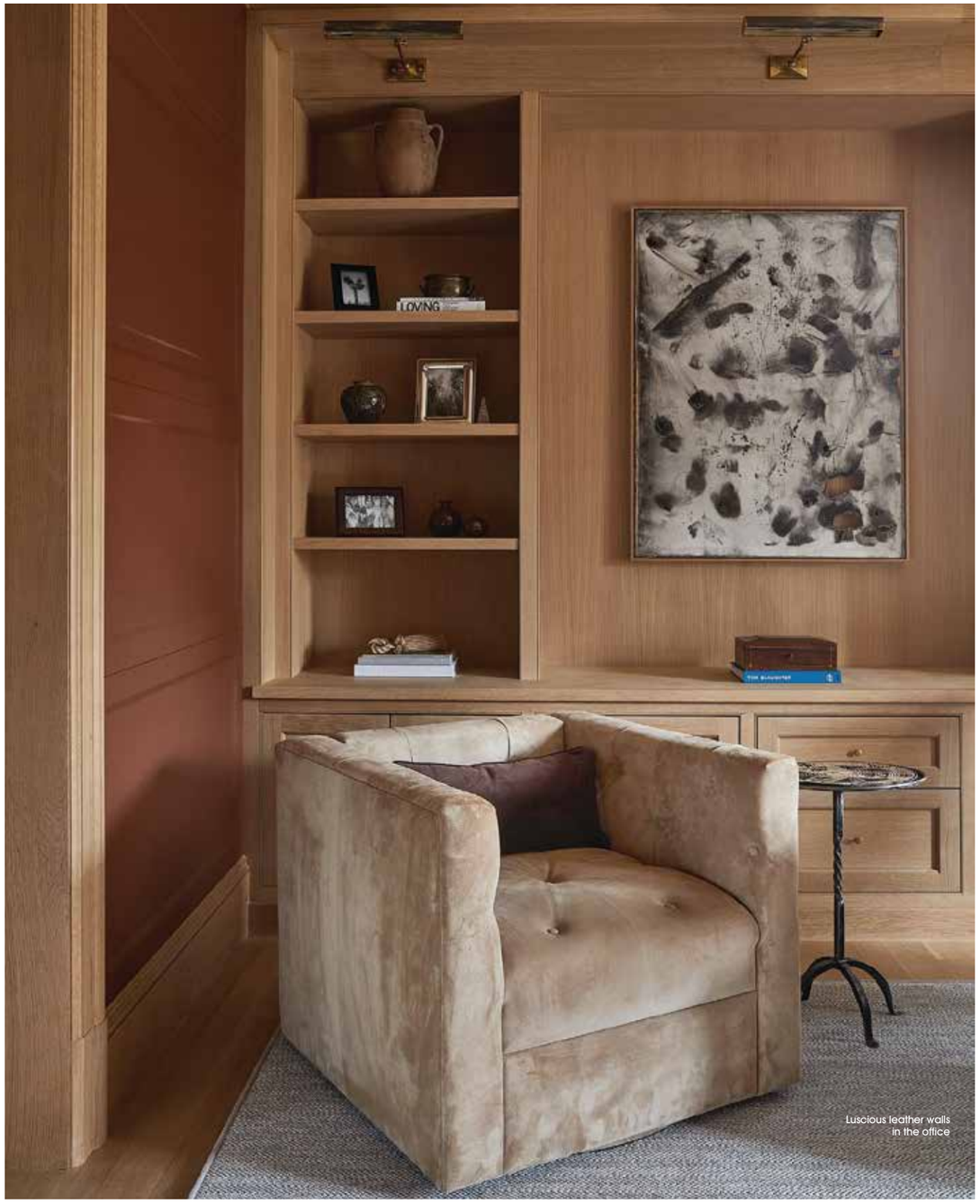
The overarching aesthetic can perhaps be summed up in one word, handsome. It's an adjective that can be used to describe a rugged masculinity and a sophisticated, classic femininity. Handsome lasts. "The house has a decidedly masculine undercurrent but there are also curves. There is some femininity mixed in the surfaces," says Berkus.

In general, the designer's rule of thumb, which has become almost like a mantra, is that he never wants somebody to walk into one of his interiors 20 years from now and immediately recognize that the home was designed 20 years ago. Berkus is not susceptible to trend visually. He's aware of styles coming and going, and he'll mix a little of then with a little bit of now. A Chanel bag with a flip-flop. The homeowners were attracted to the idea of a design that would withstand the test of time.

Eighty percent of what Berkus typically sources for any project is vintage and he hit up every local antique shop in the area, even the iconic five-floor Cambridge Antique Market. "I like the tarnation, character and sense of history and these pieces also give

"I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED THAT OUR HOMES SHOULD TELL THE STORY OF WHO WE ARE, WHERE WE'VE BEEN AND WHERE WE ASPIRE TO GO."

—NATE BERKUS



Luscious leather walls in the office

you a big permission slip. Because if it's years old, somebody nicked it already. You can let the worry go and just live," says Berkus. In order to ensure the home still had one foot in the present, the design team also trickled in pieces from contemporary artists. "There's a method to the lack of madness," he says.

When the home was finally revealed to their new family, brought to life with the new/sometimes old furnishings and their books and framed photos, "the whole house rose up to greet them." says Berkus. "The homeowners told me that we had created a space that really felt like home to the four of them. This why I do this and am passionate about it and continue to do it," says Berkus.





DESIGN DETAILS

TYPE
Single-family home

LOCATION
Cambridge

INTERIOR DESIGN
Nate Berkus
nateberkus.com

ARCHITECTURE
Hart Associates Architects
hartarch.com

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT
Matthew Cunningham Landscape
matthew-cunningham.com

BUILDERS
Gilman, Guidelli & Bellow
ggbbuilds.com

UPHOLSTERER
Partners in Design
partnersindesignltd.com

Estudio Furnishings
estudiofurnishings.com

RESOURCES

FURNITURE
1st Dibs
1stdibs.com

Blend Interiors
blendinteriors.com

Estudio Furnishings
estudiofurnishings.com

IK Studios LLC
ikstudios.com

Pavilion Antiques
pavilionantiques.com

Rose Uniake
roseuniacke.com

Thomas Gallery
917.434.4032

Thomas Hayes Studio
thomashayesstudio.com

LIGHTING
Nick Jones
nickjones.design

Visual Comfort
visualcomfort.com

RUGS
Marc Phillips
marcphillipsrugs.com

Stark Carpet
starkcarpet.com

DECOR
Den
shopden-la.com

From top: A Lawson Fenning custom Ojai cabinet compliments the wooden built-in bookcase in the family room; the wooden walls carry on into the mudroom.