

# Secrets of the trade

A builder, an architect and  
an interior designer open  
up their homes

Richard Levey,  
of RBL Architects,  
pictured in his  
kitchen with  
David Cohen, of  
Hamden Design  
and Construction  
and Heidi Cheris of  
Details Design  
Consultants.



**D**ID YOU EVER  
WONDER WHAT  
builders, architects and interior  
designers do when they work on  
their own homes? *Newton Magazine*  
was invited to have a sneak peek into  
the private homes of three professionals  
to discover their secrets.

## Home

Each of the three professionals—one an architect, another a builder and a third a designer—have collaborated on a number of projects. In addition, in this case, each had remodeled their own homes.

Not surprisingly, each reported experiencing many of the challenges and some of the frustrations that their clients inevitably go through from time to time. One noted the unsettling nature of rebuilding a home and suggested moving out, if possible, when a major renovation is to take place. Of course, each had the advantage of their own training and experience and used their backgrounds for their own benefit as their projects continued.

All three live in Newton in three very different types of homes. David Cohen, president of Hampden Design and Construction, lives in a Colonial, Richard Levey, owner of RBL Architects, lives in a mid-century modern, and Heidi Chervis, co-owner of Details Design Consultants of Newton, owns a

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Tudor. Levey took a few years to renovate his own home, and, according to Cohen, the finished product is beautiful.

Levey has made extensive renovations to his home, and has won praise with comments that it is "sleek and functional and very chic."

Chervis has also brought her design flair into the decor of her own home and is recognized for her innovative arrangements.

## ■ ■ The Projects

### ARCHITECT

WHEN RICHARD LEVEY FIRST moved into his Newton house, the deck was in such bad condition that a sign instructed people not to use it. Now he has turned the mid-century modern house into a contemporary abode that serves to raise his family and host parties.

“I looked at it and thought this could be a great house,” Levey said.

An architect built the house in 1958. The back of it rests on a hill and its large windows overlook his Oak Hill neighborhood. “It’s an unusual house for Newton,” Levey said, “a little slice of California in Newton.”


It is a two-story split-level house. The kitchen, dining room and a child’s bedroom are on the first



Richard Levey's kitchen and stairway pictured below.



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floor, a master bedroom, and the living room on the second. "It's like an urban loft set in suburbia," Levey said.

The house has great passive solar energy, he said. In the winter-time, the low sun shines through the windows and heats the house. In the summertime, when the sun is higher, the sun's rays are blocked and the house is cooler.

Before he fixed the house, Levey said it looked shabby and the rooms were chopped up. He removed a wall from the kitchen, opening it up into the living room that now features an island and a raised bar seating area. The dining room also features a bar made from a cast iron cart found in a mill. The dining area and table are large to accommodate a good-sized dinner party.

Levey also added a unique wall, which curves from the entry way towards the back of the house. This allows a visitor to enjoy the view from the home's rear windows upon arrival and gives Levey some much needed



Richard Levey's mid-century home after renovation.

storage space behind the wall. Levey said he used his architectural experience to incorporate as much storage as possible into his house—a challenge as there is neither a basement nor an attic.

In his son's first floor bedroom is a modern black leather chair. Much of the furniture found throughout the house is contemporary, black and leather, even Calvin the cat. Architects always like the color black, Levey contends.

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David Cohen's  
award-winning  
kitchen.

The second floor features one large, main room that is designated as a living room, a library and a child's play area. All the floors and walls were refinished. Levey also completely redesigned both of the second floor bathrooms. One of the only objects remaining from the original house is the entranceway chandelier. The open interior of the second floor gives way to the stunning outdoor views.

After working on his own house, Levey was more sensitive to the difficulties of living in a space while it is being renovated and recommends people find a different place to live during such times. Levey had to postpone his marriage for a year because the renovations and original wedding plan conflicted. The only regret, he said, is not preparing more space for his then unborn son to play.

#### **BUILDER/DESIGNER**

DAVID COHEN HAD WORKED on many houses throughout his career, but working on his own was a new challenge. During this experience, an old saying about "cobbler's children having no shoes" seemed apt, he said. Working on his own house took longer than expected because the homes of his clients took precedent.

"The process for building my house is the same as any other house," Cohen said. "Some elements of the house were not conducive to the way I want to live. What makes sense? Proportions. Renovating a house is similar to the birth of a child. It takes nine months for a fetus to develop and months and months for a house to evolve."

Cohen built an addition to the back of the house. It now features a larger kitchen with an



informal dining area; a new family room, an enlarged master bedroom and an additional bedroom. As a result, his three children all have separate rooms.

His kitchen won first place in the 2007 *Boston Magazine's* Dream Kitchen Contest, using his experience to build a kitchen that not only looked good, but was also functional. A large marble island cuts the room in half. One side is designated for cooking, complete with a prep sink, while the other side features a bar and mini fridge for social gatherings. The kitchen also features garage style cabinets located above the granite counters, which are able to hide and organize larger appliances.

“We enjoy having people over and entertaining,” Cohen said. “We wanted the house to flow well and have people be together.”

The house also features other innovations that Cohen incorporated. For example, the washer and dryer are located in a master bed-

room closet; so dirty clothes do not have to be brought up and down stairs. The family room is separated from the living room by glass doors so that the kids are separate while allowing the adults to see them.

By doing work on his own house, Cohen was acutely aware of the stress that his clients go through. Not having a working kitchen or a bathroom for several months can be aggravating, especially after a long day of work, he explained.

“I knew what the process of working on a house from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. was like, but I found out what it was like to live in a house from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m.” he said.

Cohen noted that he attended art and architecture courses in college and high school and has incorporated that knowledge into his work. Once, he recalled, he noticed that the directions on a blueprint showed a mantle out of proportion to the rest of the room. He used his

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## Home

architectural knowledge to make adjustments.

His building and design company works closely with both the architect and the client, and he makes an effort an effort to monitor the budget throughout the process to ensure it stays within the client's means.

## INTERIOR DESIGNING

"MALE FRIENDS COME OVER and say your husband is a lucky guy. But little do they know that it was my idea to convert the [formal] living room into a billiards room," said Heidi Chervis.

A 1912 pool table located in the former formal living room is one of the highlights of the home that the interior designer decorated herself. The table was her father's and features ivory and ebony accents that match ones found on chairs in the room. She added that the billiards room had been a formal living room, but the family never really used it.

"I am much happier now," Chervis said. "It is a usable and fun room."

Every room in the house should be useful, she stressed. In addition to the pool table, the former living room now features a hand-blown glass lamp, a few chairs tucked away in the corners, and her own paintings. The room also features a 1940's slot machine and an old-time player piano, complete with show tunes as well as the music of Simon and Garfunkle and other classics.

The house, located in Newton, is a 1920's brick Tudor. Noting that Tudors are often dark on the inside, she used colors and furniture to liven it up, making it more "whimsical." The foyer features a big red clock and an octagon-shaped rug and tuft for sitting. The tuft is a colorful piece reminiscent of Russian church towers and was custom-made by Mackenzie/Childs, a tableware and home furnishings company. Next to it is an antique radio console.

"I mix old with new. I don't think everything has to be from the same era," Chervis said.

She described the dining room as

being "bold red" with "punches" of green featured in the carpet and chairs to give it more color. The kitchen was recently remodeled to achieve a warmer, more Mediterranean feel, compared to the rest of the house. It features a center island, accented tiles, granite counter tops and handmade mosaics made from various types of stone inserted into the back splash.

"I do not want every room to have the same impact," Chervis said.

The family room is located in an addition to the back of the house. The outer brick wall of the Tudor house was incorporated into the family room. Another wall is wood, which gives them different textures. Upstairs, she gives the kids freedom to do what they want with their rooms, as long as they keep them neat. The master bathroom exemplifies her attention to detail by featuring her custom designed cabinet door knobs.

Chervis has co-owned Details Design Consultants with her partner, Rosita Fine, since 2000. One of her rules in designing a house, she said, is to pick one object a homeowner loves and use it as a palate for the rest of the house. ■

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