

The Phoebe Wallace Jewett House was described in Elizabeth Mills Brown's classic 1976 book *New Haven — A Guide to Architecture and Urban Design* as "a particularly crisp and well-finished example, with a good Ionic porch and a delectable balcony on the east side."

The house is indeed a historic residence in the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century Elm City neighborhood of Wooster Square. Phoebe Wallace Jewett lived out her life there, but some time between her death and recent history this single-family home became a legal two-family residence. During last year's downward slide of real estate values it was placed on the market. Soon after Jonathan Weinberg and his partner of 26 years, Nick Boshnack, snapped it up.

Along with housing the pair and their pair of cats, Stieglitz and Gertrude, the new owners took in a stray named Sybil who had Feline Immune Deficiency disease, also known as cat AIDS. But this is not a story about a house that became an animal shelter.

This house easily falls into the Federal style of dwelling. The "normal" layout of a Federal has the entry and stair to one side, a hallway that runs the length of the house beside the staircase, and one bay of rooms that runs from the front to the back of the house. What makes this home exceptional is the second floor, where a seamless curve redirects the hallway from the stair and allows for an east face bump out to create a "double loaded" hallway back to the second master bedroom.

The luminosity of the natural light of the stair flows down through these curves and that one simple curving gesture (as well as the sinuous stair and an alcove that is carved out below it) make this example of a traditional house type delightful in its interior elaboration. On the exterior, as Miss Brown noted, the focus on the Ionic columns makes this home a special place in a special neighborhood.

This is also not a tale of renovating a house that was in bad shape — the previous owners cared for it very well. For example, the wood floors, largely vertical-grain fir, were in exquisite shape. The exterior of the house would not need

# Reinventing an Antique

By DUO DICKINSON

*A Wooster Square gem becomes infused with a thoroughly modern sensibility*



Sofas, paintings, radiator enclosures, light fixtures and art are all visually detached from the existing white walls and trim which were left completely untouched by this home's new occupants.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DECARLO



A gallery that doubles as a studio. The extraordinary light of the home's oversized windows makes a perfect place for Weinberg's portrait practice.



The master bedroom — a classic painter's retreat that backs up to a master bath/dressing area (left) that was renovated to take the place of a kitchen.





re-painting for at least a few years, and the roof is serviceable for the foreseeable future.

In short the house was, more or less, in “move in” condition. What makes this home remarkable is not that it was physically reinvented, or even subjected to “extreme makeover” decoration. This is a story of quiet acceptance of extraordinary art by a stoic structure at a minimal cost.

Although this is a home where a couple resides, Jonathan Weinberg has a remarkable combination of passionate interests that require accommodation, and spends most of his time working out of their home. First and foremost he is an artist, so he needed a place to paint. He also wanted space to display his work. His paintings are most often interpretive portraits of one sort or another or studies of the male form. He graduated from Yale College and earned a doctorate from Harvard, and writes on art interpretation and history.

His obsessions with color, the human face and the male form have an interesting sidebar. Weinberg is also fascinated with art that is distinctly focused on male homosexuality. He has written two books on the subject, bringing the cultural and the artistic into a conjunction that enriches both perspectives. He maintains ties to Yale as a visiting critic, and he commutes to teach in Rhode Island School of Design’s liberal-arts program.



As soon as they bought the house, Weinberg and Boshnack began to make it their own in a number of ways. First they retained Milton Damascena of Kam Construction, who worked under very tight budgetary constrictions to accommodate the old home’s new owners. As Weinberg puts it, he and Boshnack “renovated the kitchen on first floor, did some structural work on the ceiling in one of the bedrooms, created a proper back porch/deck and did a lot of painting.” In addition, they replaced a tub with a large shower and did a small amount of decoration.

Since they no longer needed two kitchens, they combined the two sets of matching relatively new Home Depot cabinetry into the first-floor kitchen and made the second-story kitchen space a closet/dressing room off the master bedroom. Weinberg then took an entire upstairs bedroom and converted it into a walk-in repository for hundreds of his paintings.

Just as Weinberg’s paintings are statements of color applied to the predictable backdrop of an antique home, the brightly colored and crisply detailed furnishings they’ve filled the house with pack maximum impact at minimal expense. The preponderance of furnishings come from Ikea and other standard purveyors and use crisp lines and bold colors to create bold distinction from the soft, lumpy and familiar quality of the harboring home. This is a low-impact inhabitation of heavy contrast, using the 19<sup>th</sup>-century home as the passive counterpart to the intense (and sometimes humorous) artistic endeavors and obsessions of its owners.

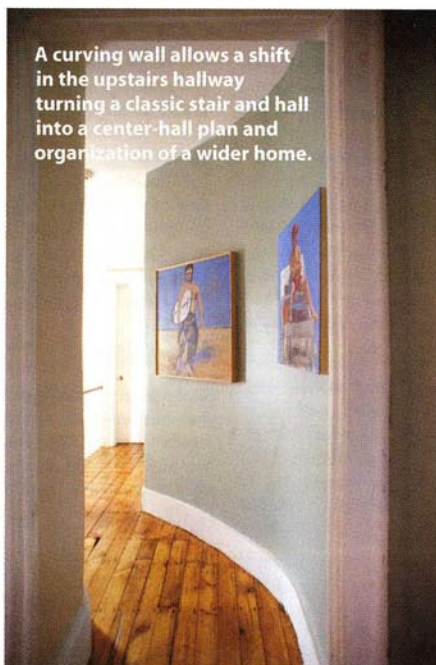
Some rooms are completely dedicated to the cause of Weinberg’s art. He has created his own “gallery” from a living space on the second floor. His studio, like his paintings’ storage room, was created from an existing bedroom, and the aroma of paint is ever-present. Lastly his office — a place where his work as both a professor and art historian working with words takes place — dominates the space as clearly as his artwork does other rooms.

This Wooster Square home is representative of thousands of others

stylistic “correctness.” The choices when dealing with an antique home are pretty stark — either you kowtow and toe the line with historicist religiosity, or you contrast the history with an eclectic attitude. Just as Weinberg’s artistic outlook and intellectual focus counterpoints much of the classical art world, this home’s stolid normalcy serves as the foil for an exultant artist within.

Perhaps when Weinberg and Boshnack found Sybil, the abandoned AIDS-infected cat, it was a metaphor for the new uses they imposed on their old home. They have created a place of physical refuge in this small New England city where, despite a vibrant arts community and the intellectual crucible of Yale, different perspectives can illicit unpredictable and sometimes challenging reactions.

There are hundreds of personal refuges like this one throughout the Elm City: beautiful older, traditional homes where non-traditional lives find comfort and unconventional attitudes find safe harbor — not only within the welcoming shelter of a home’s protective walls, but in the embrace of an open and engaged neighborhood and city. ❖



A curving wall allows a shift in the upstairs hallway turning a classic stair and hall into a center-hall plan and organization of a wider home.

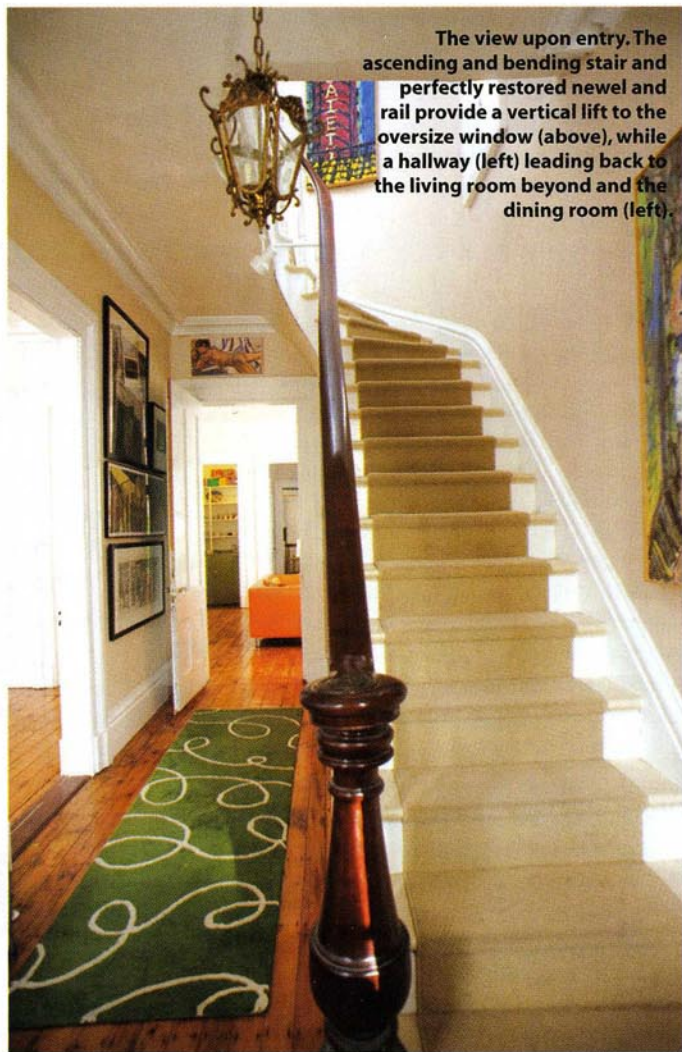
where homeowners financially stretched to afford a great location and a solid “move-in-ready” place to live. In this case the structure itself evokes a sensibility that is unmistakably in counterpoint to its contents.

Many antique homes have an enormous overlay of historic gravitas and specific





A proud hybrid of Federal massing using semi-Victorian and neo-classical elements including the entry portico and demi-balcony (far right), a simple shape with extraordinary adornments set in a Wooster Square neighborhood.



The view upon entry. The ascending and bending stair and perfectly restored newel and rail provide a vertical lift to the oversized window (above), while a hallway (left) leading back to the living room beyond and the dining room (left).



An array of portraits by homeowner Weinberg evidences an extraordinary sense of character, color and insight. A portrait of legendary Yale architectural historian Vincent Scully is at lower right.