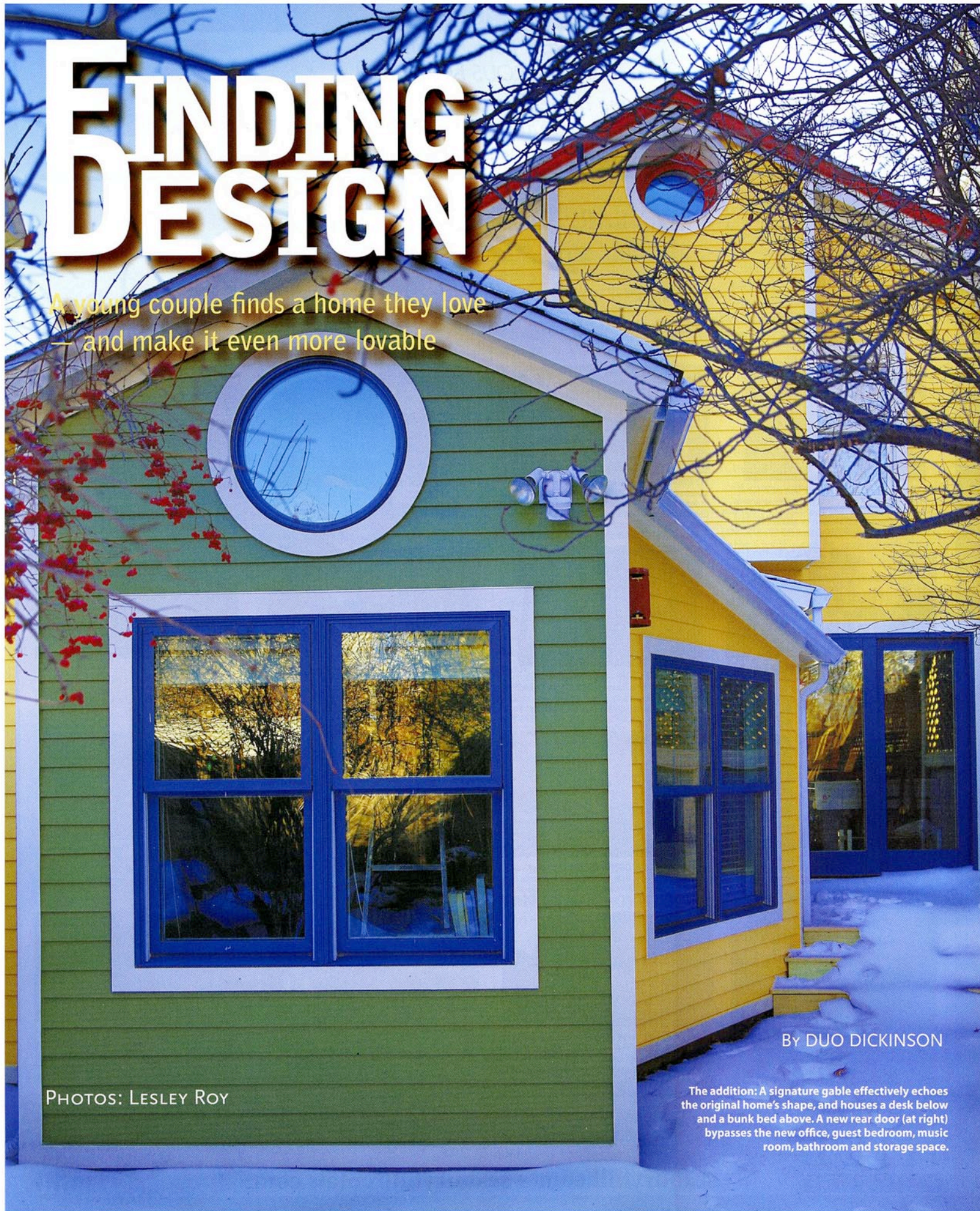


# FINDING DESIGN

A young couple finds a home they love — and make it even more lovable



PHOTOS: LESLEY ROY

BY DUO DICKINSON

The addition: A signature gable effectively echoes the original home's shape, and houses a desk below and a bunk bed above. A new rear door (at right) bypasses the new office, guest bedroom, music room, bathroom and storage space.



ATHOME

Thomas Parker is an assistant professor of French and Francophone Studies at Vassar College. His wife, Pauline LeVen, is an assistant professor of classics at Yale.

Like so many other young academics settling in New Haven, they **love** the sense of **community, local** restaurants and cultural infusion that makes our **wee** New England **city** unique.

But more, even though their lives are language and literature, they love design. The couple met in

Paris in 1997 at the École Normale Supérieure and were married in 2011. Thomas started teaching at Vassar in 2005 and when Pauline finished her Ph.D. and got a job at Yale, they moved to New Haven in the fall of 2008.

Recounts Parker: "We were already commuting back and forth from Poughkeepsie [N.Y.], where I had been employed at Vassar College since 2005. I now commute from New Haven."

Looking around for a place they could afford, they found a distinctive home between Orange and State streets. The house was built in 1853 as a tiny two-family. It's a semi-Federal/lightly Queen Anne style home — consistent with the structures surrounding it, but clearly a smaller version of the neighborhood norm.



Thomas Parker and his wife, Pauline LeVen, are proud of their eclectic taste in furnishings as well as their evolved home's interior.

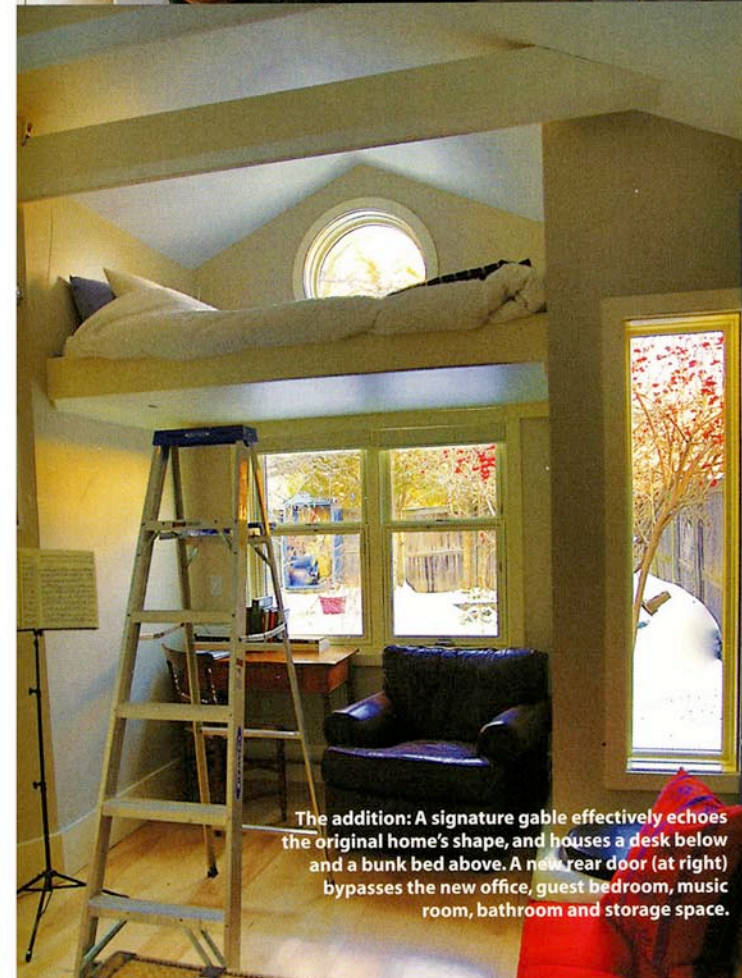
The house is perhaps just 19 feet wide, with a second floor completely given over to a master suite as part of a whole house renovation done in 1987 by architect Roger Manny. As a consequence of its ongoing renovation, the home had a compact but open plan.

Beyond the undeniable cuteness of its scale and whimsical remodeling, the backyard was quite deep, and was the springboard for its first personalization by the new owners.

"The main part of the house mostly existed as you see it now," explains Parker. "We painted it, put a new roof on. I hired a backhoe and dug a fire pit in the backyard with the guidance of my neighbors, who are architects and builders themselves."

But it was the home's back story that provided the most intrigue for the young couple. Two previous owners were rumored to have met with dramatic fates — death or breakups (or both) — with details "that only a filmic imagination could invent," Parker says. The rumors of these horrific events seemed to have generated a consensus that the home's basement was haunted.

Given the tight confines of the overall size of the home as it existed, and the complete openness of the entire second floor, there was no guest room for the nine — count 'em, nine — parents



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and stepparents who regularly visit, nor precious little quiet space for a music room, an office, and a three-quarters bath to augment the master bath and powder room.

But the couple wanted to maintain the existing flow of the house, use green materials, design any remodeling to be energy-efficient, and most importantly to "leave our creative stamp, while preserving the existing ambiance," explains Parker. "Mostly, we wanted the design and building experience to tell a story."

In building what they built and whom they built it with, all those goals were met.

Fulfilling their ambitious list and confronting the home's disquieting history, LeVen and Parker thought the practical and the supernatural issues might share a common solution.

"We don't believe in spirits, but there was direct access from the kitchen to the old stone basement. We decided to block that access to create more floor space," recalls Parker. "As an added benefit, we have had no problems with death and despair. By the way," he adds, "our 100-pound golden retriever remains deathly scared of the basement."

With multiple missions defined, the couple sought professional design help. They ended up at the nearby office of Turner Brooks. The eclectic, animated and small-scale home had an immediate resonance for Brooks, an adjunct professor at Yale's School of Architecture. Practicing for more than 40 years — first in Vermont, then as a Rome Prize recipient and teaching all over the country — Brooks alighted in New Haven, where he has designed the Gilder Boathouse for the Yale crew teams and is presently working on the renovation of the Cold Spring School.

His extraordinary career was launched with exquisite tiny homes in Vermont, featured in Vincent Scully's transformational 1974 book *The Shingle Style Today*. The scale and delightful idiosyncrasy of his work resonated with LeVen and Parker.

When Turner saw the house he thought the postmodern second floor renovation should be reinterpreted. But part of the

couple's design requirements was to create a renovation that "that preserved the spirit and style of the house, which was renovated in a [postmodern] style." So, like all good house designers, Turner began to absorb how the owners saw their home. The architect explains: "It fits perfectly with their lifestyle, and I — being of course a chameleon architect — switched gears very quickly, and espoused the project in its postmodernist terms."

Brooks soon came to understand that the two academics used the home "as a place of an endless series of wanderings, music and writing and pondering, all conceived as just pauses in this peripatetic event."

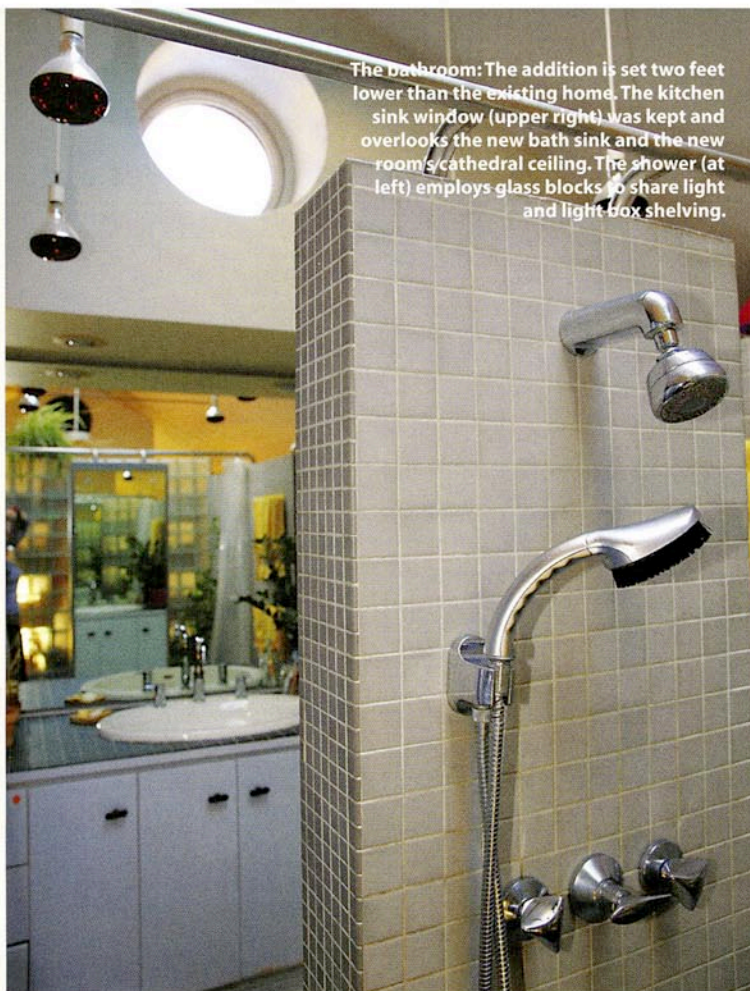
In fact, Parker puts their best hopes for their house in these terms: "We wanted a space that actualized interstitial divides — an architectural creating of Homi Bhabha's discourse on 'Locations of Culture.' Bhabha quotes Heidegger: 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its *presencing*.' This is the relationship we wanted a step into the new space to actualize."



Beyond the magic marriage in design the owners felt with the home and Turner Brooks, and the clarity of their vision, the fit of the design process, the designer and the client is inevitably organic. And Turner understood that a small project with high content on a limited budget required time for hands-on interplay that he simply could not provide at an affordable fee. So, in his words: "I gave the project to a student/employee of mine, the great Alice Tai. She produced something that, weirdly, seemed to have come right out of my own head."

But that channeling happened only after a fair amount of preloading. As Parker recounts: "Turner referred to Alice as a 'jet engine of creativity,' and a lot of good wine was consumed between Turner, Alice, Pauline and I as we brainstormed before beginning the project."

The result, after looking at a variety of possible designs in model form, is a very small angling addition launching into the generous rear



The bathroom: The addition is set two feet lower than the existing home. The kitchen sink window (upper right) was kept and overlooks the new bath sink and the new room's cathedral ceiling. The shower (at left) employs glass blocks to share light and light box shelving.

yard. The new wing creates a true back door that bypasses the new room directly entering the existing kitchen.

The "head" of the addition is a small gable that distills the whole house shape, and incorporates the multicolored trim and siding to further unify is angled projection to the host/parent home.

The new space answers all the questions posed by the owners using two tools.

First, by dropping the floor of the new space to grade level, two multitasking benefits allowed spaces to overlap. The lowered new floor affords a view over the new bathroom from the existing kitchen sink window that once looked outside. And by nestling a new bed up into the new end gable a desk can share its floor area below.

Second, the use of built-ins — shelving, storage, cabinetry — allows books, music, sitting, bathroom activities and office functions to be simultaneously accommodated around the new space's perimeter.

But the results of intensive designing are always subject to financial realities. "We contemplated having a wine cellar built in and I desperately wanted there to be a root cellar with a glass trap door that you could see into from the landing into the new room," Parker explains. "Alice and Turner designed it, but we ran out of money."

Even after so much musing, planning and vetting, Parker further recounts a classic panic attack just prior to commencing construction: "Pauline loved the project until several trees in the back yard were cut down and a pit was dug. At that point she woke up at 4 in the morning, proclaimed that the project was off, threatened to 'fire' me too and move back to France."

"Alice jumped in with a computer simulation that showed that there would be enough light in the new addition and that the garden would not be ruined," he explains. "Pauline allowed us all to come back on the job."



In the 1980s the entire second story was opened up by previous owners to be a sea of open space and a celebratory postmodern event in which the bath (center) is featured as an architectonic piece with a ridge skylight flooding light while the bed is tucked around one corner (at right) and closets fully laminate the other side (left).

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The final result made everyone bask in the glow of satisfying expectations on a budget with creative zest and practical insight. But no project with so much input can be built with finite funding (is there any other kind?) without a great builder — and one was found.

Enter Dana and Darren Peterson, of Peterson Brothers — a third-generation business located in the neighborhood that specializes in renovations to existing homes. "I've built two of Turner Brooks, projects and on both he finessed the delicate balance of the owner's needs, the budget and specific building challenges — melding these elements, he ended up with results that revealed his potent hand and simple, unmistakable aesthetic," explains Darren Peterson. "On this project he really managed to marry a perfect proportion of the owners' eccentricities with the needs of an old New Haven building. I thoroughly enjoyed being a part of it."

One consequence of the collaboration was the creation of a mutual admiration society: "Dana and Darren were great," Parker gushes. "Fantastic work and craftsmanship. Aside from being patient with us, everybody in the neighborhood with knowledge of these things commented on the quality of the work, which was well above and beyond the norm. Darren was the philosopher and Dana regaled Pauline with stories about his chickens [a fascination of Pauline's]. What more can I say?"

Sometimes places and people combine to create a remarkable reality none of the participants could have predicted — but a result that could not have happened without each contributor. A great symphonic performance, a great civic document like the Constitution — or, more personal and precious, the creation of a home.

At the heart is what all good design synthesizes: humanity, aesthetics and craft. Homes can be all of that, and more — a place where family happens. ❖