

YOUR HOME | RENOVATIONS

A Somerville Victorian's makeover includes two-story-tall bookcases that double as a cat climbing wall

For this 1874 home retrofitted for energy efficiency, the owners and designers took cues from a classic video game.

By **Marni Elyse Katz** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 26, 2026, 8:10 a.m.



The cat makes its way down from the second floor via openings in the bookshelves' color-blocked components. MEGAN BOOTH

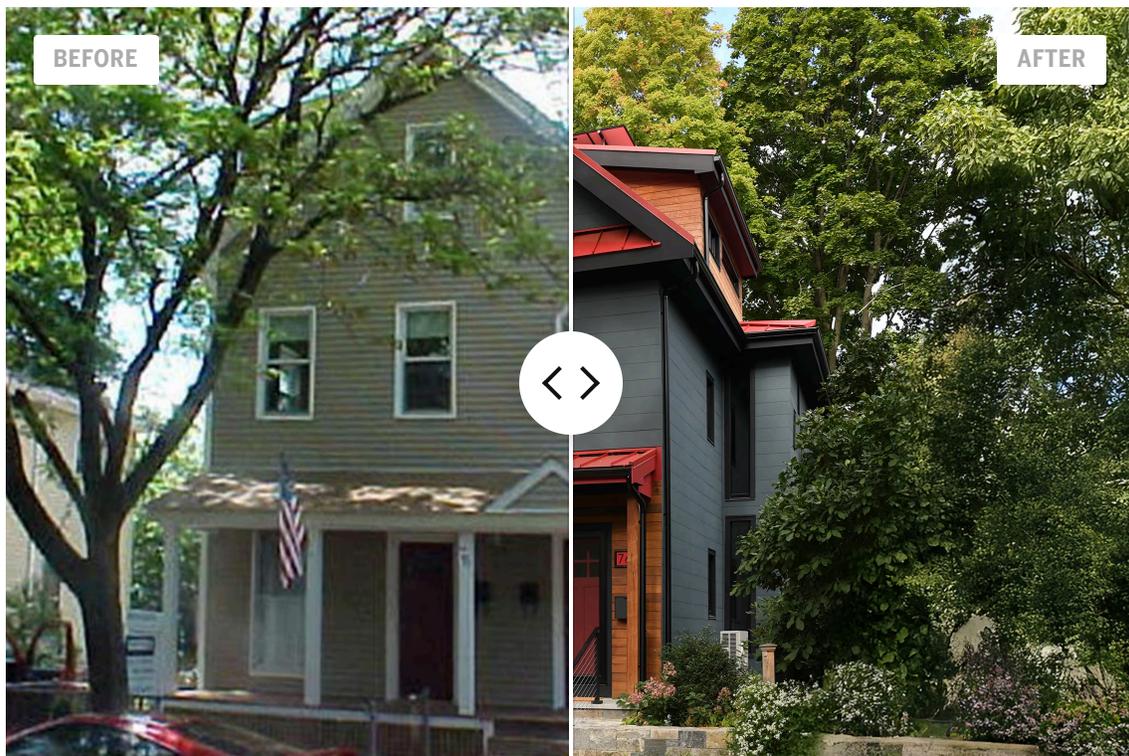
More than a decade after purchasing a duplex with vinyl siding in Somerville, the owner, who had since married, was ready to turn the simplified Victorian built in 1874 into a single-family home. The couple renovated with energy efficiency top of mind, intent on decreasing their carbon footprint. “It’s the only single-family, retrofitted passive house in Massachusetts,” says David Muñiz Supple, whose firm, New England Design and Construction, handled the top-to-bottom transformation.

Led by project manager Aaron Newell, the team gave the couple more living space without increasing the home’s footprint. They popped the dormers on the top level to accommodate the owners’ studios — both work in creative fields — and expanded a first-floor bay window into a squared-off bump-out for the U-shaped kitchen, adding a compact roof deck off the library above it.

Shared living spaces supplanted the prior rental unit, which had occupied the entire first floor. There’s a dining room in front as well as a full bath with a wall of seemingly

random but quite intricate tiles in 28 different colors. The living room is in the back and boasts new French doors, a Juliet balcony, and plenty of seating including a sleeper sofa for guests.

The kitchen sits in the center of the home, along with the dwelling's visual centerpiece: A two-story bookshelf that doubles as a jungle gym for the owners' two cats. The handsome, stained wood unit with painted birch plywood backs is also the backdrop for the new floating steel stairs with red oak treads that run from the first floor to the third.



Before and after of the exterior of the house. To see the transformation, drag the arrows to the right or left.

PHOTOGRAPH ON RIGHT BY MEGAN BOOTH

According to the homeowners, any empty wall is fair game for book storage. They describe the vision for their home as less a house with space for books than a library they can live in — the double-height shelving and a rolling library ladder were practically a given. While design aficionados likely see the midcentury modern color-blocking as reminiscent of Charles and Ray Eames' modular storage units from the early 1950s, the

owners and design-build team point to a cultural icon from the mid-1980s as an influence: the video game Tetris.

The 25-foot-tall bookshelf is composed of units in five different shapes. Each echoes a shape from the video game. As lead designer Grady Ragsdale formulated a travel path for the cats, the owner says T, L, and Z shapes emerged. The cats enter through an opening in a second-floor closet, then pass through circular openings in the sides, tops, and bottoms of various shelves, down to the home's main level. Some components have plexiglass covers for safety. There are also six windows interspersed through the design.

An induction cooktop range replaced a gas one. MEGAN BOOTH

The home's color scheme evolved from colors the owners thought would be fun to look at every day. When mimicking colors from Tetris ended in garish results, the team tapped Dane Austin, founder of Dane Austin Design, to tone down the palette.

The owners are delighted by the muted colors that run through the living spaces, popping playfully against crisp white walls.

An earthy orange from the kitchen is carried up to the primary bedroom, where the crew raised the ceiling, lining it with natural wood slats and leaving the new structural beams exposed. They also added a clerestory window over the bed to bring in natural light without sacrificing privacy.

The team raised the ceiling in the primary bedroom, leaving the new structure exposed. MEGAN BOOTH

Like the bath on the first floor, the primary bath bursts with color. Initially, the owners considered a tiled version of the MBTA subway map, modeled after a bath with a tiled version of a New York City subway map the couple had admired. But in the end, they went in a different direction. The couple gave the team a screenshot of a favorite frame from an animated short by Oskar Fischinger. The designers created a scaled drawing that the couple printed and colored in with markers to indicate the colors they wanted. Then,

they executed the final layout — 864 tiles in 14 colors — in Photoshop. They give huge kudos to the tile guy, who they say followed their printout like a map.

In the primary bath, a tile representation of a frame from a 1930s animated short by Oskar Fischinger lines the shower. MEGAN BOOTH

Resources

Design-build: [New England Design and Construction](#)

Color consulting: [Dane Austin Design](#)

Landscape design and construction: [A Blade of Grass](#)

More Photographs

A tiled wall in the guest bath boasts 28 colors; only a few identical colors touch, which was quite a feat. MEGAN BOOTH

The second-floor library supplements the double height bookshelf behind the stair. MEGAN BOOTH

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