



MADE HER WAY

When a stay-at-home mom and her husband bought a Newton fixer-upper, she got the chance to show off some serious design moxie.

By **RACHEL LEVITT**
Photographs by **ROBERT KNIGHT**



A faux-alligator chair by Century Furniture and a Madeline Weinrib carpet add levity to the staid dining table and bench from Desiron in New York City.

DAWN SYLVESTER AND JOHN TUDOR NEVER THOUGHT THEY'D LEAVE CAMBRIDGE.

Coming from Pittsburgh and Cape Town, South Africa, respectively, the couple met while getting their M.B.A.s at Harvard. They loved the city's urban vibe and student population, but after years of house hunting, they couldn't find a place to call home: Every one they looked at was either too big of a project, or too small for a growing family. Forced to expand their search to the western suburbs, they ended up looking at literally hundreds of properties while living in Cambridge rentals.

But on a winter morning in 2007, they found a house that was just right. Within seconds of walking through the doorway of the six-bedroom, 6,235-square-foot West Newton Colonial Revival, Sylvester, 37, fell in love. "It just oozed character," she says. "I adored its high ceilings, gorgeous crown and base moldings, beautiful original floors, and intricate woodwork—and the front staircase was so grand it took my breath away." The

avowed city dwellers were sold on the 'burbs and took the plunge.

The home's quirky 19th-century layout particularly inspired Sylvester. "The house seemed full of mystery, as if you might uncover a secret passage or a historic document buried in the wall," she says. It reminded her of her grandmother's Pennsylvania home, where she'd spent childhood weekends "discovering" hidden chambers. She knew that her sons, Calvin, age four, and Beckett, two and a half, would play epic games of hide-and-seek amid the back staircase, walk-in closets, and interconnected rooms. In other words, the house was perfect for a creative mom and her feisty children.

Because it hadn't been updated in at least 30 years, the house needed new bathrooms, a new kitchen, landscaping, a laundry room, and a formal office space, plus a new heating and cooling system. A self-described "design junkie," Sylvester wasn't deterred by the scale of the project.

For this mother of two young boys, renovating is the one thing that is exclusively hers, she says: It's her way of expressing pent-up creativity. "I guess I have an unusual appetite for the little decisions that might bore someone else to death," she says. "I love picking out hardware, lighting, and the perfect shrubs—and spending hours in the garden planting them."

Excited to have an expansive canvas "to test out all of the ideas in the design universe," she was lucky enough to find "rock star" general contractor Bill Friel. Thanks to the depth of Friel's experience, he was a tremendous resource for her every obsession. She appreciated him most, she adds, because he had an "anything is possible" attitude, granting her free rein to try things out.

A former marketing director for the Massachusetts nonprofit Trustees of Reservations, Sylvester wasn't exactly a design neophyte. She had practiced her design skills on four Cambridge



To achieve a dramatic look in the parlor, Dawn Sylvester painted the fireplace black and framed it with two custom canopy chairs and an acrylic table from CB2.

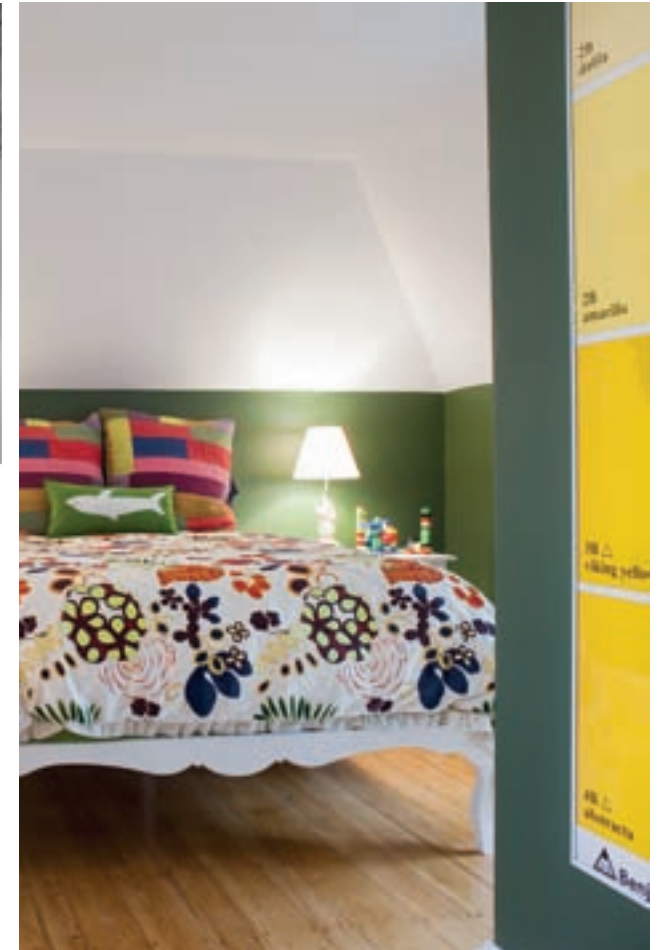


Above, a built-in chalkboard/magnet board keeps sons Calvin and Beckett entertained while Sylvester prepares lunch. Her renovated kitchen sports five-inch-wide oak plank flooring and Shaker cabinets with extra-long European chrome pulls. She especially loves how the oversize crown molding “twists and turns with the cabinets and soffits.” Below, Calvin demonstrates his flying skills in his airplane-themed bedroom.

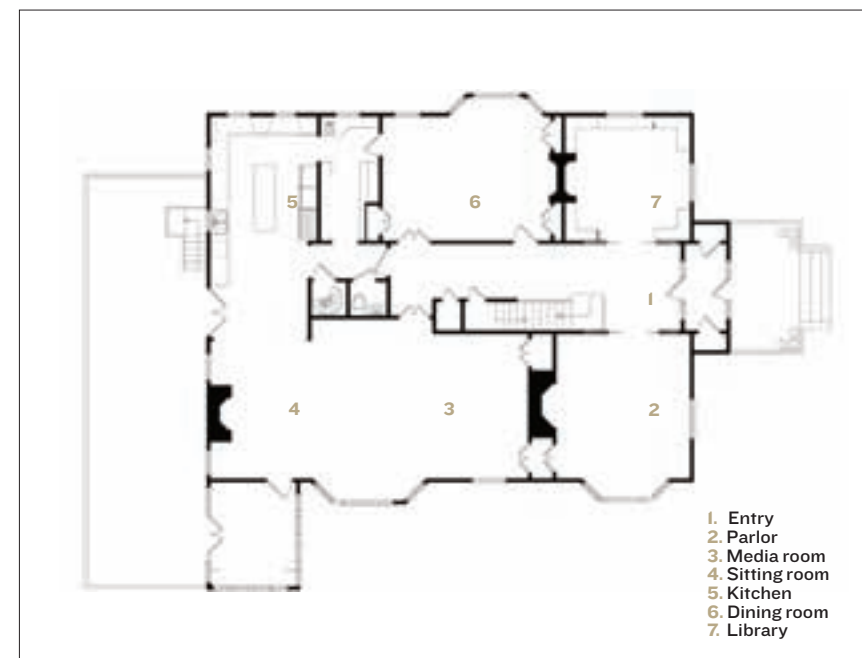


Sylvester added punch to the fireplace by painting it blue-gray. The Mitchell Gold wingback chairs are covered in faux leather, which is (almost) kid-proof.

Sylvester reclaimed an attic nook by turning it into a “camping room” as a Father’s Day gift to her husband, adding a woodsy wallpaper mural and sleeping bags.



Clockwise from top left, the back staircase to the third floor was clunky and not for show, until Sylvester rebuilt the railings and balusters to match the grandeur of the front stairs and added birch-patterned wallpaper from Cole & Son; the guest bedroom in the attic was designed to feel like a quirky New England bed and breakfast, with its pop-art paint strip and Anthropologie duvet; to achieve a casual, farmhouse look for the game room, Sylvester ran beadboard throughout. “The space is for bouncing balls and riding bikes and just blowing off some toddler steam,” she says.



rentals over the 13 years that she lived in the city. By the time she got her hands on the Otis Street interior, she had plenty of tricks up her sleeve. “The best thing about living in these old houses,” she says, “is that they have lots of tiny rooms to work with. Even if you make a huge mistake, it’s relatively minor.” In one of their rentals, she’d painted the dining room black, to her husband’s horror. Though she loved the hue, she chose a color with broader appeal for her Newton home: Blue Danube by Benjamin Moore.

Before having children, Sylvester and Tudor, 40, had stayed in grand hotels around the world, and their travels offered endless sources of design inspiration. Miami’s Delano Hotel served as the primary model for the Otis Street house. Sylvester “shamelessly copied” its ebony-stained floors, white walls, and white furniture. And while some



Built from scratch, the library features elaborate millwork, a gas fireplace made of black iron, and a stunning Indian desk from Boston's Mohr & McPherson.



Clockwise from left, the design for the master bedroom started with the twig-and-leaf chandelier, which introduced a nature theme, but Sylvester added crystal doorknobs and a plaster medallion on the ceiling because it “felt naked without it”; the second-floor guest bedroom is all Hollywood Regency glam, with its metallic lattice-print wallpaper from Graham & Brown on the fireplace wall and lattice-print sheets on the bed; oversize slate tile and a tub made of Carrara marble slabs lend the master bathroom a modern sensibility.

might consider it blasphemy to paint over original woodwork (more than one contractor advised her to reconsider), she did it without hesitation. “New England gets so little sun in the winter,” she says, “so every little bit you can do to maximize the light really helps.”

Sylvester had the dark-stained birch library built from scratch, drawing inspiration from Manhattan’s Hudson Hotel. New Hampshire-based carpenter Brian Groves crafted the millwork to create an exact replica of the hotel’s fireplace. In a passing conversation with Groves, Sylvester had mentioned that she loved built-in secrets. Upon finishing the library, he revealed that he had built a secret panel into the mantel, and it’s where her sons now hide their superhero action figures.

The parlor, which doubles as Sylvester’s office, was meant to feel formal, much as it would have in

Victorian times. Inspired by the ones that Los Angeles designer Kelly Wearstler used in the Tides Hotel in South Beach, Sylvester placed two custom-made, canopied bergère chairs in front of the fireplace.

The nascent designer’s one blind spot? The kitchen. “I am a tragic cook, while my mom is a gourmet chef,” she says. Her mother insisted that the kitchen be more than beautiful—it had to feature all the tools cooks need to work their magic. Following her mother’s advice, Sylvester (whose main appliance is the microwave) added a pot-filler above the cooktop, a six-burner stove, and double ovens. “I don’t want to count how many hours she and I spent discussing such nuances as whether the freezer should open from the right or the left,” she says.

For anything permanently installed, such as moldings, tile, and lighting,

Sylvester chose classic finishes like subway tile and crystal sconces. But she felt free to go a little modern when accessorizing. “I would often look around and think, This room feels way too stuffy, so I’d add a midcentury piece,” she explains. “If a room felt too modern, I’d add an old photograph or a stack of books.”

Sylvester also wanted the house to reflect her sense of humor. “I didn’t want it to feel too serious or too grownup, so I snuck in whimsical things like the print of a giant fork in the hallway and the massive Benjamin Moore paint strip in the guest room.” And there’s a big rubber-band ball in a box masquerading as art in the library. “It makes me smile to have a little kitsch around.” ■

CONTRACTOR Bill Friel **MILLWORKER** Brian Groves, Colby Cabinetry

Stunning Anemone sconces by Robert Abbey give the master dressing room starlet flair, enhanced by silver ottomans from Ligne Roset.



TRADE SECRETS

INSIDER TIPS ON WHAT MAKES THIS SPACE GREAT

1. WET BAR The third-floor game room features a wet bar with a Thassos marble top, as well as a Sub-Zero refrigerator/freezer. The Horchow mirror is made from wooden porcupine quills.

2. BUTLER'S PANTRY With its traditional white subway tile, white cabinets, and glass globe hardware, this area exudes a classic Victorian feel. For a humorous touch, Sylvester found a polished-silver ice bucket and filled it with roses.

3. ARTWORK As a reminder of her husband's native land, Sylvester hung the family's collection of African masks on the brightly painted dining room wall.

4. CLOSETS Sylvester refreshed the built-in cabinets inside the his-and-her walk-in closets by painting them to match the slate floor in the master bathroom, and added chrome hardware to match the polished finishes in the rest of the house.

5. KID'S ROOM In lieu of framed pictures, an "art installation" in one of the boys' rooms showcases vintage balsa wood toy airplanes (a steal at around a dollar each).

6. LIVING/FAMILY ROOM A built-in cabinet keeps crafts and games organized in plastic bins for playtime.

7. FURNITURE The game room also features a Rosy Angelis floor lamp designed by Philippe Starck for Flos and an artful Frank Gehry Wiggle chair, made of cardboard.

8. STAIRCASE With its original balusters and newel post, detailed medallion, and beautiful fluting, the home's staircase is full of historical charm.

