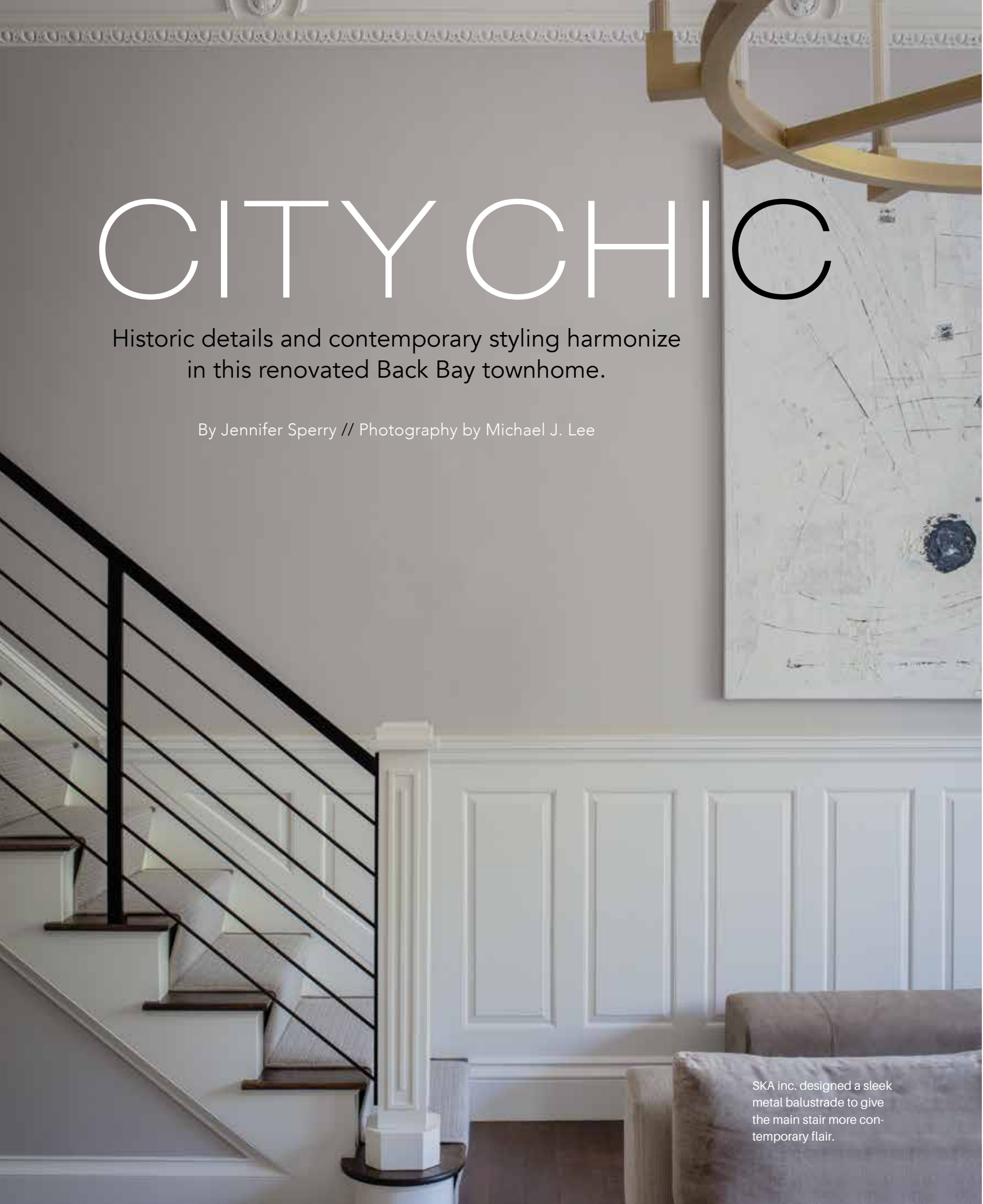


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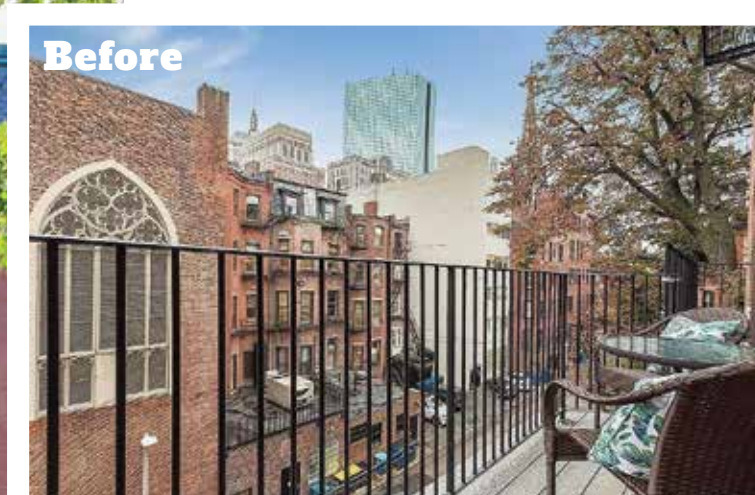
Historic details and contemporary styling harmonize in this renovated Back Bay townhome.

By Jennifer Sperry // Photography by Michael J. Lee



SKA inc. designed a sleek metal balustrade to give the main stair more contemporary flair.





“LIKE A DOCTOR OR LAWYER, YOUR TEAM IS A GROUP OF PROFESSIONALS YOU HIRE TO LOOK OUT FOR YOUR BEST INTERESTS.”

- BOB ERNST

**B**oston’s Back Bay is an iconic neighborhood, bordered to the north by the Charles and to the east by the Common—and its townhouses are coveted residences. But for construction companies, the urban environment poses a variety of challenges. Parking, delivering building materials by either elevator or crane, satisfying a maze of building codes, and protecting neighboring units from utility shutoffs and noise are all required.

For remodeler and custom builder FBN Construction, these not-so-small matters are all in a day’s work. “If it was easy, anybody could do it,” says FBN President Bob Ernst, who estimates that about 70 percent of the company’s residential work is in the city. “We have a team of people who know how to navigate the cumbersome pathways

that are part of urban settings,” he explains.

When Cambridge-based SKA inc. was tasked with overhauling a 19th-century townhouse on Commonwealth Avenue, principal Sam Kachmar recommended FBN not just for its craftsmanship and building expertise but also for its logistical skills. The property boasted beautiful period details—copper-lined windows, egg-and-dart moldings, ceiling medallions, and coal-powered fireplaces—but its materials were dated, its storage limited, and its flow between main living spaces awkward.

“Our focus was to maintain the general layout but to increase the overall functionality,” says Kachmar of the extensive renovation. “The clients wanted to respect the apartment’s historic integrity while freshening it with their more contemporary leanings.”

FBN Construction executed this built-in banquette in the dining area off the kitchen. Storage drawers underneath are just one example of the architect’s quest to infuse the townhome with extra storage.





**Before**  
Leveling out the apartment's first story paved the way for a new, expansive kitchen with Jewett Farms cabinetry.

On the first story, a hallway connects the formal living room at one end and an open-concept kitchen and dining room at the other. The existing hallway had two strikes: it wasn't straight (it hitched around an interior room, interrupting sightlines) and was also elevated. "When you entered the home, you immediately stepped up two stairs into the hallway leading to the kitchen. From the kitchen, you stepped down a couple stairs into the sunken dining room," explains Kachmar.

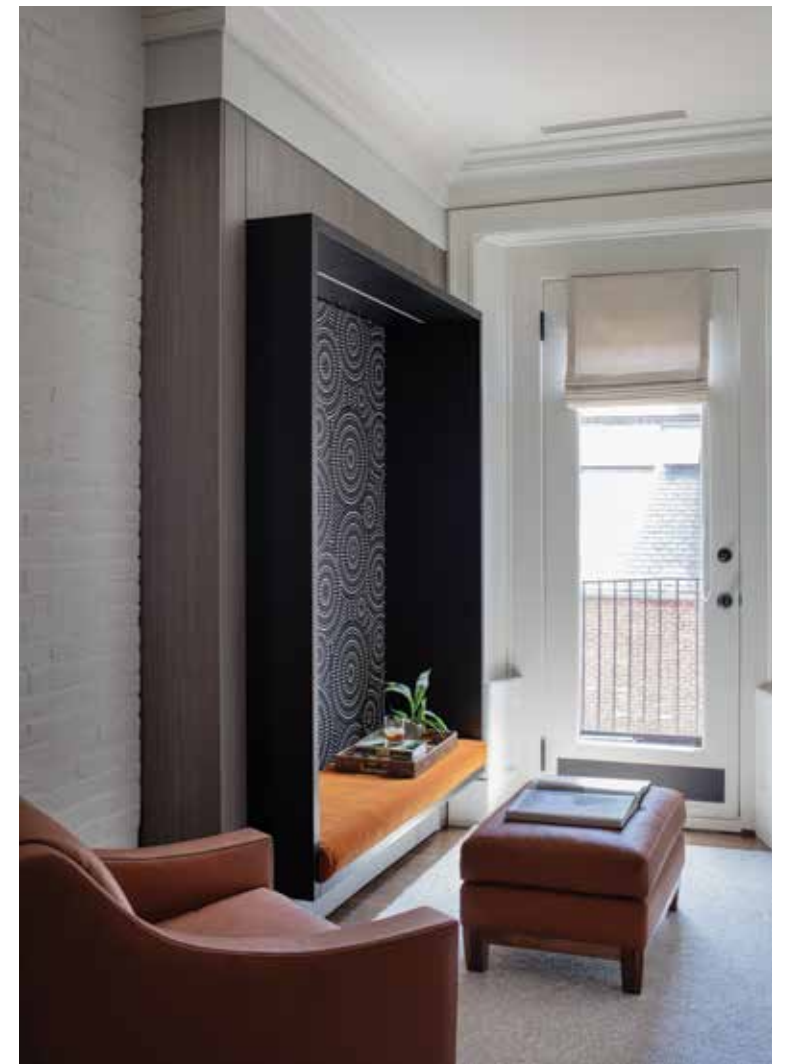
Straightening this hallway and removing the raised level were the project's largest design interventions. "It was an unusual arrangement," agrees Ernst. "Making it all one level took a lot of creative problem solving in terms of framing. We had to make sure our work didn't affect the ceiling of the unit below. It was definitely one of our more difficult tasks."

Another construction challenge was the home's decorative plaster crown moldings. "From a budget point of view, it's always better to maintain historical pieces than to reconstruct them," explains FBN Vice President Chris Magliozzi. "We restored what we could, but ultimately had to reproduce many new pieces using casts." About 80 percent of the ornamental crown molding in the formal living room is new. "It was an undertaking, but it was worth it," he adds.

The renovation modernized each room, including the kitchen, outfitted with new cabinetry by Jewett Farms. Some cabinets are white, but most are finished in a rich blue, a custom blend of two Benjamin Moore colors: "Newburyport Blue" and "Hale Navy." Illuminated glassed upper cabinets keep the tall storage banks from feeling overly imposing. Sleek quartz cascades over the island's exposed edge and unlacquered brass fixtures nod to period elegance.



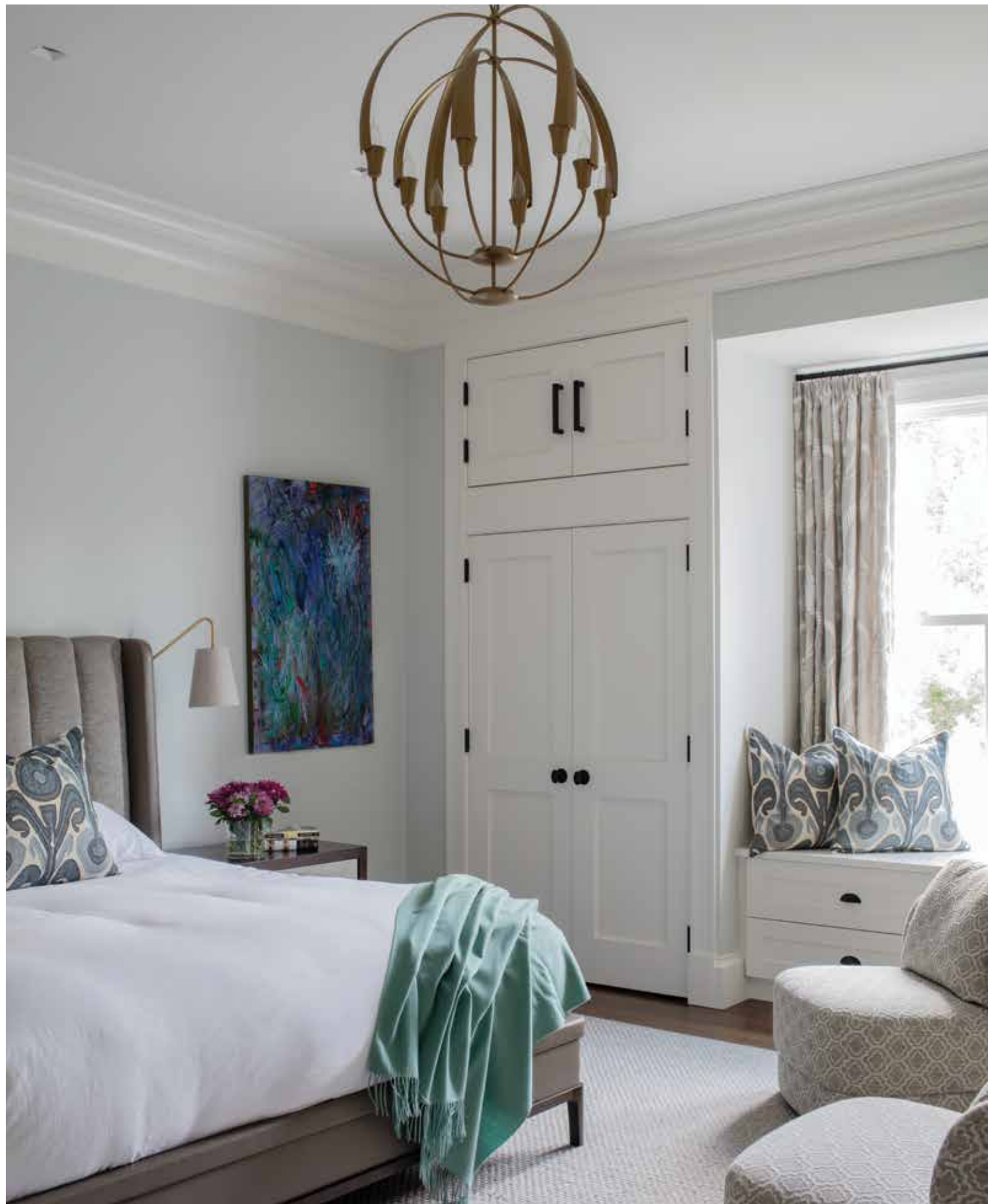
Above: A glass wall lets additional light into the second-story guest bedroom. Right: This built-in bench folds down into a Murphy bed, transitioning the office into a guest bedroom as needed. Below: Various hues of blue mingle harmoniously in the powder room.



At the hallway's opposite end, in the formal living room, new 15-foot-high built-ins flank an updated fireplace surround. "We had to figure out a way for the clients to reach their books, so we came up with the library ladder concept and they embraced the idea," says Kachmar. All three fireplaces in the apartment—living room, dining room, and master bedroom—were updated by FBN with gas inserts.

Functionality improvements continued on the second story, where the master bedroom gained more storage via built-in dressers and a drawer-filled window seat. SKA stole space from an adjoining room to give the modest master bath eight more inches. "Thoughtful details like the floating vanity and a glassed, curb-free shower, in addition to those extra inches, make the bathroom feel lighter and more spacious," says the architect.

With windows only on two ends, the apartment's second story lacked natural light in its interior rooms. In response, SKA outfitted both a guest bedroom and office with glassed walls by Italian manufacturer Albed. The glazing lets in light; velvet curtains close when privacy is needed.



Left: New built-ins in the master bedroom enhance its charm and functionality. Above: Traditional wood mixes with modern metal in the stairwell. Below: Subtle changes that made a big difference in the master bath are a curb-free shower, recessed mirror, and floating vanity.



The original main stair suffered from a dated balustrade and a dark upper landing. In its place, FBN executed a much more contemporary iteration from SKA's design in collaboration with metalworker Bartek Konieczny. Other practical improvements included new windows to match the existing, in accordance with the Back Bay Historical Commission, and a new copper roof. Fully incorporated smart technology by System 7 controls the thermostats, shades, lights, and video cameras.

Completed in less than a year, the updated residence is a testament to collaboration, with each vendor's expertise contributing to a cohesive whole. FBN's construction prowess and SKA's design drawings made the gut renovation flow smoothly in tricky urban circumstances.

"Like a doctor or lawyer, your team is a group of professionals you hire to look out for your best interests," asserts Ernst. "Our transparent, open-book pricing is particularly helpful on a renovation like this, when you're not always sure what lies behind the walls."

To Ernst, a 30-year construction veteran, working in partnership with your contractor, and not against, is a game-changer. "We show how each modification, whether required or desired, impacts the budget, and we release weekly updates. This transparency creates a level of trust," he summarizes. "As a result, our work is more efficient, and the clients' dream home materializes on time and on budget." **NEL**

**Architecture:** SKA inc.  
**Contractor:** FBN Construction  
**Kitchen Cabinetry:** Jewett Farms  
**Interior Furnishings:** Nancy Serafini Interior Design  
**Custom Metalwork:** Bartek Konieczny  
**Custom Carpentry:** Herrick & White  
**Smart Technology:** System 7 Technology Design