

Moving on Up

A South End family takes their lives, their work, and their footprint upward.

BY ERIN BYERS MURRAY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENT DAYTON



Living and dining areas share tight quarters but feel spacious thanks to the minimal decor, including an 8-by-10 grid of Ikea frames and a Danish modern chair that Battista rescued from the trash.

The purple wisteria crawling up the side

of an 1850s, four-story row house on Rutland Street was the first thing to catch Susan Battista's eye. She was living with her partner, graphic designer Fritz Klaetke, 42, and their daughter, Ava Detroit, now 7, a few blocks away in the South End's Concord Square. "On my way to Flour Bakery, I would just stop and stare," says Battista, 44, who owns a market research firm, Topic 101.

Battista finally got a peek inside during an open house in 2005. It wasn't a pretty sight. Once a corner storefront and then a boarding house, the building sported a stage on the second floor and a basement ceiling full of hooks, eerie reminders of the illicit activities favored by previous residents, Klaetke says. Maybe it would require some renovation and a little paint, but it would be worth it to score a corner in the South End, they figured, so they rolled the dice and bought the house in September of that year.

They imagined building a shared office on the first floor for their small businesses and fitting residential space on the floors above but quickly found that the 440 square feet per floor was challenging to work with. To squeeze in all of their programmatic requirements and meet Klaetke's aesthetic demands (his father was an architect, and he had grown up in a Mies van der Rohe-designed house in Detroit), the couple hired David Stern and Diane McCafferty of Stern McCafferty. Klaetke says, "Their minimalist vision totally meshed with our look."

Unfortunately, after peeling back some damaged drywall, they discovered that most of the structure—including the floor joists—was rotted. Instead of doubling up joists or selectively replacing the unsound ones, the contractor, Canton's Timberline Construction, recommended stripping out everything to the brick walls. At one point during the renovation, says Klaetke, you could stand in the basement and look straight up to the roof.

Once structurally sound, the design was limited by a tight budget, which ended up at \$201 per square foot, about half of the average cost in the city. "We were trying to constantly balance something that was cool aesthetically versus what could be done practically,"



Susan Battista and Fritz Klaetke with their daughter, Ava Detroit, on the front stoop of their renovated South End home. Below, the house's compact footprint demanded precise space planning and a willingness to climb a lot of stairs each day. Opposite, a view of the couple's home; on the top floor is a new dormer which lets plenty of light into the master bedroom.





says Stern, who enjoyed the challenge. "It's like molecules: if you compress them, they have more energy. The same is true in architecture."

Stern created a clean, white space for the first floor office, designed around a single custom shelving unit that "gets rid of all the junky stuff that you never want to look at," like the printer and fax machine, says Klaetke. The unit also conceals the chimney. They painted one wall in the office with magnetic paint so that Klaetke could use magnets to pin up his ideas—of which he has many.

The couple wanted their daughter's room to be on the second floor but that would have required putting the kitchen on the third—a lot of stairs to negotiate laden with groceries. Instead, Stern encouraged them to "bring the kitchen down, which made a huge difference in the progression and sense of space." The open kitchen is separated from the dining and living

area only by the kitchen's ceiling soffit and a rim of cove lighting.

Determined to use sustainable methods wherever they could, the couple decided to use hardwood flooring throughout. "People like bamboo, but you have to ship it from the Amazon or China. You lose your carbon footprint with all that fuel," says Battista. Instead, they found a white ash from western Massachusetts; it's cleared in a sustainable way, and they stained it to varying degrees of darkness for the walls, floors, and stairs.

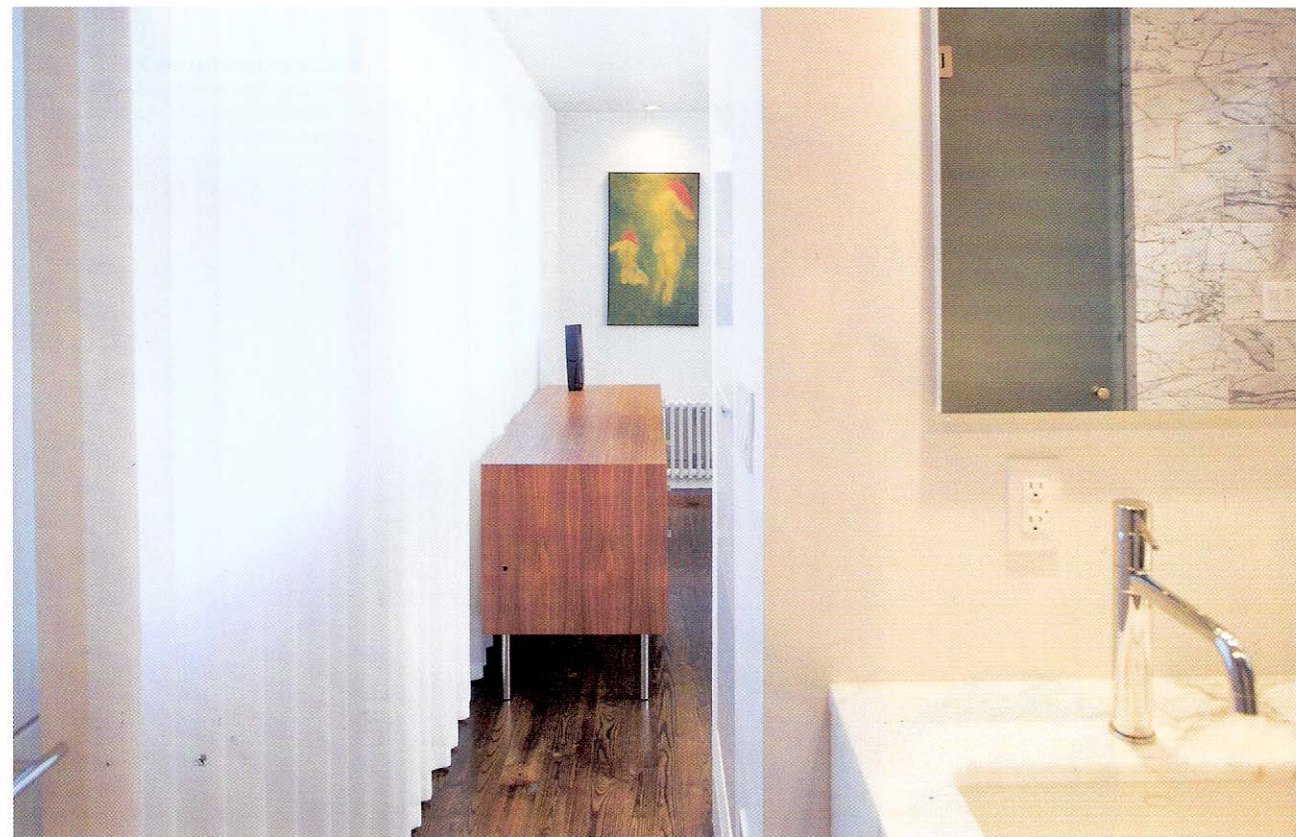
"Ava's Floor," as the third floor is known, houses their daughter's bedroom and a living room that can be closed off by a set of sliding acrylic panels to create a guest room. Manufactured in southern New Hampshire of partly post-consumer plastic, the translucent panels also make up one wall of the bathroom, allowing natural light inside, even when the door is closed.

The fourth floor is the couple's bedroom and sanctuary. After several rounds with the South End Landmarks Commission, Stern received permission to remove a portion of the asphalt roof and add a dormer for better light and height. He also installed a central walk-in closet between the bedroom and the master bathroom. A house fan in the ceiling uses the staircase as a vent system, drawing the heat up and out, saving energy.

As they stand gazing out of the top floor windows and toward Back Bay, it's clear that Klaetke and Battista believe their gamble paid off. They speak of their year-and-a-half renovation process with humor. And they're proud of the final outcome, which garnered Stern McCafferty an award from the Boston Society of Architects. "You think about how much stuff you can do on each floor; it's like vertical living," says Klaetke. "It just changes your point of view." ■



Klaetke and Ava Detroit dine at the custom stainless steel bar. Opposite, left, the bar is part of a marble-topped island illuminated by Bocci pendants; right, the family room can be completely enclosed with sliding translucent panels.



The staircase opens up to the master bedroom on the fourth floor; a collection of molds used to manufacture rubber gloves adorns the small dresser. Opposite, above, a walk-in closet separates bedroom from bathroom; below, a neighbor created the doubled white linen curtains in a ripple fold.

The entrance to the shared office is lined with sustainably harvested white ash. Below, the simply designed workspace features a Saarinen marble-topped table and a display wall treated with a magnetic primer. Opposite, above, a custom wall cabinet hides office detritus; below, Ava Detroit at work.

