



LIVING ROOM  
BEFORE

# UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS

A whole-house gut-renovation involving four floors, a three-hour time difference, two sisters – and one very special ritual.

BY KRIS FRIESWICK



## GET THE LOOK

Todd Dundon bought his mid-century-modern daybed (it's also pictured on the cover) in Los Angeles. Today, Anne Barrett sends clients to Reside in Cambridge for vintage pieces from that era. You can also find a similar reproduction piece at Urban Outfitters.



## LOW

New daybed, \$480 at Urban Outfitters, 361 Newbury Street, Boston, 617-236-0088, and other locations, urbanoutfitters.com

## HIGH

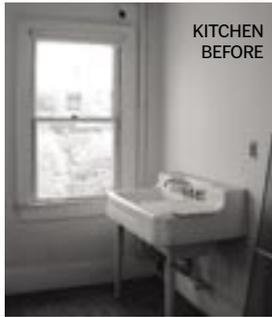
Vintage teak-and-rattan daybed, \$1,800 at Reside, 266 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, 617-547-2929, resideinc.com



**UPSTAIRS**

**LIVING LARGE** Architects Anne Barrett and Todd Dundon mix new kitchen cabinets from IKEA with a vintage mid-century couch with their circa 1895 original fireplace. Art, too, has a prominent place: There are paintings by Anne's sister, Hannah Barrett (seen in mirror), and Laurel Sparks, Hannah's girlfriend, on the walls. Laurel's work is currently on view at the MFA.





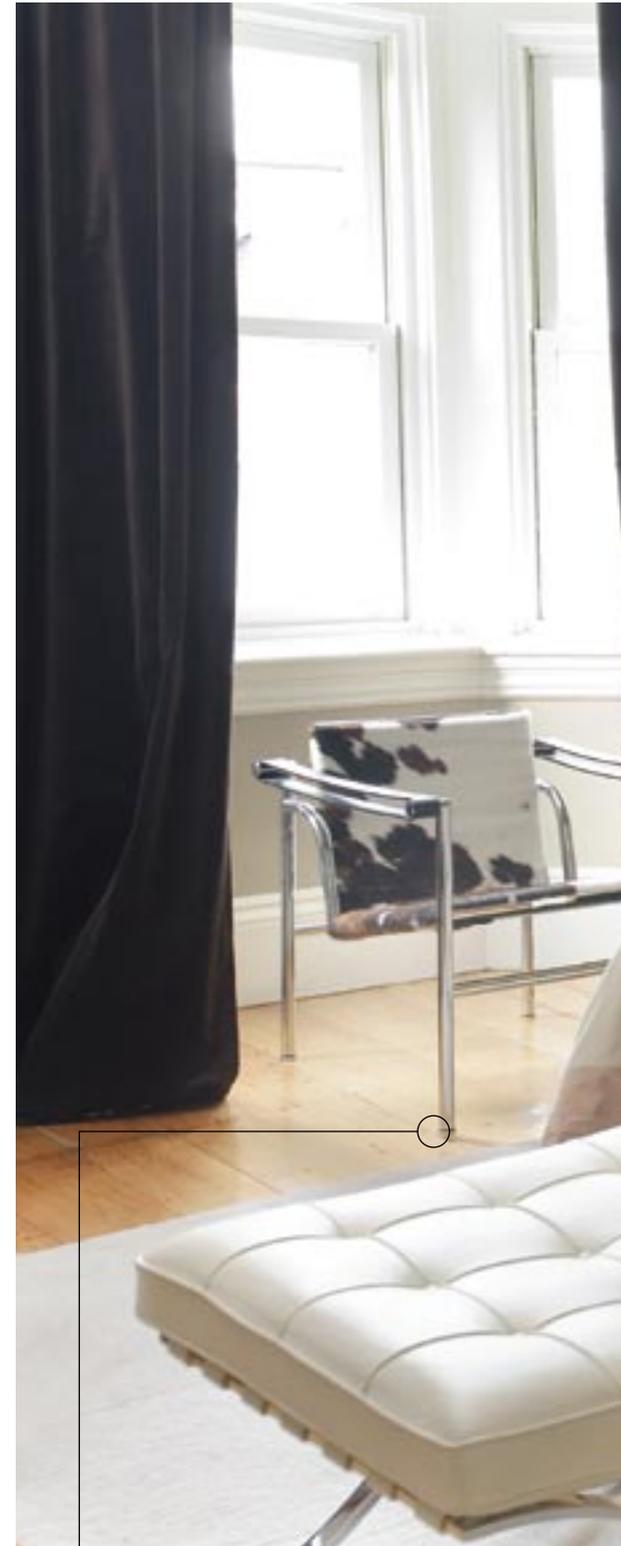
KITCHEN  
BEFORE



BATHROOM  
BEFORE



**THE DECOR'S IN THE DETAILS** The black graphics on the bathroom walls in Anne and Todd's unit are removable acrylic decals the couple bought at the ICA gift shop. The cabinets were custom-built, but the heating unit under the tile floor is from Home Depot. Top: The bright kitchen.



**GET THE LOOK**

Anne and Todd bought their licensed reproduction of the Le Corbusier sling chair at Design Within Reach. But there are also plenty of nonlicensed reproductions available.



**HIGH**

Sling chair in cowhide, \$1,680 at Design Within Reach Studio, 519 Tremont Street, Boston, 617-451-7801, and 1030 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, 617-576-3690, dwr.com

**AWAY FROM IT ALL** On the top floor, a framed flea-market find hangs above the bed. The wood floors are original, but the windows are new, efficient models.

## UPSTAIRS



**LOW**  
Sling chair in cowhide, \$675  
at Bauhaus 2 Your House,  
[bauhaus2yourhouse.com](http://bauhaus2yourhouse.com)

**THE STORY OF ANNE AND HANNAH BARRETT** – sisters who not only purchased and gut-renovated a circa 1895 single-family town house in Jamaica Plain, but then happily moved into it together with their significant others – may make some readers skeptical. Anne, 39, is an architect. Hannah, 41, is an artist and art professor. At first glance, the sisters, who grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania, seem to occupy opposite ends of the style spectrum. Anne is a modernist. Hannah’s style is “vintage eclectic,” she says. How did they find a way to agree on the hundreds of big and small decisions that must be made when renovating a home? Just how ugly did it get? Surely, the drywall must be riddled with telltale fist-sized patches.

Actually, there are no such holes. The couples peacefully share the four-story end-unit town house on quaint Everett Street. They executed a massive project together with a minimum of drama and conflict. They are like an “after” family

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**CLEAR ADVANTAGES** The living room on the main floor of Hannah Barrett and Laurel Sparks's condo mixes IKEA bookshelves and kitchen cabinets with a 3OE Design table and Philippe Starck-designed chairs. The painting is by a New York-based friend of the couple's, Carrie Moyer.



**DOWNSTAIRS**

**GET THE LOOK**

Hannah Barrett and Laurel Sparks use test-tube-shaped bulbs in these 20-inch-long modern, scaled-down pendant lamps. A shorter IKEA version has a similarly sleek, bare look.



**HIGH**

Glass-shaded Illuminating Experiences Meltemi pendant lamp, \$290 at Illuminations by Barre Electric, Glen Road Plaza, West Lebanon, New Hampshire, 603-298-8036, barrelectric.com

**LOW**

Plastic-shaded IKEA Pabo pendant lamp, \$14.99 at IKEA, 1 Ikea Way, Stoughton, 781-344-4532, ikea.com



on an episode of *Dr. Phil*. For instance, guess how they decided which couple got which two-story unit?

“We flipped a coin,” says Anne, who, with her husband, Todd Dundon, also an architect, got the top unit. “We did it before we even started demolition.”

“It just seemed to be the fairest way to do it,” says Hannah, who lives with her girlfriend, Laurel Sparks, 35, also an artist and art professor, in the bottom two floors. Weird.

IN 2003, WHEN THEIR SCHEME WAS HATCHED, THE couples lived on opposite coasts; Hannah and Laurel in



**FAMILY PORTRAIT** Bottom row, from left: Hannah Barrett and Laurel Sparks; top row, from left: Anne Barrett and Todd Dundon (shown in their apartment).

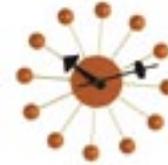


KITCHEN BEFORE



**GET THE LOOK**

For their kitchen clock, Hannah and Laurel bought a knockoff version of an icon of mid-century design – one that’s still being produced. (Their orange clock isn’t made anymore, but the red one is close.)



**HIGH**  
Reproduction Nelson Ball Clock, \$315 at Design Within Reach



**LOW**  
Knockoff ball clock, \$32 at Bowl & Board, 1354 Beacon Street, Brookline, 617-566-4726, and other locations, [bowlandboard.com](http://bowlandboard.com)



**THE LONG VIEW** From the new kitchen (above), a view into the living room, where another of Laurel’s paintings hangs over the couch. Laurel found the fabric for the curtains online.

Jamaica Plain and Anne and Todd in Los Angeles, where she worked as a residential architect “doing \$20 million McMansions,” Anne says, and Todd worked on commercial properties for the Gensler architectural firm (he has transferred to the company’s Boston office). Both of the Barretts had attended Wellesley College, and both love New England. So, partly fueled by Anne’s desire to start her own architecture firm and partly by the sisters’ desire, Anne says, to “be close to each other so we could hang out,” the two couples decided to buy a home together.

Nervous about house hunting in expensive Boston in a peak market, they embarked on a disheartening search in places as far away as Providence, where one agent showed them a home next to a prison halfway house. (Hannah remembers the agent assuring them, “You can’t ask for better neighbors. They’re constantly monitored.”) They finally found their place in Jamaica Plain in February 2004. It is one of three attached buildings making up a brick mini-block that might have been airdropped in from Back Bay. The house had been in the same family since 1938 and had been sliced and diced and used as multiple small units – a warren of hallways, doors, and dark rooms. With its four floors that could become two spacious two-bedroom, two-bath units, both couples thought it was perfect, and, at \$570,000, it was in → PAGE 72

## Upstairs, Downstairs

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 56



**NEW KID** The town house is in a row of similar-looking brick Victorians (though only one – the sisters’ – has an orange front door).

their price range; Hannah and Laurel budgeted an additional \$100,000 for the renovations, and Anne and Todd \$110,000. They bought the house as a single-family with a jointly held loan but then registered with the city as a condominium so they could refinance their units with separate loans. “We pretty much did everything we advise

our clients not to do,” says Anne, who has since opened a residential architecture and furniture design firm, 30E Design, with behind-the-scenes help from Todd, who is now 39. “We did business with family; we moved in with family; we did business with friends; we went with the lowest bidder. We did at least the top five things you

should never do.” Then the fun began.

Anne and Todd started drawing up plans on the plane ride back to Los Angeles the day after signing the papers to buy the house. Hannah had no problems leaving all of the architectural decisions to her younger sister. “Every place Anne’s been, she’s always created this incredible atmosphere, and I wanted that,” Hannah says. “And we had all our architectural fees waived.”

The perils of such a project must have been obvious to those closest to them. The Barrett parents “were terrified,” Hannah says. About what? The financial ramifications or that Anne and Hannah would harm each other during the process? “All of the above,” Hannah says.

“They could not understand,” Anne says. “When they saw the building inside, they couldn’t visualize it, and they were like, ‘Oh, my God. What are you doing?’”

THE DESIGN STAGE TOOK PLACE UNDER deep cover. Anne and Todd both had jobs in Los Angeles and weren’t ready to tell their bosses they were moving across the country in six months; yet they had a house to redesign on the side. “It was really stressful for us,” says Anne. “From February to July, we were working on these drawings in secret. Hannah and Laurel would call me at work with questions about stuff that needed to be answered, and I couldn’t really discuss it at work – and there was a three-hour time difference.”

Neither of the architects in the family had any area contacts in the construction business, so they hired a friend of Hannah’s as contractor. Since they were locals, Hannah and Laurel were to oversee the project. Then, against Anne’s strong advice, Hannah and Laurel moved into the building before construction began but after they sold their previous home, hoping just to move from floor to floor. That was in April. They moved back out of the place in August. Their first contractor quit to return to a project she had thought was on long-term delay. The next contractors, recommended by a sculptor friend, were less than detail-oriented, but at least they were on the job. The project pressed forward.

The entire house had to be rewired and replumbed. There were no heating ducts, and the top two floors, not occupied since the ’70s, still had the building’s original match-lit water heaters. Because the structure had been filled with many small rooms, walls had to be knocked down to create the new, open floor plans. Because it was a single-family house, walls had to be built to create the separate condos. The main entrance now leads to two doors – one entering the lower apartment, the other leading upstairs. Old coal-fired heating units had to be removed from inside each of the two fireplaces that were located on every floor. The exterior walls got new plaster, and

the hardwood floors were refinished. New bathrooms – one of the four baths has a heated floor – were added. Windows were cut into outside walls. The backyard had to be regraded and landscaped.

Anne and Todd left LA in late October. This was the hardest part for Hannah. “They had told their work when they were quitting and when they were driving across country,” says Hannah. “Knowing that Todd and Anne were coming to a shell in October, that was really stressful.”

UNABLE TO MOVE INTO THE HOUSE when they arrived, Anne and Todd spent a few weeks couch-surfing with a series of friends. They finally moved in before Thanksgiving, at which point the windows in an upstairs bedroom – which, while they were still in California, the first contractor had sworn did not need to be replaced – literally fell out of their casings. It took weeks and weeks for the new windows to arrive. January is not an ideal time to wait for new windows.

All in all, the renovation project was a success. It took less than a year to go from rabbit warren to fully renovated and updated home. They brought the project in within about 10 percent of their budget. And, most impressive of all, the sisters still love and enjoy each other.

“We’ve had some stressful conversations,” says Anne, “but there weren’t lots of them.”

“We put all our money into this,” says Hannah. “We didn’t want to lose our shirts. Plus, we all have to live together.”

“We still take vacations together,” says Anne.

“We miss each other if we go too many days without seeing each other,” adds Laurel. “It’s really true.”

Laurel pauses, then turns to Anne. “Did you tell her about the gong?”

“I didn’t tell her about the gong.”

“You have to tell her about the gong.”

“It’s a house secret,” says Anne. Then all eyes move to the cocktail bar in the corner of Anne and Todd’s dining area. There’s a gong hanging there from a silk rope.

“It’s the cocktail gong,” says Hannah, as Anne taps lightly on the brass disk, which is about a foot in a diameter. A deep and resonant tone, capable of penetrating even the sturdy new walls, sounds.

Clearly, the Barretts are an advanced species of sisters: loving, respectful, and highly cooperative. But they also share a common bond more powerful than blood, shared financial burdens, and shared walls – a bond that can hold a family together through even the worst of times. They share a deep and abiding commitment to the cocktail hour.

“We hear that gong all the way down in the basement,” Hannah says with a grin. ■