

Graphic wallpaper suggestive of historic Art Nouveau style sets off the study's original fireplace.

Victorian Vitality

Sensitive renovation turns a vintage Brooklyn brownstone into a bright and up-to-the-minute home.

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WHAT WE LOVE ABOUT THIS HOUSE:

- Reconfiguring the interior walls of this 1880s brownstone opened up the dark, central spaces to sunlight.
- Clean-line furnishings layered over historic architecture make the home livable for today.
- The homeowner personalized the space with artwork reflecting her African-American heritage.

How do you make a 19th-century house work for 21st-century life? That puzzle confronts scores of homeowners who love old homes—especially residents of Brooklyn, which has the nation’s largest concentration of Victorian-era row houses. Vicki Fuller solved the old-versus-new dilemma when she embarked on a top-to-bottom renovation and decoration of her classic bowfront brownstone in New York City’s most populous borough.

The narrow row house had a dim central core, and elaborately carved oak woodwork added to the heaviness. Although Vicki cherishes every bit of her home’s vintage detail and was strongly opposed to painting the woodwork, she looked for ways to lighten and brighten the place. The Herculean job ultimately took two and a half years to complete.

Vicki, who loves to entertain and makes a point of using every room in her home, was determined not to sacrifice any modern amenities. On her wish list: a commodious kitchen with >> on Z4



Contemporary seating in the living room contrasts but does not conflict with the elaborately carved dark wood of the home’s original architecture (top left). A silvery faceted breakfront (above right) topped with reflective crystal objects adds sparkle. The painting by African-American artist Charly Palmer is a dose of welcome color.



BETTER BY DESIGN >> from Z2

garden access, new bathrooms, and computer-controlled audio in every room. With the help of Jamie Nesbitt-Weber, an architectural and interior designer, the three 800-square-foot floors were redesigned, reconstructed, and brought to a high level of polish.

Making the house seem larger and brighter dictated almost every design decision. The kitchen, entirely redone, has a wall of French doors that open to the garden centered on a bluestone patio. On the central floor, Nesbitt-Weber removed a 12-foot section of wall to enlarge the opening into the living room. The top-level master bath, as well as two smaller baths, were carved from the dark central space between the front and back rooms on each floor.

To blend new with old, carpenters cleaned or matched every smidgen of decorative woodwork and paneling on the lower two levels. "It looks like it was there from the beginning," Nesbitt-Weber says. On the top level, where there was no fancy molding, new poplar closets and cabinetry were painted crisp white. >> on Z6



Rounded upper cabinets, fluted edges on lower cabinets, and notched corners in the limestone countertops are among the distinctive details in Vicki Fuller's kitchen (top). Built-in Hoosier-style cabinets flank the banquette (above) for extra storage space. Slate floors in brown tones, tapestry fabric, and Tuscan-yellow walls warm the white cabinetry.



BETTER BY DESIGN >> from Z4

When it was time for furnishing decisions, the designer suggested simpler furniture to set off the home's stately architecture. By nature, Vicki craves sumptuousness and drama—"rooms with a drum-roll effect," she calls them. Vicki recalls showing Nesbitt-Weber pictures of overscale upholstered pieces and elaborate window treatments. "Jamie, ever the diplomat, would say, 'Yes, we can do that,'" Vicki says with a laugh, "But maybe we can make it a little more ... subdued."

Luxurious fabrics, such as crushed velvet on the rectilinear living room sofa, answer Vicki's desire for drama. In the study, gilded wallpaper has the elegance Vicki likes, yet the graphic pattern has a modern edge. "It's opulent, the scale is dramatic, but it's not too sweet," Nesbitt-Weber says.

Vicki is delighted with the collaboration results. "Jamie gave me the effects I wanted and made it comfortable on a day-to-day basis." Even the kitchen, which Vicki thought would be just a place to ponder the garden, gets used. "Now that I have my wonderful kitchen, of course I cook," she says. "It begs you to at least sauté some chicken." 🍷

Amethyst silk upholstery is a luxurious touch on Vicki's simply styled bed. Neutral walls, carpet, and draperies contribute to the bedroom's soothing quality, and also keep things bright.

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