Studio Visit
The Designer Remaking
Durham, North Carolina

Petal Power
A Flower-Shaped House Blooms in the Berkshires

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January / February 2021
Display until March 15, 2021

Isaac Resnikoff of L.A. design collective Project Room and his son, Eli, arrive at their Highland Park house, which is finished with simple materials and filled with vintage finds.
Step by Step

Over the course of nearly 20 years, two artists renovate a Los Angeles home and adjacent bungalows into the perfect live/work space.

Architect Warren Techentin collaborated with artists Christopher James and Kristin Beinner James to renovate the couple’s once-derelict home in the Los Feliz section of Los Angeles. When they first bought it, the corner entrance was obscured by a tangle of vegetation.
Christopher James vividly recalls when he and his wife, Kristin Beinner James, first laid eyes on the pink and maroon house in L.A.’s Los Feliz neighborhood in 2000. Divided into upstairs and downstairs apartments, the house was a wreck, and the three bungalows out back weren’t much better. “The sewer in the main house was disconnected, there was no heat, and rain streamed in through broken windows,” says Chris.

Built between 1906 and 1926, the structures, which locals say were once used to accommodate out-of-town talent for a nearby movie studio, had obviously seen better days. But the property offered the live/rent opportunity the couple, both artists, were looking for, and they saw the potential to create a place to both work and raise a family.

After purchasing it, they settled into the upstairs apartment and began renovating the one-bedroom bungalows and renting them out to fellow artists. “We had a sort of reverse discrimination policy,” Chris jokes. “You had to be an artist to live here.” In 2010 they reached out to architect Warren Techentin, a friend, to redesign a collapsing exterior stair on the south side of the main house. Five years later he returned to explore how Chris and Kristin, who have two daughters, might convert the 2,700-square-foot house into a four-bedroom, single-family home. Elevated above the nearly half-acre lot, the boxy structure offered the perfect blank canvas for clean-lined rooms, but there was little connection to the surrounding garden that the couple had brought back to life.

In addition to making the house suitable for a family of four, the couple wanted to retain its Mission lines and Moroccan-inflected details. “Chris and Kristin are modernists, and they wanted a modern…”

“We had a lot of conversations about how to adapt the character of the building, as well as how to open up the house to the garden.” Warren Techentin, Architect

Golden Age
A once-neglected home gets ready for its close-up.

- c. 1906
  Three bungalows are built on a lot measuring just under a half-acre on the edge of Los Feliz.

- c. 1912
  A one-story house is built on the site.

- c. 1926
  A second story is added to the house.

- 1910s–1920s
  The buildings are used as quarters for out-of-town talent by a neighboring movie studio, according to local lore.

- 1940s
  The two floors of the main house are converted into separate apartments.

- 2000
  Christopher James and Kristin Beinner James buy the property and begin the process of updating the bungalows and the upstairs apartment. Chris also begins revitalizing the landscape.

- 2010
  Architect Warren Techentin redesigns the exterior stair on the main house, along with a garden shed and a desk.

- 2015
  Techentin begins working on a plan to convert the two apartments into a four-bedroom, single-family home, a project that requires significant shoring up of the foundation.

- 2016
  Chris and Kristin finish renovating two of the bungalows for use as art studios.

- 2018
  Renovation of the main house is complete.
home,” Techentin says. “But they wanted the character of the house to come with it.” For inspiration, they looked to the early work of pioneering modernist Irving Gill. “There is something very restful and satisfying to my mind in the simple cube house with creamy walls, sheer and plain, rising boldly into the sky, unrelieved by cornices or overhang of roof,” the architect wrote in 1916.

The project was both a renovation and a recasting of the original, with added elements that feel as though they were meant to be there all along. Chief among them is the long terrace that connects to the garden through new French doors in the dining room and kitchen. Of the new detached chimney and outdoor fireplace, Techentin says, “Louis Kahn did them frequently as ways to modulate scale. Here, the chimney balances the two volumes and helps the house to read as one entity.”

Upstairs as well as downstairs, new and reconstructed windows flood the rooms with light. Echoing an existing curved opening between the living and dining rooms, an archway leads from the barrel-vaulted living room to a diminutive library located beneath the renovated stair that leads to the second-floor bedrooms. Lined with books and featuring a reading nook and a bar, it’s an intimate counterpoint to the public rooms.

To make the tiny kitchen more usable, Techentin moved walls and added storage. He worked closely with Chris and Kristin on choosing finishes and materials, like the solid brass handrail on the staircase and the library’s bar counter, crafted of brass sheeting. Chris also modified existing cement tile designs and created layouts for the tile in the bathrooms.

The rooms are hung with pieces by the couple, who now work out of two of the bungalows, and by artist friends. The pair has also found a place for several antiques that were in Chris’s mom’s home in San Francisco. “They’re so over the top and just weird enough that they fit here,” he says.

The dialogue between old and new is fitting for a property that has evolved over the years to become a deeply personal reflection of its owners, who have created a place that’s conducive to work as well as play. Friends come to stay, and there have been art exhibitions and video screenings, along with the occasional dance party. Says Kristin, “It’s an oasis in the city.”

Chris customized the main bath-room’s patterned Granada cement tiles (below). “I had them take out some of the lines,” he says. “I’m a fan of ’60s Op art, and you get a 3-D effect if you lay them in the right way.” Lush plantings surround one of the two bungalows on the property that the couple converted into art studios (opposite).