Houzz Tour: Modern Home, Full of Character

Two historic townhouses become a colorful, uncluttered family abode

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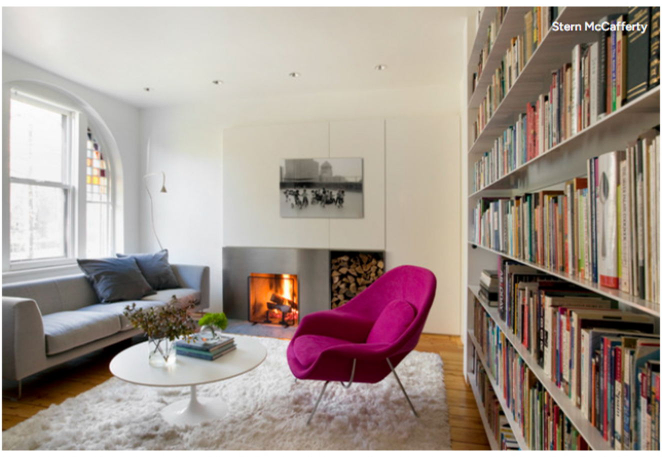
Houzz ContributorMore

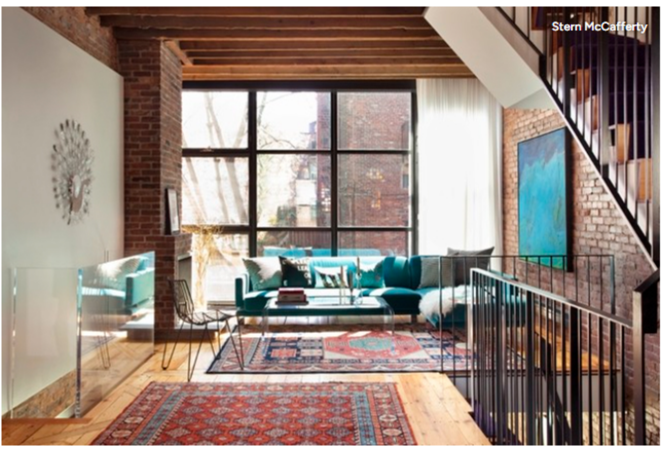
This 19th-century home in Boston's historic South End combines two townhouses, one of which had already undergone a significant remodel. The clients originally lived in one of the townhouses, and when the second one was vacated, they purchased it and contacted David Stern and Diane McCafferty's Boston-based firm to blend the two homes into one.

The clients have three children, so building a livable and open family home was important. Bold colors and lively pieces were chosen to create a space that represented their character. "The clients wanted spaces where their friends could feel at home, where their kids' activities weren't shut away behind doors, and where a person could find a quiet moment," says architect David Stern. "They weren't afraid to take risks."



Custom metal bookshelves line the wall of the second floor family room. A hidden wall of white storage cabinets with concealed hardware is just visible on the back wall.

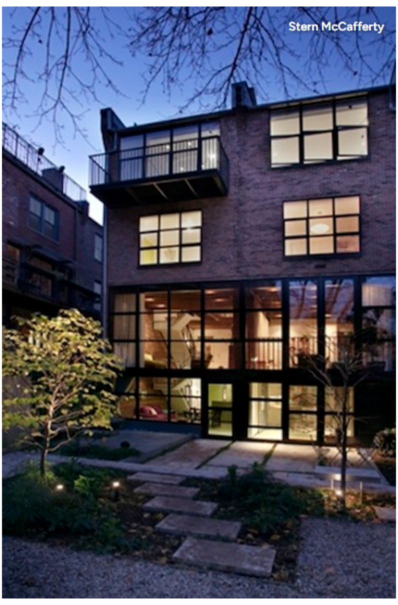
While many of the pieces of furniture in the home were custom designed, McCafferty and Stern also incorporated pieces the family owned and loved — although many of these were reupholstered to fit with the new space. By combining these products with a few new classic mid-century items, Stern and McCafferty were able to accomplish a look that's as eclectic and bold as its residents.



This main living space is one of Stern's favorite rooms. "It has such a strong character, and a feeling of authenticity without being overbearing," he says. "I like the light and openness and intensity." Stern set steel beams where the walls intersect with the ceilings and the floors, creating spaces where the home's original brick could remain visible.

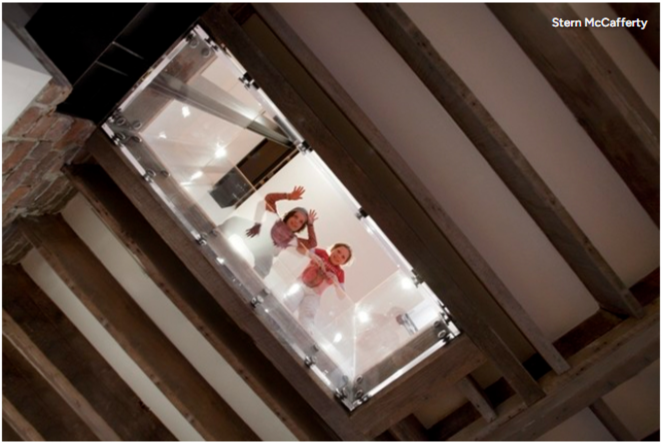
Stern McCafferty

Stern created an open layout with views of the outdoors and to all the other floors of the house. Open spaces and light were essential to the clients; they wanted a home that felt simple, beautiful, and comfortable. "Our work tends to be very modern, with simple lines and uncomplicated detailing," says Stern. This approach is apparent throughout the rooms of this residence.



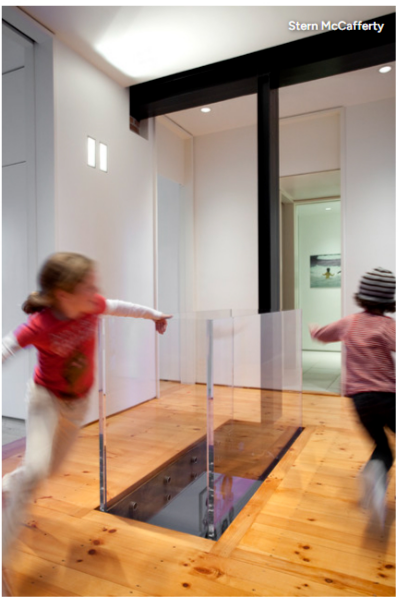
The house is made up of two adjacent townhouses — visible here, from the back of the structure — originally designed in a Romanesque revival style. Although the back of this house is relatively contemporary, the facade in the front was preserved in its original classic style.

After the second townhouse was purchased, Stern gutted it and rebuilt it to match the original. A craft room was added to the ground level, a living room and dining room were added to the first, an extra bedroom and family room were added to the second, and the master suite was placed on the top floor.

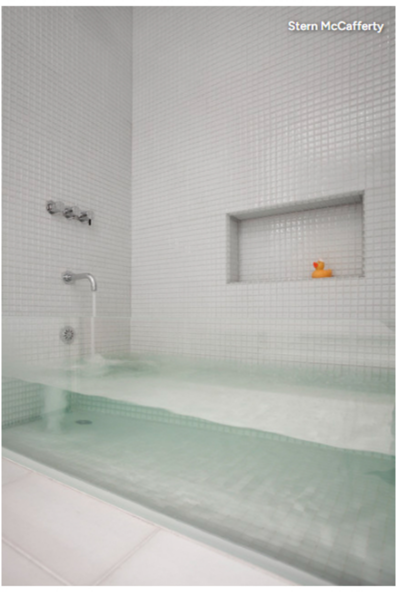


Multiple areas of the home have cut-outs to allow for light, emphasize height, and let the original bits of the structure show through. "We developed a concept early on that the juncture between the two townhouses would be celebrated," says Stern. "We wanted to embrace one of the primary conditions of the site and express it through the architecture."

A similar cut-out can be seen in the main living area of the house, where the view goes all the way down to the garden level.

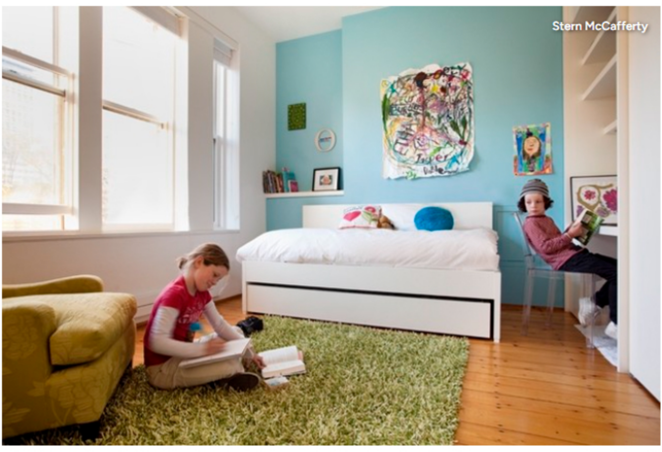


The contrast of materials and the meeting of the two homes is clear when viewing the cut-out from the top, where the original flooring meets the clear acrylic railings.



This amazing bathtub (which we originally fell in love with in this ideabook) was installed in the children's bathroom. Its beautiful and simple structure was achieved by wedging a thick glass sheet between two tile walls.

The idea came from the clients, who were inspired by a photo that they had saved from an old magazine. "We love detail, so there are always special moments in our projects," says Stern. "And in this house, the glass-front bathtub was one of those moments."

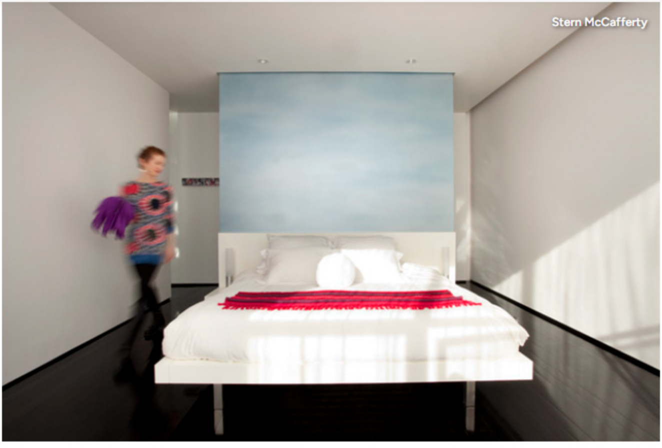


All of the children's rooms have a similar open, modern and bright feel to the rest of the house, but are still very kid-friendly. Each child's room has one bold wall of color, built-in desks and shelves, and a trundle bed custom designed by McCafferty.

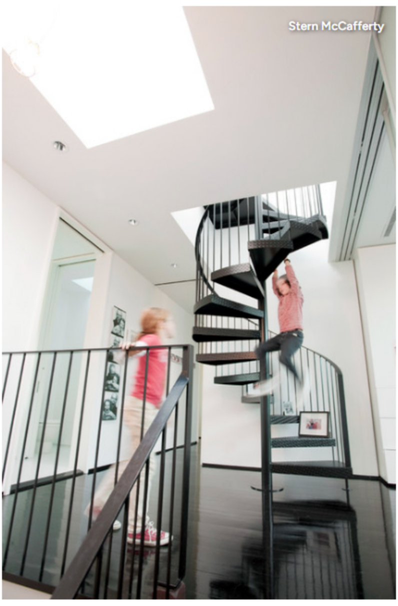
Stern McCafferty

"The client wanted to maintain the spirit of the two original homes, but they also had a penchant for using deeply saturated color," says Stern. "This ended up being a very important part of the project."

In the dining room, a bold yellow wall sets off structured dining chairs and a simple but strong table. The table, designed by McCafferty, can convert into a large console.

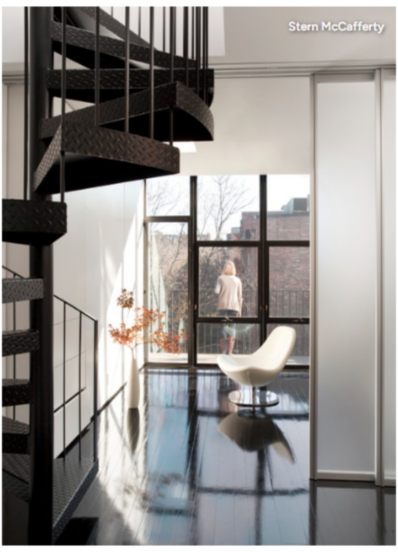

Stern McCafferty

The master suite is the definition of relaxation. The clients wanted it to be empty of any distractions or fuss, and McCafferty and Stern put together a room that's truly empty — but in the best possible way. The painted wood floors were given a glossy sheen that reflects the soothing blue wall behind the bed, which McCafferty designed.

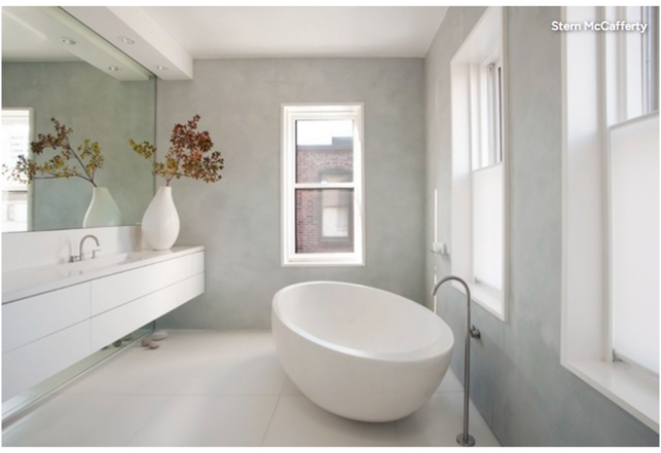

Stern McCafferty

The home's roof is accessible via a metal spiral staircase adjacent to the master suite. The glossy lacquered floor extends throughout the suite area, reflecting light around the already open space.

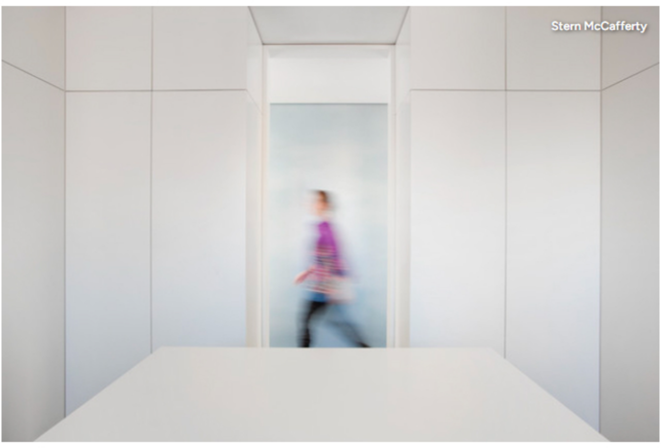
When asked how he would describe this house, Stern says, "It's alive, organic, colorful, and uncluttered."


Stern McCafferty

The numerous windows, presence of natural light, and exaggerated height of the house can make it feel removed from its urban location.


Stern McCafferty

The master bath is another one of Stern's favorite rooms. The textured gray walls, pristine bath tub, and white counter and floor all combine to create a soothing room. The large white tiles on the floor are almost seamless, visually extending the space.


Stern McCafferty

The master dressing room is like a work of minimalist art. The couple wanted a dressing room that felt pristine and uncluttered, like the master bedroom. Each of these white panels is a touch-spring door that opens to closet space and shelving.

Overall, this home is a modern home, but it's also full of character. The footprint and style of the original structure is still highly visible throughout the space, as is the clients' unique and bold sense of style. "In the end, every project is unique," says Stern. "This was influenced as much by our predilections as by the site and the needs and personalities of the owner."