

Victorian Revival

A Newport home with an old soul is updated to meet modern needs

By Andrea E. McHugh
Nat Rea Photography



Tom and Carrie Walker have summered in Newport for more than 20 years, first buying a home on Kay Street, while admittedly having their eyes on a different prize. “We would always walk down to the water, down to Thames Street or wherever, and we’d walk down Greenough and say if a house ever comes on the market here, we’ve got to grab it, because it’s the most beautiful street,” says Carrie. When a Victorian circa 1900 hit the market, they pounced.

“We were in love with it from day one,” she says. Anyone would fall for the turn of the century stunner, dripping in old world craftsmanship and character, but as the years passed, the Walkers made wish lists and collected ideas on how to ensure its role in their family’s future.

“They had a really deep connection to [the house], but they were ready to take the next step and make it suitable as a full-time home that could support everyday life for their family, both now and for generations to come,” says Patti Watson, principal at Taste Design. Watson was tasked with both preserving and celebrating the home’s historic integrity while ushering it into a new phase that included modern comfort and everyday usability.

Her mission was clear: expand the kitchen, add bedrooms and bathrooms, and transform both the third floor and basement into spaces that would support the diverse hobbies and interests of the Walker family. “All things that would make it more livable without losing any of the charm that drew them to it in the first place,” says Watson.

Overseeing design projects throughout New England, she knows century-old architectural detail is a precious commodity here, and she’s equally well versed in repurposing spaces that accommodate contemporary demands. “That’s always the dance, and we’ve become really adept at walking that line with over 20 years of experience here in Newport,” says Watson.



With this house, she says, they had to take a thoughtful approach.

The kitchen, for example, was a tight squeeze. Like many Gilded Age kitchens in Newport, it was originally designed for efficiency and used primarily by domestic staff. During a preliminary walkthrough with the Walkers, Watson dreamed up a solution to expand the cramped space that lacked flow: remove the back staircase.

“It was original to the house, but no longer practical, and we were able to gain square footage both on the first and second floors by taking it out,” she says. The modification allowed one of the bedrooms to gain an ensuite bath, added a guest bathroom on the second floor and created a more functional layout without compromising the exterior character.

The third floor of the home had long been ignored; a forgotten “scary” space, Walker describes. Watson’s firm recreated

the space with dormer windows resulting in additional square footage with updated bathrooms, bedrooms, and a bonus room. “That whole level is now the perfect retreat for the younger generation,” says Watson. It’s also become a private escape for guests, adds Walker. “You can just send a family up there and say, ‘See you in the morning!’”

The third floor also serves as a place where the Walker family, including their 24-year-old daughter, can gather, relax, unwind and engage in some of their favorite activities. “We’re card players, game players, puzzle-doers, and it’s just a nice space for all of that,” says Carrie Walker.

“[Their daughter] would say that that was like her little nest because she felt like at the end of the day, she would just retreat up there, and she was at the top of the house, looking over Newport,” adds Walker. Watson’s firm recreated



the project. (Similarly, the fully renovated basement boasts a new layout that gives Carrie Walker dedicated space for sewing and crafting.)

By every measure, the most talked about, unique space in the home is the scullery. Much like traditional sculleries throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Walkers' is used for food prep, washing and storing dishes, and serving as an overflow kitchen of sorts, only on a much more aesthetic scale.

"It's actually my favorite part of the project. It's not original to the home, but it feels like it could be," explains Watson. She says she can't take credit for coming up with the idea — she credits Carrie Walker — but once it was on the table, she ran with it. Tucked directly off the new kitchen, where the original kitchen had been, the two spaces are separated by an antique-style window wall with wavy



glass commissioned from a local glassmaker. "Those two spaces really just work together," adds Lawson.

Watson's team suggested the soft green palette and brass details to give the scullery vintage vibes. "But it's totally functional, too. It gives the homeowners a place to prep and clean up out of sight, which is wonderful when they're entertaining," says Watson. "It's one of those spaces that feels old and new all at once, and it really suits the clients and the house."

Unconventional maybe, but Carrie Walker declares it a game changer. "Once you have a scullery, you always have to have a scullery," she says, laughing. It's proven its worth many times over. "It was just a great place for the pantries and the extra sink, extra dishwasher, extra fridge — the sort of stuff you want when you have a busy household. Taste did such a great job in picking the colors and the wallpaper. It's a beautiful space. I just love it."

Carrie Walker describes the color palette and wallpaper as "calming and subtle." The overall aesthetic, however, is anything but simple. "She pushed us on some stuff too, like the dark blue in the living room," concedes Walker. "I said, 'I don't know about that,' and she said, 'You're gonna love it,' and, you know? I do. It's absolutely beautiful."

Watson says her entire approach was about making smart changes to the home that feel like they've always belonged.

"It's graceful, comfortable, and rooted in a sense of place. This home has that in spades. It has a long history, a strong sense of character, and now, it's got all the thoughtful updates that make it ready for the next chapter," she describes. "It's still very much the house the homeowners fell in love with, but now it supports the way they want to live. Historic charm seamlessly blended with modern luxuries — that's my concept of Newport living." 🍷