

Art Full Home

An intrepid artist couple transform an historic Madison home

BY DUO DICKINSON



With its skin removed, the brick and timbering create a sculptural event within the carefully rendered interior surfaces of this dining area.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY DeCARLO



The artists pose with the tools of their respective trades, before the domestic focus of their craftsmanship.

Mabel Chittenden) had lived in the house until both passed away in their 90s within six months of each other. A complicated estate disposition meant there would be an auction of the family home.

For those readers with short memories, 1992 was perhaps the bleakest year in residential real estate until our present funk. On top of the national zeitgeist, the Chittenden home was an *Addams Family* caricature of overgrown shrubbery and untended decay. But it was even worse than that. "The pipes were not drained, then winter came and every elbow burst, and then the house sat, empty, for three years," recalls Cathi.

Dominic's sister Bettie saw the opportunity of a wreck for sale during the last wrecked real estate market. Based solely on Bettie's long-distance recommendation (and a small inheritance Dominic had received) the artists gulped and made a blind bid — and soon learned they were the "winning" bidder.

Dominic recounts: "We found out we had bought a house, sight unseen, on the road driving back to Connecticut. When we got there it was so overgrown Cathi exclaimed, 'There's a house in there?' We really weren't sure we wanted to be here."

Timing, as they say, is everything. Cathi and Dominic had walked the walk of hip artists, but contemplating a life as restaurant waitstaff or cab drivers to earn enough to pay for their addiction to sculpture, they realized that they did not want that to live that value system. Both loved art in their lives, but it did not connect with a work ethic that seems more Yankee than *artiste*. "I am a finisher, and it was time to stop living a life disconnected to the rest of the world," explains Dominic.



daughter of Colorado, before impetuously jumping into high-performance fine arts education. Both were sculptors, wore black, were planning to move together to some hip art colony in the Southwest and were, well, cool.

But a call from Dominic's sister Bettie Krygier changed their lives forever. Bettie and her husband Billy had moved to a classic 19th century colonial home on the Post Road in Madison in 1985. The home next door was another classic: the John Newton Chittenden House, built in 1854. The Chittendens were original settlers of Madison in 1639, and direct descendants (brother and sister John and

In the beginning they camped out in the least collapsed portion of the house — a rear wing added in the late 19th century. First, a new heating system was needed, and removing the old oversized (not to mention exploded) pipes of the old system freed up their thinking about what the interior might be. Similarly, removing the biomass of overgrown shrubs-cum-trees and strangling vines revealed the exterior of the home.

Simultaneously the sinking and rotting interior columns set to mud in the basement had to be replaced with steel columns set to new concrete "pillows"

What was a bedroom has become a central common bath, with materials and fixtures precisely located and detailed by the Boscos.



The master bedroom was the last piece to be renovated in the 'new' (only 120 years old) wing. A fabulous antique headboard is bathed in light from a (truly) new skylight.

ATHOME

When Cathi Hay and Dominic Bosco were young art students at Chicago's Art Institute in 1992, they had no idea how quickly their lives would be changed by a house in Connecticut. True, Dominic was from East Haven — but he had abandoned the Nutmeg State for Hampshire College in Massachusetts and then migrated to the City of Broad Shoulders. Cathi was a

Each surface in this parlor has been treated with thought, care and an artful eye — all wonderfully complemented by furnishings that also reflect their artistic owners.



— after the floors were jacked up to level. Once stability and heat were achieved in the first year, all the interior surfaces and non-bearing non-original walls were removed, leaving a skeleton.

Thus began over a decade of incremental work by the couple — who, in an inversion of the stereotypical divorce-by-construction scenario, decided to wed a year into the project, with Cathi officially becoming a Bosco. Although they designed every aspect of the renovation and did virtually all the actual work save roofing, cabinet-making and electrical work, they did have to pay back their mortgage and for the materials they needed to create a home out of a wreck.

Reality has a way of changing perspectives. The concrete value of making money through hard work — and generating demand for that work by honing skills — inspired the Boscos to leave what they had dedicated their education to — sculpture. Dominic knew he had to create — and he knew he could paint — so he spent years working as a house painter, building a skill base that art schools ignore.

Despite all his dedication to professional proficiency, that alone was not enough for this job. Beyond a workmanlike job, Dominic saw the potential to truly transform rooms with color, texture and pattern. What was called “faux painting” in the 1980s has evolved into architectural painting and his firm, Gold Star Painting, has had more than a decade’s track record of exquisite and subtle burnishing of interiors that has few equals in the region.

Cathi’s new path was similarly rigorous, but no less inspired. She saw pieces of life around her and wanted to capture them. So drawings in pencil, pen and ink came out of her hand — first portraits of children, families and pets, then adding school mascots. All the while the fine-arts sensibility was present — she regularly exhibits botanic and still-life renderings of extreme care and skill. She has her own business, C&D Studios — that is a platform for her full-focus art life.

You might say that Dominic was a “painter” and Cathi an “illustrator” — until you saw their work, and especially their home. Its subtle contrasts, complements and surprises bespeak both expertise and artistic insight in equal measure.

Throughout the course of a 17-year slog that advanced painstakingly from first floor to bathrooms to second floor, the



The kitchen was renovated with furniture level cabinetry and the surface treatments that display Dominic Bosco’s extraordinary skills.

An attic became a studio for Cathi Hay. Skylights and open space make a low-ceilinged loft feel light and bright



house was always “getting finished.” Once the rooms had finished surfaces and the house had a tight, weather-resistant envelope, the Boscós circled back, room by room, to add trim, color, millwork, floor refinishing (yes, they did trust an outside source for that work, too) to create a home with an interior that is as glowing as any fine arts focal point. Detail after detail was layered upon every space — window treatments, built-ins, quirky antiques and finally examples of Cathi’s extraordinary art endow almost every room.

The kitchen lagged the rest of the house’s surfacing. Cathi’s lofted attic studio followed that, and the last piece — the master suite — was finally and completely rebuilt on the second floor of the 100-plus-year-old rear addition.

“I work day and night to get the best result at what I do,” says Dominic. And the execution in this home — glowingly smooth trim, delicately textured surfaces and flawlessly glazed walls — provide undeniable evidence he is indeed a master painter. His work serves to frame Cathi’s drawings that catch the eye and draw you deeper and deeper into their deliciously precise patterns and yet have their own seemingly effortless glow.

The home is not some worshipful history thesis. Strategic removal of the existing skin revealed the 1854 brickwork that lay hidden. Walls are pulled back to reveal timbering, a bedroom became a bath, and the master bedroom has skylights and a sculpted glass steam shower enclosure. The many (many) subtle tones and textures of the interior are timeless in their appeal. Although technically realized through the world of decoration, one senses that this home is obviously a life focus of two artists channeling their high art training into a reality that is neither affectedly pretentious nor predictably by-the-rules.

At long last, Dominic and Cathi are “done.” Their in-town antique has been truly reborn, its landscaping manicured and its exterior (complete with a gilt bit of trim here and there) complete. However, the restless heart of an artist still beats inside them both.

“This was a labor of love,” sighs Cathi with relief. *However*: “The next one will be its opposite,” she adds — “a new modernist jewel in the woods.” ❖

New bookcases and sheer flowing curtains make a small living area into a retreat.

