



# NEW ERA

ONCE THEIR KIDS MOVED OUT, BUILDING TEAM STEVE AND SUSAN HOWELL INVIGORATED THEIR BOXFORD HOME. BY REIMAGINING WHAT THEIR KITCHEN COULD DO.

STORY AND STYLING BY COURTNEY GOODRICH



The showpiece is the black walnut island and sideboards; every detail was taken into account with the light gray cabinets on the side and back walls, including an exposed beam with a cabinet door slightly shorter than the rest.



# In

1992, Steve and Susan Howell built their house on a quiet 2-acre lot in Boxford. First, they constructed the garage, and then they assembled the frame for the house inside the garage and held an old-fashioned timber frame-raising with friends and family, erecting the bones of the 2,600-square-foot structure in one day. Susan remembers she was pregnant with her daughter, Olivia, now 25, and that a few years later she and Steve welcomed a son, Jake, now 22. They loved the house, but when Jake went to college four years ago, Steve and Susan, whose Howell Custom Building Group is in Lawrence, took a closer look at their kitchen. Other than some appliance upgrades, it hadn't been touched since they built the house, and it needed to flow better with the spaces around it.

"We thought this could be a great place to live for the next stage of our life," says Susan, "but our needs have changed. We wanted to create a more stylish space with an improved layout for hosting our adult children and our friends."

"It was time to do it," says Steve. "Our kids had grown up and moved to their own apartments. We felt the renovation would help invigorate the home for the two

Above, The Howells built the 2,600-square-foot Boxford home in 1992.

Top and far right, The kitchen was transformed into a bright functional space.





PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEG MANION SILLIKER (TOP LEFT)  
 BOTTOM LEFT BY ERIC ROTH (TOP RIGHT)  
 BOTTOM RIGHT





Above, New closet space and built-ins were incorporated into the breezeway/mudroom.

Left, Custom stained-glass doors were made for a black walnut china cabinet.

of us, as well as usher in a new era of entertaining." Since they had connected the house to the garage with a 200-square-foot breezeway/mudroom with a large octagonal three-season gazebo in 1995, there was plenty of space to work with. But they also wanted it to be more efficient. For example, to get from the kitchen to the gazebo, where the Howells often entertain family and friends, they first had to go through a narrow hall-

way where the laundry and coat closets were located.

The Howells knew the first step would be eliminating the hallway, which would instantly open everything up. They sketched some preliminary kitchen layouts and called Holly Gagne from Holly Gagne Interior Design in Rowley. Gagne, whom they have collaborated with on client projects before, reviewed the layouts, which showed configurations similar to what had been there, and advised them to consider alternatives that shifted the orientation of the island and pushed the kitchen toward the back of the house, opening up the floor plan. "I told them, 'You're opening up the space for a reason,'" she says. "They wanted to connect the adjoining spaces for a greater interaction with them, so the orientation of the functions within the kitchen should be considered in this context."

With the hallway gone, storage is now provided by a new closet and built-ins in the breezeway—the laundry was moved to the basement. The Howells placed a long island in the center of the kitchen with cabinets on the side and back walls plus two built-in custom sideboards in the dining area. Doorways were widened, a new window that overlooks the backyard brings in natural light, and the wood beams were appropriately showcased. Changes were also made to the living room, such as installing an additional window and new French door sliders with transom windows.

In the kitchen every detail was taken into account with the light gray cabinets built by B+G Cabinet of Newburyport, including accommodating an exposed beam with a cabinet door slightly shorter than the rest. Appliances include a Sub-Zero refrigerator, Sub-Zero refrigerator drawers, and an induction cooktop, wall oven, and convection steam oven from Wolf. Fixtures are from Designer Bath, the backsplash is made with glass tiles from Ann Sacks, and durable quartzite tops the counters. When it came to the floors, the Howells felt they needed to match the original antique heart pine in the living room, which was salvaged from an 1800s mill building. "It's a highly prized salvage wood," says Steve, who after some searching found more in a building in upstate New York that was being dismantled.

But the showpiece is the black walnut island and sideboards, made by Howell Custom Building Group's lead carpenter, Kurt Baier. "Large-scale dovetail joinery on thick slabs of black walnut seemed to give many of the cabinetmakers pause," says Steve. "We called three shops and they were all reluctant to do it. But Kurt was up for the challenge."

Gagne assisted with material and finish selections and helped furnish and accessorize the spaces. The Howells' friend, stained-glass artist Louis Pulzetti of Emmet's Hill Wood and Glass in Alton Bay, New Hampshire, created custom stained-glass doors



for a black walnut china cabinet that stores pieces collected over the years as well as heirlooms from a Cape Cod house that had been in the family for generations. Pen-and-ink drawings from Susan's aunt, Nancy Seligsohn, who illustrated the original Pippi Longstocking book, hang in the living room, while artwork above the fireplace is by Newburyport artist Alan Bull, who created the painting from a photograph the Howells took on a trip to Patagonia.

Gagne also introduced the Howells to plant designer Lynn Steeves, whose studio Flora is located in Gagne's studio. With Steeves, Susan chose plants such as succulents, ferns, and air plants to decorate the

spaces, which Gagne likes to do because "it gives life and texture to a space without making it feel overly accessorized," she says.

"It was fun to come home and see the progress every day," says Steve about the renovation. As a builder, he loved the process almost as much as the result. "We got to step into the shoes of our clients and experience the transformation on a daily basis."

"Every time I walk in the door or come downstairs, it exudes everything we wanted," says Susan.

It looks like they are going to be enjoying their home for a long time to come. ■

*For more information, see Resources on page 122.*

Above, A gazebo offers the perfect spot for dinner parties.

Right, The kitchen opens to the dining room with exposed beams, French doors, and a new window.





## PERSONAL TOUCHES

HOLLY GAGNE HELPS ONE COUPLE PRESERVE THEIR CLASSIC SHINGLED NEW ENGLAND-STYLE HOME WHILE ADDING A BOHEMIAN FEEL TO THE SPACE.

BY VICTORIA ABBOTT RICCARDI // PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC ROTH  
STYLING BY SIERRA BASKIND FOR ENNIS, INC.

Gagne layered the space with various natural and contemporary elements, such as slung beige leather and chrome chairs and a funky wooden coffee table.



**I**n an ideal world, home design projects would neatly unfold from A to Z—beginning with the interior designer meeting the client in the space to be renovated to understand the possibilities and the homeowner’s desires. For Holly Gagne, principal designer and owner of Holly Gagne Interior Design, that didn’t happen. By the time she got pulled into the kitchen and living room restoration of a couple’s traditional New England home in Manchester-by-the-Sea, construction was well under way.

“Normally, we like to think holistically and not do any construction until the whole design plan is done,” says Gagne, who frequently works on the North Shore. “However, the wife was working with a previous designer, more of a decorator, and wanted me to look at the architect’s schematic plans and select the one which gave her most of what she wanted.” In addition to a new deck and screened-in porch off the kitchen, the couple wanted an open floor plan to connect the kitchen to the living room area, which would be expanded further by incorporating the first-floor guest room space.

“I came at it from ‘What’s your experience when you walk into the kitchen, and what do you want

to be your focal wall?’” says Gagne. “‘How are you going to use this space now that it’s open to the living room? What makes sense for that flow?’ And just going through that thought process—the circulation, how she wanted to use the space for entertaining and cooking, and what was going to be the right layout for that—we advised a whole new layout and new kitchen cabinetry.”

The couple agreed with Gagne’s suggestion to have the kitchen flow into a designated dining space, which would lead to the living room area. Then Gagne worked with the owners to fine-tune their wish list for the space, which included brightening the overall area—ultimately achieved by adding a larger span of windows above the kitchen sink. The couple wanted a large kitchen island with a honed Carrara marble surface, where they could enjoy breakfast with their three children and spread out when serving and entertaining. They wanted a Viking range, Sub-Zero fridge, and two dishwashers, one on either side of the kitchen sink, for entertaining.

“The other part of the process was the whole materiality [of the project],” says Gagne. “The home was a classic shingled New England-style home with lots of

Brightening the overall area was achieved by adding a larger span of windows above the kitchen sink; the kitchen flows into a designated dining space, which leads to the living room. Off the kitchen is a sunporch.

trim detail that we really wanted to preserve, but that wasn’t exactly the wife’s style. She wanted to bring a California boho feel to the space.” The trick was finding a way to blend the two styles in a seamless, harmonious way.

Gagne’s solution was to layer the space with various natural and contemporary elements, such as slung beige leather and chrome chairs to pull around the living room’s funky wooden coffee table, cut like a grapefruit half. She chose beige leather stools for the kitchen island and lit it from above with a hip bubble glass chandelier resembling an amino acid chain. She then installed mod rectangular brass cabinet pulls on all the cabinets and drawers in an understated satin finish. A Kilim rug in the living room added an ethnic pop, as did a hazy blue modern Oriental rug in the dining area, made even more eclectic with the addition of clear hanging blown-glass pendants made by an artist on Etsy and a floor-to-ceiling stone fireplace, which became the room’s sculptural focus.

“The wife was very direct and knew what she liked,” says Gagne, “and our job was to have all our suggestions connect with the other elements. With the fireplace, she had to go get the stones immediately (due to time constraints), and we suggested they have





linear edges (not round) to preserve the home’s clean lines and be more modern.” Then, to add a casual flair, Gagne made the actual mantel from a piece of locally reclaimed wood.

To match the home’s existing white-painted trim, the kitchen, dining, and living room spaces were kept white. The kitchen counters and sink were white, as was the backsplash. But to add more verve to the

kitchen, Gagne suggested a tiled marble backsplash in a jazzy Chevron pattern. The wife wasn’t sure.

“She really went back and forth on this, because the space felt so classic,” says Gagne, “but this was the one element of the space that could give it a bit of personal style.” In the end, the wife decided to go with Gagne’s suggestion, ultimately rejoicing in her decision. In fact, she and her husband so loved how the project turned

Working around the master bathroom’s existing Carrara marble shower, Gagne placed a thick Carrara marble slab on top of the existing vanity, which also raised it to a more comfortable height.

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out, they asked Gagne to redo the boys’ bedroom and tweak their master bath.

“Basically, the boys’ bedroom was a big loft and we created two rooms,” says Gagne, “with a door, closets, a cool study room, and built-in bureaus and closets.” All the cabinetry was painted a rich gray-blue.

For the master bath, most of Gagne’s changes were cosmetic and were designed to better reflect the wife’s taste. “She was so happy with the vibe of the downstairs,” says Gagne, “but stylistically, the bathroom just didn’t feel right to her.” So, working around the bathroom’s existing Carrara marble shower, Gagne placed a thick Carrara marble slab on top of the existing vanity, which also raised it to a more comfortable height. She painted the vanity and the frames of both mirrors hanging over the double sinks a deep charcoal gray and put in a spa-like freestanding tub. Vinyl grasscloth wallpaper gave the bathroom’s walls texture, while three black-and-white abstract paintings arranged by the tub added a contemporary touch. A new toilet and updated shiny chrome fixtures (to match those in the shower) added freshness, while an art deco starburst light between the mirrors on the vanity gave the bathroom an unexpected zap of playfulness.

In the end, the nearly eight months of work completely transformed the family’s experience of their home. “Opening their house up from one end to the other connected the family to their surroundings,” says Gagne, “and then connected them as a family within the interior space.” What’s more, she adds, all of these changes really helped the wife emotionally connect



to each space. The master bath has become her place of retreat and the downstairs achieves everything the couple wanted, including the wife’s sense of peace from living in a New England home that finally reflects her personal style. ■

*For contact information, see Resources on page 122.*

A spa-like freestanding tub was added to the master bath; vinyl grasscloth wallpaper gives the bathroom’s walls texture.



## PURPOSEFUL DESIGN

HOLLY GAGNE CREATES A DREAM KITCHEN IN A NEWBURYPORT HOME WITH FARMHOUSE-INSPIRED ELEMENTS ALONGSIDE MODERN TOUCHES.

By Lauren Torlone Mahoney  
Photographs by Eric Roth  
Styling by Sierra Baskind for Ennis, Inc.

The Person  
home is a mix of  
modern-meets-  
barn in all the  
best ways.



**S**HOW ME A DESIGN ENTHUSIAST WHO DOESN'T love a kitchen renovation, and I'll show you someone who isn't a design enthusiast. With so many options and fun to be had, kitchen design, be it from scratch or a remodel, is so appealing because the sky (OK, the roof) is the limit. From classic whites and neutrals to pops of color, from traditional to modern and everywhere in between, mixing and matching preferences to fit client lifestyles is very much on-trend. That's why it's no surprise that local designer Holly Gagne, owner and principal designer at Holly Gagne Interior Design, has a plate full of plans.

One of the designs Gagne and her team developed was recently featured as part of the 18th Annual Newburyport Kitchen Tour. The home, owned by Dolores Person, owner and broker of William Raveis Real Estate in Newburyport (which specializes in Newburyport

properties), and her husband, Rich, did not disappoint. A true reflection of its owners and of Gagne's personal design philosophy (to design for every client's unique lifestyle and priorities), the house, simply stated, was a standout. The entire design process was aided by Dolores and Rich, who presented Gagne and her team with a handful of images they really connected with, invaluable data for Gagne and her team. The Persons were also open to new ideas and suggestions and to moving outside of their "comfort zone"—helping to create that delicate push and pull between client and designer that helps bring about outstanding results.

Beauty, function, and flow are all given equal billing in a Holly Gagne design. Gagne uses words like "harmony" and "solution driven" to describe her approach to design, and it shows. Her work flows, evoking a sense of peace and calm while still being highly functional.

Farmhouse-inspired elements are given their due alongside more modern touches, including the bold color featured prominently on the kitchen island and sleek Carrara marble countertops.

The Person home is a mix of modern-meets-barn in all the best ways. Situated in one of Newburyport's newer neighborhoods, the home sits on what was once a 27-acre 19th-century farm. As such, farmhouse-inspired elements are given their due alongside more modern touches, including the bold color featured prominently on the kitchen island (it's Benjamin Moore's Newburg Green, for all who will undoubtedly want to know). Sleek Carrara marble countertops from European Quarry Imports in Salem, New Hampshire, are classic and modern at the same time, while spacious cabinets by Newbury Cabinets are as functional as they are beautiful.

The dining table itself is crafted from wall panels from 19 Federal Street in Newburyport, and the hard-to-miss historic Woodbridge School of Newbury sign (circa 1898) is displayed above the kitchen entryway.

A sliding French door is as much of a showpiece as it is a functioning door that hides the pantry when not in use. Behind it, the contents are likely to be the envy of many a homeowner, including a Marvel wine fridge, a full bar and arguably, the holy grail of kitchens—a second dishwasher.

The floors are prefinished engineered white oak by Seacoast Floor Supply in South Hampton, New Hampshire, and are an understated nod to the house's farm history and another embodiment of Gagne's style, incorporating function, design, and historical elements seemingly effortlessly.

But bringing stunning and often complex designs from paper to "real life" is anything but effortless, and Gagne (who earned her Master of Interior Architecture from the Boston Architectural College) and her team like to get in on the ground level and be as involved in the process as they can from day one. Whether it's a full-scale renovation or addition, or brand-new construction, Gagne and her staff routinely work with architects, general contractors, and builders to ensure every client's design is brought to life in the best way possible.

The houses that Gagne designs are also homes in the truest sense of the word. In many instances children live in them, they are not design pieces to be admired from afar but couches that are sat on, breakfast counters where toddler meals are eaten, spaces where friends are entertained, and homes where pets not only live but are loved. "I truly want to give people the ability to live comfortably in their home" says Gagne who believes it can still be a well-designed space.

While design preferences can vary widely from client to client, many do crave a clean aesthetic, which often serves as a perfect backdrop—and an opportunity to add in "less-safe" design choices, like wallpaper, which, Gagne reassures, is not the lifetime commit-



ment it once was. Personal touches are worth it; design risks, no matter how great or small, are worth it in order to make your mark on a space. It just makes good design sense to "bring a little bit more of your personality" into the spaces you spend time in every day, says Gagne. Being comfortable and happy in a functional space isn't a concept that needs a lot of selling, but it does sound like a great place to get started. ■

*For contact information, see Resources on page 122.*

Spacious cabinets are as functional as they are beautiful to look at; the floors are prefinished engineered white oak, an understated nod to the house's farm history.

### Old Meets New

The homeowner's collectibles, brought from their former Federal-style home, weren't put out to pasture. Interior designer Holly Gagne and her team re-envisioned them for this modern barn, a new structure that has found its place on an old slice of farmland.

Photograph by Eric Roth

