



DREAM HOME/DREAM TEAM

A Meridian-Kessler classic is reborn.

Written by Neil Charles/Photographed by Ashlee Kindred

Constructed in 1926 in the popular Tudor Revival style, with exposed exterior beams and steep gabled roofs, our featured home is a Meridian-Kessler classic that recently underwent a substantial renovation by the talented team of architect Mark Demerly, builder Rob Bennett and designer Tiffany Skilling. Acquired by Kelly and Nick Colby after several years spent scouring the neighborhood for something suitable to make their own, the house was in need of an overhaul to open up sight lines and remedy some of the alterations that had been implemented over the course of the past century. “There had been a lot of hands in it over the years,” explains the designer. “It wasn’t in disrepair. You could have lived in it, but it just felt dark and a little scary.”

Having previously worked with the couple on a major remodel and a subsequent addition, Rob Bennett had a good idea of what they were looking for this time around. “Another opportunity to work with Nick and Kelly was awesome,” says the builder. “I knew

we were going to make this home into something truly special, honoring its history while still bringing it into today’s way of living.” Kelly concurs. “We love the whole process,” she says. “This team allowed the house to tell its story through its architecture and design.”

One of the first orders of business was to replace the original steam heating system and install air conditioning. The project was on an epic scale: the 1920s poured concrete floor had to be broken up and trenches excavated to make way for ductwork, effectively creating a new crawl space. Contemporary hardwood floors were installed, and the original radiator vents were saved for incorporation as architectural details into the new design. “I’ll never forget those days when the floor was completely removed and you would walk through the front door and have to step down two feet to the cinder below, while the amazing plaster detailed ceilings were intact above me,” continues Bennett. “It really was a surreal experience.”



Original iron radiator vents were preserved to provide architectural detail throughout the home.

The intricate wood ceiling was painted, highlighting the pattern while brightening the space.

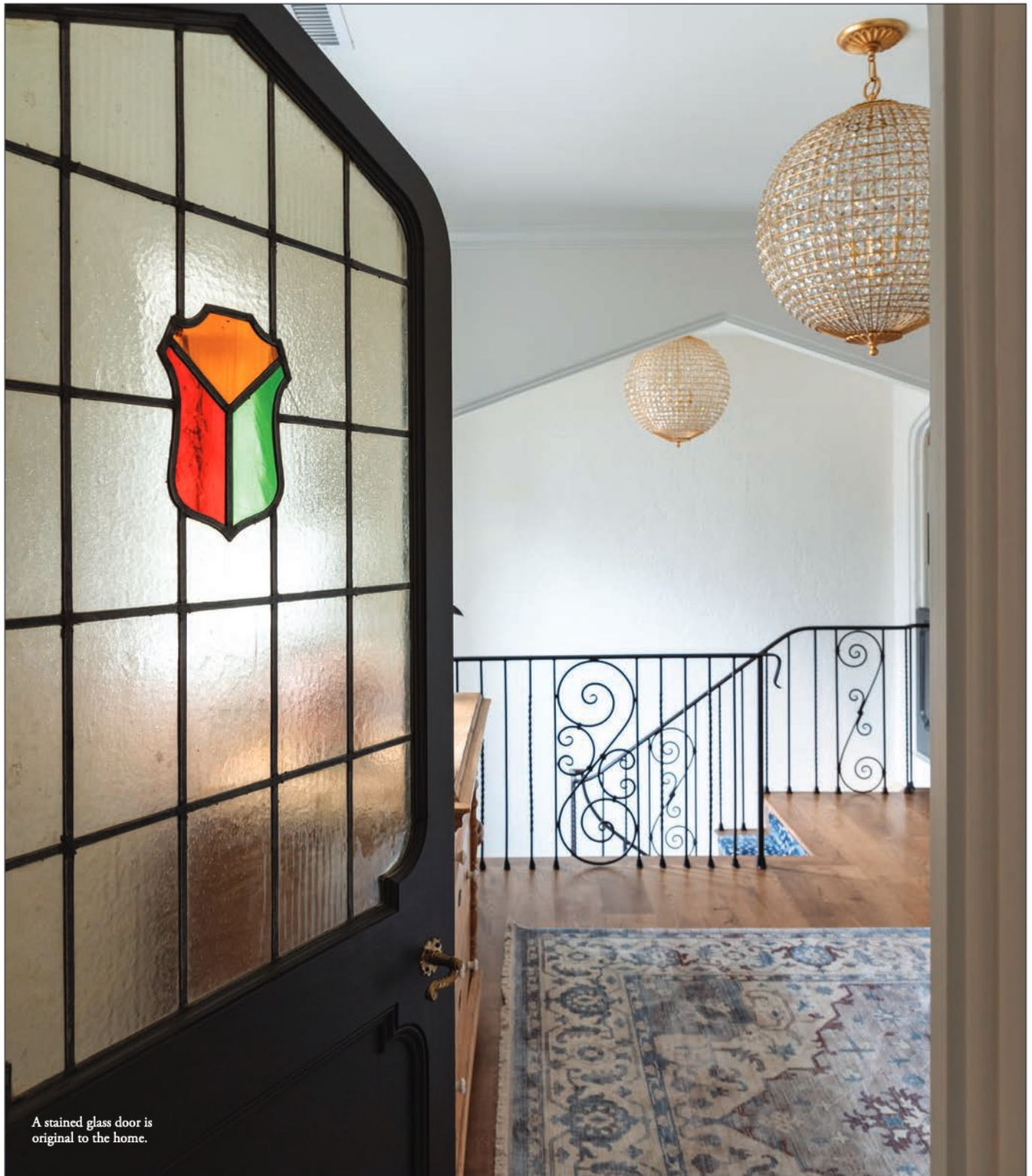


The kitchen's exposed beams look like remnants of an older structure.





Gleaming subway tile gives the laundry room a luxe feel.



As was typical of many homes from the 1920s and '30s, the original design is, for want of a better description, rambling. Elements of Tudor highlight the exterior, while inside there is a lively mixture of Gothic and Norman arches, high ceilings and elaborate plasterwork that cleverly resembles solid stone blocks. Add an unusually intricate painted wooden ceiling that might be at home in a Loire Valley Chateau, and you have a charmingly whimsical ensemble. This eclecticism gave the architect and

designer a broader framework within which they could bring the home up to date in a sensitive, but not slavish, fashion. Tall mullioned windows, complete with elaborate turn-of-the-century hardware and iron muntins, could easily have been replaced with something more efficient and modern. Instead, they, along with the doors, were painstakingly sandblasted and powder-coated to resemble their original condition by Midtown Window Restoration. The effect is stunning.

Wide arched doorways make the kitchen seem even larger.



The jewel box of a pantry has charm and lots of storage.



In the dining room, original built-in cabinets are highlighted in a blue shade found throughout the home.



Typical also of the period was the home's compartmentalized layout, with a labyrinthine series of rooms, many gloomy and uninviting. "We really wanted to make it open and bright," says Skilling. "We always look at the entire home and start with a master plan that will tie areas together." Opening up spaces into a more contemporary and appealing layout while retaining the spirit of the original presented plenty of opportunities for the architect and designer. "The transformation maintains original details and room proportions to make it feel it was always there," explains Demery. "Adding new arched openings that replicated the original ones helped us unify the formerly closed-off spaces. The home now flows seamlessly between rooms."

The kitchen in particular benefited from being opened via wide arches to the dining room on one side and a small sitting area on the other, with a view through to the base of the iron and wood staircase beyond. Throughout these spaces, a particularly relaxing shade of blue contrasts with new and refinished wood surfaces,

while subtle repeating diamond motifs here and there tie the design back into the formerly commonplace iron radiators. What appears to be an armoire with a distressed mirrored front is in fact a cunningly disguised refrigerator. "If I can make an appliance look like it's not an appliance, I'll do it," says the designer.

Upstairs, the entire configuration of the rooms has been redesigned to provide a large master suite, complete with an office for the man of the house. Down a couple of steps and through an informal seating area, one arrives at the guest quarters, constructed above the garage. There is an easy flow to the upstairs rooms, with access provided by either the main staircase, or original servants' stairs at the back of the kitchen. Throughout this most engaging home, one is met by small and pleasurable surprises: a nook here, an angle there, or a vista only enjoyed from a particular spot. Although the project was ambitious, it is the execution in the details that sets this delightful house in a league of its own, a testament to the skills and vision of all involved. **sl**