

This Boston Home Reinvents the Brownstone for a New Era

Tonal décor in soft pastels and custom millwork complement the classic architecture

By Amy Bradford

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Union Park is one of Boston's best-preserved residential squares, its graceful ellipse filled with mature trees and fountains and encircled by its original cast-iron fence. The square's bow-fronted mansions are typical of the [Boston brownstone](#) style, and embody a uniquely American vision of metropolitan splendour: brownstone – or sandstone, to give it its proper name – was the building material of choice in north-eastern states during the 19th-century's rapid urban expansion. This was partly thanks to the material's natural abundance and partly due to its softness, which made it easy to decorate with intricate carvings.



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

This particular brownstone, owned by a couple with three children, dates back to 1900, and combines restoration with sensitive modernisation. [Boston-based interior designer](#) Lisa Tharp worked on the project alongside [Massachusetts firm](#) Mellowes & Paladino Architects, who preserved as much of the historical façade as possible and restored the elements that had been removed over the years. Their task included designing a new set of mahogany double doors to closely match the originals, based on archival photographs and surviving examples in the neighbourhood. New louvred wooden shutters add a contemporary touch – and offer a hint of what lies within.



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

Tharp was excited by the prospect of “working within a historic envelope while designing interiors for a modern family”. As the Boston home extends over six storeys, she had the luxury of dedicating each floor to a specific function: now, the “piano nobile” at the top of the steps, which would likely have once housed a grand salon, is home to the dining room and kitchen, while the street level below contains the living room and library. The upper floors house a principal suite, family lounge and guest bedrooms.



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Kalja Greeff

This evolution was made possible by structural alterations to the rear of the property. “Traditionally, brownstones suffer from a lack of natural light due to their solid long walls on either side, but by adding three storeys of glass to the rear elevation, the house is now flooded with sunshine while maintaining privacy at the front,” explains Tharp. The garden courtyard was enhanced with a new kitchen balcony and a carriage house with a roof deck and pergola, providing ample outdoor lounging space in addition to a top-floor roof terrace.



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

The interior was shaped by the homeowners' longing for "a calming oasis" in their busy lives. "We used soft, [natural colours](#) with little contrast between walls, millwork, window treatments and furnishings," explains Tharp. "Keeping the contrast low means that pale hues flow easily from one space to the next; in the spaces that have less natural light, we used slightly richer shades."



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

The decor of the dining room was shaped by the home's history. "It was inspired by silver servingware: silvered silk is used on the walls and curtains, with chalky silver paintwork on the trims and ceiling," says Tharp. The adjacent kitchen is one of the palest rooms in the house, "a complex off-white with muted blue, green and grey undertones". This colour also lends sophistication to the common areas, such as the hallway and staircase.



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The library and living room on the lower floor are more tranquil still. "The library is cocooned in a seaglass-green, suiting-inspired fabric, the Heathered Linen design by [Phillip Jeffries](#)," says Tharp. "All the trims were painted the same hue to keep things calm, and the ceiling is a paler tint to visually raise the room's proportions, given that the ceilings are lower on this floor." The designer also curated the home's art collection, and the library is brought to life with a deep blue painting by Sarah Philouze above the fireplace, from [Jo-Ann Artman Gallery](#). Armchairs upholstered in cashmere flannel complete the quietly refined picture.



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

In the bedrooms, colours are a little warmer: the principal suite is decorated in an uplifting blend of pink and camel, with [Phillip Jeffries' Vinyl Solstice Silk](#) wallcovering in Blush Star on the walls. A guest bedroom overlooking the garden is adorned in soft violet hues "to create a sense of escape", while a top-floor space has hints of green to reflect its treetop views.



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The Boston home's other standout feature is its custom millwork. "The building was gut-renovated down to the studs, but the new millwork restores classic ornamentation," explains Tharp. "It's ornate yet streamlined, to honour both the architecture and the clients' contemporary leanings. Panelling is consistent with the best 19th-century Boston houses, and enhances room proportions – in the library, for example, the moulding extends onto the ceiling to give the illusion of greater height."



Photo: Read McKendree / Styling: Katja Greeff

“Everything here is new, but designed to look timeless,” the designer continues. “We brought in restored vintage pieces, such as Murano chandeliers, and natural fibres that complete the calm, comforting vision. This home is a new classic.” [@lisa_tharp](#), [@mellowesandpaladino](#)