

THE WINDING STAIRCASE, here shown rising to the third floor, features a curvaceous handrail that starts on the garden level as tree roots growing out of the basement floor. The handrail becomes lighter and more delicate as it ascends. One of two libraries in the home (LEFT), the children's library includes a window seat with a view of the front walk. The tufted leather chair recalls an Edwardian original in miniature.

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Photography by  
PETER VANDERWARKER

Architecture by HICKOX WILLIAMS

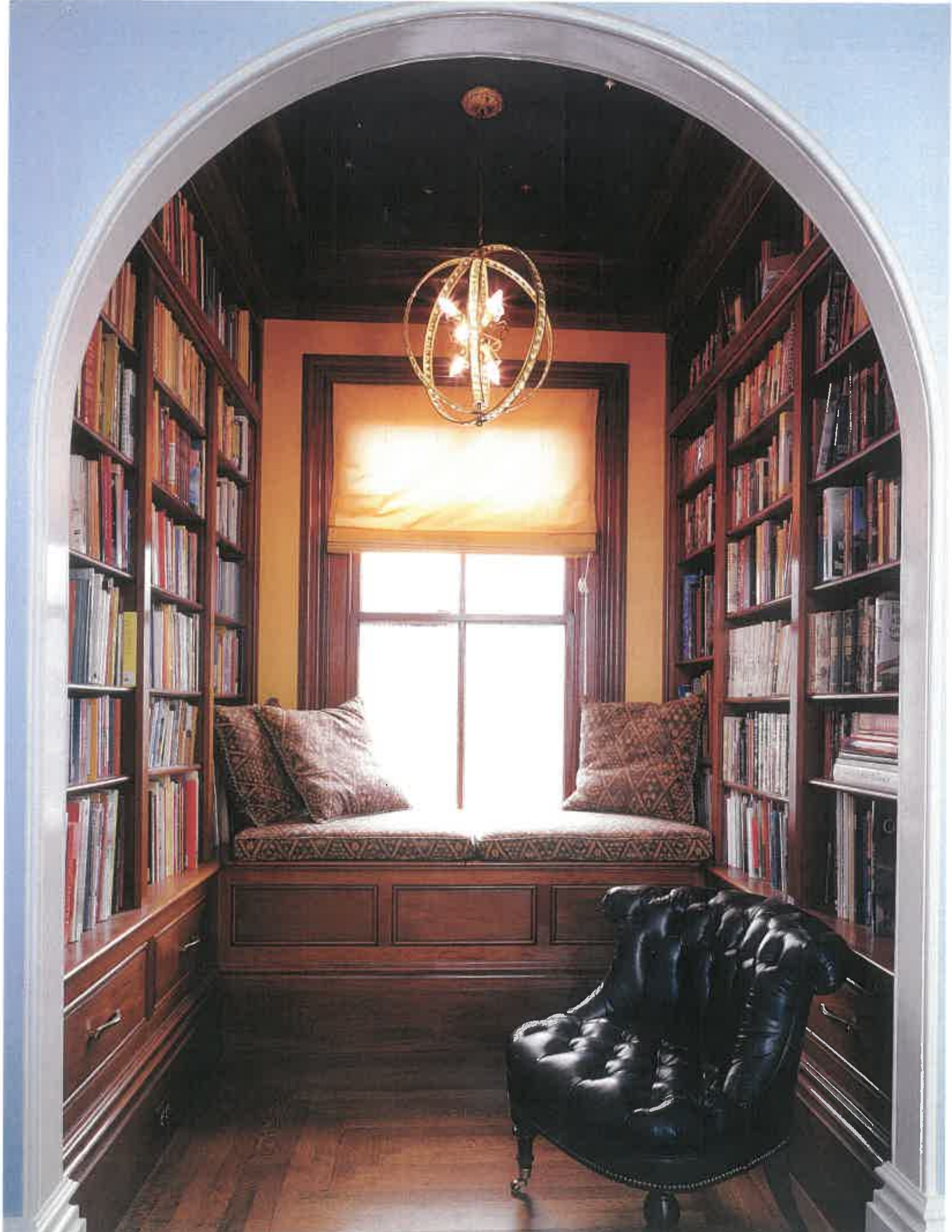
Interior Design by  
ANDRA BIRKERTS

Construction by F.H. PERRY

house

THE SECOND LIFE OF A SECOND EMPIRE HOME

redux





**THE LIBRARY (OPPOSITE PAGE) offers maximum shelf space plus one row of drawers. Looking across the hall and into the living room, the house's strong color sensibility is on display. The daybed in the living room (ABOVE) is easily moved and accessible from all sides, an example of the homeowners' penchant for furniture that is lighthearted and convertible with not a hint of conventionality. The facade (LEFT) displays such classic Second Empire elements as eaves with decorative brackets, and a mansard roof.**

**F**ROM THE STREET, THIS 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FRAME HOUSE PRESENTS the dignified façade of the Second Empire style that's typical in many established New England neighborhoods. Closer inspection, however, reveals anything but a staid Victorian.

Take the sinuous mahogany handrail that crowns the four-story staircase: at its lowest level, the carved wood becomes a tree trunk whose roots seem to grow out of the basement floor. The upward reaching tree-as-handhold seems an apt metaphor for this extraordinary home, owned by a professor and an author.

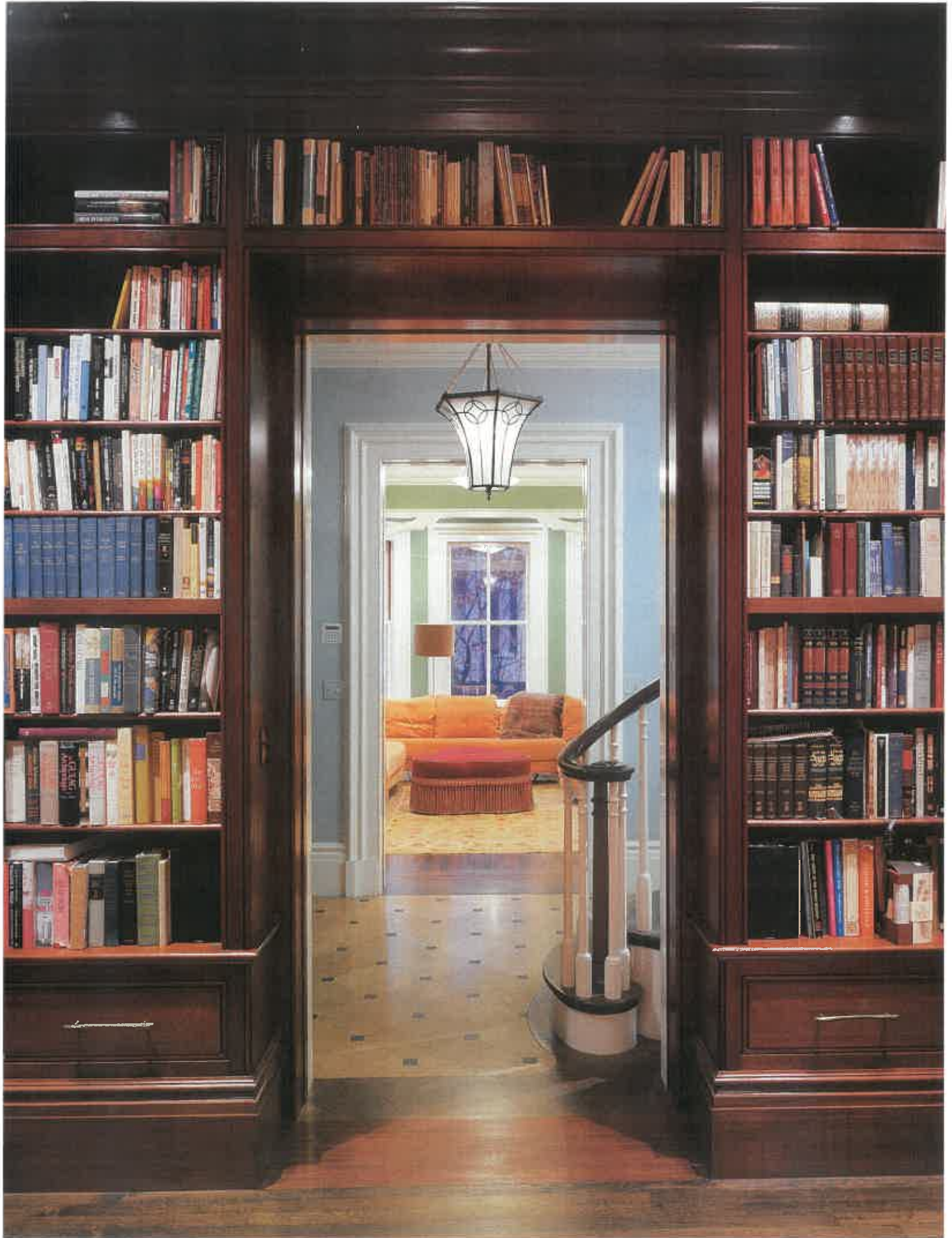
"It's one way that creative homeowners express themselves," says Brad Gardner, who, as production supervisor for the contractor, F. H. Perry Builder of Hopkinton, oversaw the six-year ("and counting!") renovation of the 1865 house. "Guests don't see that tree root in the basement, but the family does when they come in from the garage. It's a private pleasure. And the handrail itself," he continues, "decreases in size as you go up."

"Part of the overall design sensibility is that the mass, detailing, and

color all get lighter and more delicate as you go upwards in the house," says architect Patrick Hickox of the Boston firm Hickox Williams. "This was not so much a restoration project as a re-imagining of what a Second Empire house could be."

The Second Empire style, popular between 1855 and 1890 and named after the Second Empire of Napoleon III, is expressed residentially as an imposing two- or three-story symmetrical block distinguished by a mansard roof. These homeowners liked the historic design and the large, high-ceilinged first-floor rooms it provided, but they also wanted bedrooms for four young children, workspace for two creative adults with wildly different schedules, and an open play of space and light between levels and rooms. Most of all, they wanted a lighthearted house that was full of surprises.

"The interior was gutted," Hickox explains, adding that earlier alterations had long ago removed all traces of the original. "We added a kitchen wing, created flow, brought the outside in and the inside out, and oriented the entire space towards openness and light."







**PERIOD DETAILS RECUR THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE: HEFTY MILLWORK IN A COMPOUND-CURVED PROFILE, FLUTED COLUMNS, DECORATIVE BRACKETS, AND BUILT-IN CABINETRY.**

The result is a house whose structure follows a traditional layout, but whose details are anything but conventional. The layout features a living room, library and dining room flanking a central hall. The first-floor hallway continues the straight line of the newly created front walk and culminates in the kitchen at the back of the house. Overlooking the kitchen is a balcony that terminates the second-story hallway; the children's rooms are located here. The third floor has parents' workrooms and master bedroom

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**THE DINING ROOM ceiling (LEFT) is decorated with symbolic interlocking wedding rings. Built-in niches provide display for a collection of art glass. Pieces of the sectional seating, here grouped together in the living room alcove (ABOVE) are often separated and moved to other parts of the room. The black fireplace, with its Victorian firebox, is original to the house.**

organized around a delicate, colonnaded pavilion, the culmination of the now-slender stair rail and the enclosure for a large skylight.

Unusual details abound. Besides forming the beginning of the stair rail, trees grow elsewhere in the house: a pair of fluted columns supporting the lofty kitchen ceiling sprout electrical branches bearing a harvest of soft little lights. The ceiling itself billows upward, intersected with Gothic arches and lit via cleverly hidden lights and windows high above. A breakfast nook between the kitchen addition and the original house is perfectly round, an oculus in the ceiling. On the second floor, the oculus is a lit port-hole in the floor of the children's balcony. The children's closets all have hidden staircases that lead up to the next level. And, just as the tree motif recurs throughout the house, so do period details. The hefty millwork has the same compound-curved profile throughout the house, though mold-



PART OF THE OVERALL DESIGN SENSIBILITY IS THAT MASS, DETAILING AND COLOR ALL GET LIGHTER AND MORE DELICATE AS YOU GO UPWARDS IN THE HOUSE.

ings get lighter and smaller in scale on succeeding levels.

“Working on this house has been amazing,” says F. H. Perry’s Allison Iantosca, a vice president at the construction firm founded by her father, Finlay Perry, over 30 years ago. “They constantly adjusted their ideas and tried things out; we had to learn to be adaptable, to trust their process.”

“Communication was everything,” interior designer Andra Birkerts confirms. “The homeowners’ method was to be very involved in every single decision.” Adds Hickox: “They wanted an unconventional house that honors the ceremonies of everyday life.”

That said, not every element of the house was reborn to a second life. A massive copper beech anchors one corner of the front yard; a child’s swing dangling from an elephantine lower branch. “The family loves this tree,” Hickox says. “When we began work, they made it clear that we had to protect it. It represents the spirit of the house.” 🌳

PORTHOLES PROVIDE LIGHT and surprising views into other rooms. The oculus on the breakfast room ceiling (ABOVE, RIGHT) is also a way for children to peek down onto adult heads from the second floor hall (ABOVE, LEFT). The kitchen (RIGHT) inhabits an addition at the back of the house.

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#### DESIGN DECISIONS

### *Ascending Palette*

Interior designer Andra Birkerts’ color plan is the counterpart to architect Patrick Hickox’s architecture: Both lighten and grow more delicate as they ascend upwards. In this way, they echo nature. First floor colors are saturated and strong, with earth-toned red walls in the library, nature-inspired green in the living room and a complex, lavender-infused blue in the dining room. The colors become paler on the second story, particularly in the hallways. An intentional departure is that each of the children’s rooms features a different primary color. The top floor is dazzling and pale to the point of being almost completely white. “It’s meant to be kind of heavenly,” Birkerts smiles. “The best way to introduce color,” she continues, “is to make it feel like it’s an intrinsic part of the house, instead of an overlay.”

Third-floor hall:  
Butter Pecan,  
OC-89.

Second-floor  
hall:  
Greenmount  
Silk, HC-3.

Kitchen ceiling:  
Light Blue,  
2066.

Breakfast area  
ceiling:  
Sweet Orange,  
2017.

\*All paint colors,  
Benjamin Moore

