

# Rewriting History

Site Specific revitalizes a turn-of-the-twentieth-century home for a young family.

BY KAITLYN MURRAY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NAT REA



**WHEN A YOUNG FAMILY FIRST CLOSED ON THIS STUNNING, TURN-OF-THE-**twentieth-century property in 2018, they knew it would require a few tasteful, carefully executed upgrades to turn it into a home.

Fortunately for them, this was Site Specific's specialty, on both accounts.

Phase one of the project kicked off that summer. With the new owners having yet to move in, Construction Manager Chris Behlke and his team were able to perform all of the 'messier' bits of the renovation upfront, including gutting the kitchen, constructing a mudroom and installing all new heating, electric, flooring and paint. Site Specific's ability to self-perform work was one of the key factors in delivering this project on time. In addition to managing subconsultants, the company uses their own labor to push the schedule when needed and provide a seamless design and construction experience for homeowners. "We have woodworkers, electricians and more on staff so we are able to help our clients problem-solve early on and work through any challenges that may arise," says Behlke.

One such challenge: the original structure's unusual construction materials. Made up of terracotta block, the exterior walls were essentially immovable. "With terracotta block, you cannot run wires through it. It just exists," Behlke explains.

And so, when it came to revamping the kitchen, which is predominantly enclosed by exterior walls, Site Specific utilized existing power locations wherever possible.

"When we needed to add locations, we 'trenched' the plaster to create new pathways for new boxes," Behlke says. "We then fully overlaid the existing walls with quarter-inch drywall, fully glued and fastened to avoid potential cracks at the trenches in the future, as well as provided a flatter, more uniform substrate to accept paint and tile."

While the counter-to-ceiling tile backsplash wasn't applied until the following summer, Site Specific did work closely with frequent collaborator, Kelly Taylor of Kelly Taylor Interior Design, in that first phase to make the kitchen just as arresting as it was functional. They opened the space up so it could flow freely into the dining



"The one area in the house that we didn't do major renovation to is this entryway because we were hoping to preserve 100 percent of the original architecture. A grand staircase like this is uncommon for homes in Providence. But it did have a few broken balusters, so we had custom matches turned by Custom Woodturning in Tiverton. It wasn't something where you could just buy something off the shelf — they make exact period detail matches to anything you need. Whenever it doesn't make sense for us to make something inhouse, we turn to talent that's in the state, because there's a real institution of people who can make great things here."

area and they incorporated seamless accents like a custom steel island for a focal point, marble countertops, stainless steel appliances and a modern sink. Then, taking advantage of their on-site millwork shop, Site Specific also created the blue-gray cabinetry from scratch. It perfectly complemented the tower in the nearby mudroom, which had been transformed from an empty, underutilized space to a welcoming-yet-chic spot for sneakers, coats and umbrellas.

Another large undertaking occurred in the adjacent living area. Though already outfitted with two desirable window seats on either side of the room, a pair of unsightly built-in radiators blocked each. Site Specific not only tore them out for aesthetic purposes (eventually replacing the benches and appointing complementary surrounding wainscoting and paneling), but they also substituted the home's outdated gas and steam system.

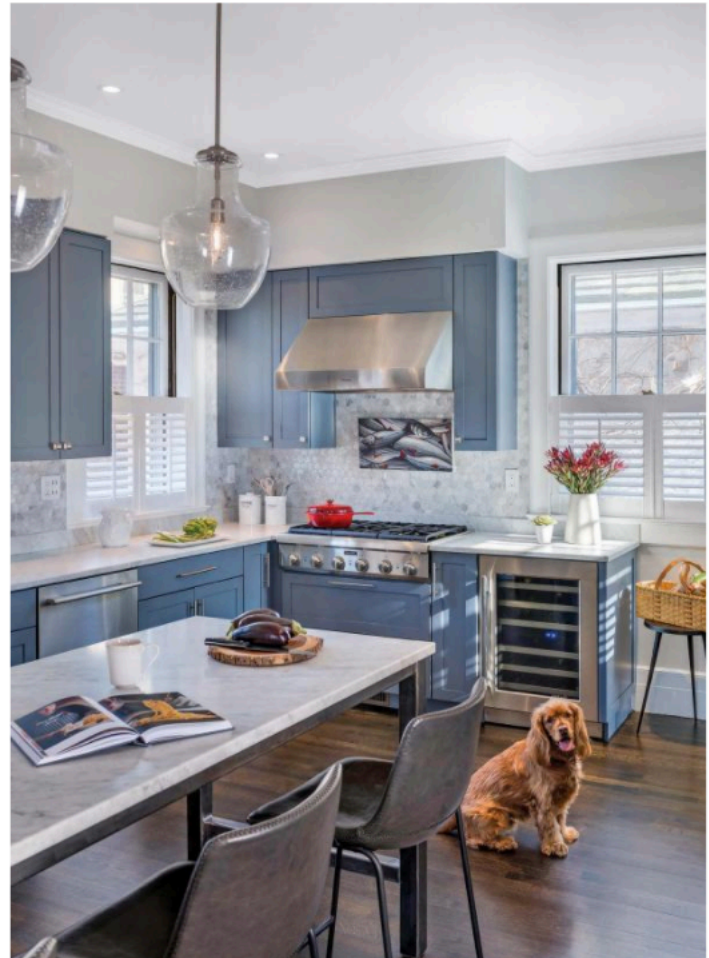
"We provided a new heat pump system to the entire home with no damage or penetrations anywhere," says Behlke. "And we were able to conceal 100 percent of the system so it wasn't an eyesore."

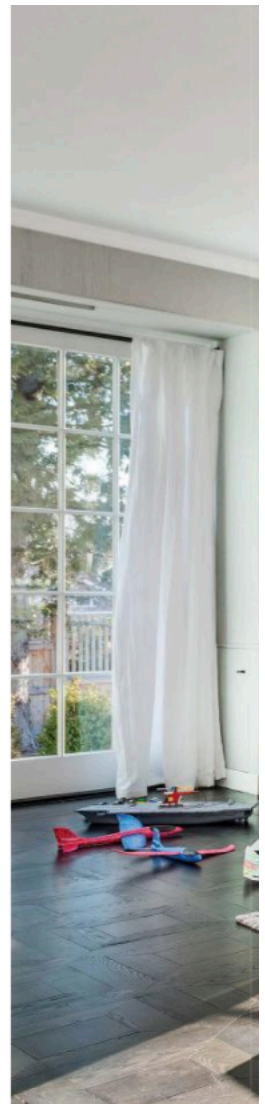
Just in time for the new owners to settle into and enjoy their cozy city digs as the outside temperatures dropped. But once the warmer months rolled back in, it was back to business for phase two of the construction project.

"This time around, it was an occupied renovation, which we really pride ourselves on," Behlke says. "We are able to complete these projects in a timely manner while providing the least disruption possible."

Quite a feat when you consider how much the team accomplished in just a few short months. Perhaps the most impressive is the master suite, which is positioned just above the home's grand entrance.

"We had this really critical zone, the entryway, that we could not touch because we wanted to preserve the staircase — it's original to the home," Behlke explains. "Still, we had to get all of the systems to this second-floor room, which had never been a bathroom before. A lot of property owners in the area will say, 'I'd love to do this, but...' and that's where we will say, 'Well, we can make it happen.' We do that by working really closely with the designer and the client to figure out how we can best do what needs to be





done with minimum impact on their life.”

Drawing upon their extensive experience with renovating historic homes, Site Specific was able to get creative with how they installed the new fixtures upstairs without making an opening in the ceiling or disturbing the stairway below. They fed new plumbing and electrical to the second floor through vertical ‘chases’ concealed within closets on the first floor, then worked with Taylor and her team at KTID to locate electrical in the cabinetry rather than tackling those tricky exterior terracotta walls. They also trusted in their industry relationships.

“We have trusted plumbing and heating contractors that we work with exclusively for homes like this. We lean on them for their expertise and they rely on us to provide great opportunities to facilitate neat, clean work,” says Behlke.

The quality of the materials used was equally as important when fashioning the new bathroom. And so, they asked their tile setter to incorporate a newer product that they knew would be ideal for this bathroom renovation. Then they doubled down on the commitment to quality with additional training.

“We sent myself and three other employees to a systems training course so we could be educated in how these products are appropriately waterproofed, how all of their systems integrate together and so on,” Behlke says. “Becoming educated in these systems allows us to manage it better and to self-perform better. We’re passionate about this; we want to do it right and we want the best systems, so if that means getting additional training, we’ll do it.”

The result? Every young working parents’ dream bathroom, complete with an elegant his and hers floating vanity, modern vessel sinks, flawless cabinetry by Jutras Woodworking, a gorgeous curbless shower and a free-standing tub.

In the attached master bedroom, Site Specific crafted a large walk-in closet as well as the surrounding panel mouldings. To match the existing detail of the wall, they extracted an original piece, copied it, brought it to their Providence location and adjusted the

settings on their machinery to recreate it. Site Specific boasts an affinity for millwork, able to recreate most mouldings — crown, casing, baseboard, basecap, picture rail, you name it — all inhouse. Many millwork details made and installed by Site Specific trickle down to the first floor and can be admired throughout, from the panel mouldings to the wainscoting to the trim.

“We made a calculated decision when it came to the crown moulding. We planned to replace some of it — it’s all plaster — but we didn’t make anything look too pristine because it would have jumped out against something that looks older,” Behlke explains. “We wanted to preserve that historic feel.”

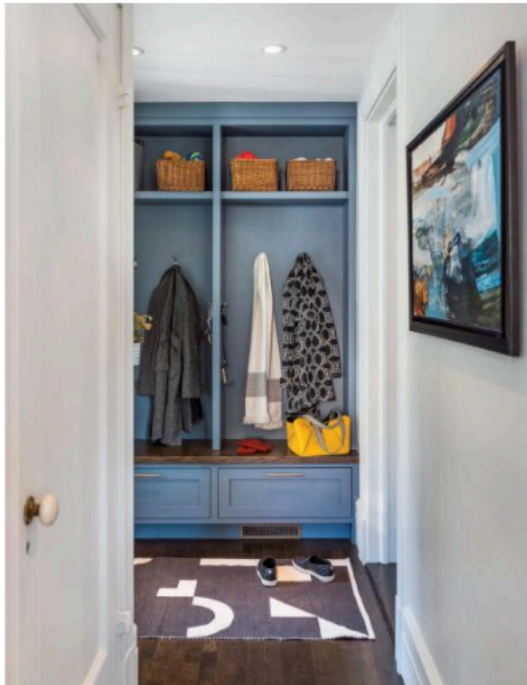
But still, some areas were in need of updating.

“The playroom was another huge challenge. It has a really unusual window system. All of the glass was yellowed, discolored, blown seals — it was an early form of insulated glass and it had completely blown,” Behlke says. “We looked into the feasibility of replacing all of the windows in total, but the construction of this room, having at some point been more of a porch or a three-season room, didn’t allow us to replace any of the windows without tearing the entire thing off the house.”

And so — after making sure the project was 100 percent lead safe — they collaborated with one of their glass contractors to remove all the glass, brought in a local metal contractor to do repairs on the existing steel and then had all brand-new glass installed. It made for a beautiful, light and airy space for the kids, and parents, to enjoy.

“Another strength is our relationships with local designers and other industry experts. We’re able to make a quick phone call to make these jobs seamless and accomplish everything that everybody wants, which is always a goal,” says Behlke.

In the end, the homeowners certainly got everything they wanted; a historically rich home with all the trimmings needed for comfortable, modern day living for years to come. ♦



## ABOUT SITE SPECIFIC

Founded in 2004 on a "whatever it takes" work ethic, Site Specific is a collaborative effort led by principals Peter Crump and Matt Dempsey. Site Specific seamlessly merges the architecture, design and construction processes while cultivating a client-focused approach. They collaborate with industry experts and clients alike to create beautiful, functional spaces — delivered on time and on budget.

### SITE SPECIFIC

141 Gano St., Providence, 401-632-4400, [sitespecificllc.com](http://sitespecificllc.com)

### PROJECT CREDITS:

**Site Specific:** Design-builder, kitchen cabinetry, trim and historic moulding

**Kelly Taylor Interior Design:** Interiors

**Jutras Woodworking Inc.:** Bathroom, mudroom and laundry cabinetry

**Whitmore Boogaerts, WB Sculpture Studio:** Custom kitchen island

**Bill Lizotte Architectural Glass & Aluminum, Inc.:** Shower enclosure

**Nat Rea Photography:** Project photography

**Rue Sakayama Photography:** Photograph of Peter Crump and Matt Dempsey