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## A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Interior designer Andra Birkerts takes her Wellesley, Massachusetts, home from closed-in to wide-open

Written by **ESTELLE BOND GURALNICK**  
Photography by **SAM GRAY**

**W**HO COULD RESIST A LUSH ACRE-PLUS property close to the business district in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in a good school district, with gardens that sloped to the landscaped bank of the Charles River? "The location and land were so entrancing, we bought this house almost without looking inside," says interior designer Andra Birkerts, who, with her husband, Harris Footer, in 1995 purchased the 1912 Colonial-style house on land that was once part of a gladiolus farm. "We were 90 percent sold even before

we opened the front door," says Birkerts, whose firm, Andra Birkerts Design, is in Wellesley Center.

Which was a good thing, because once inside the compact house, they were disappointed that there were scarcely any views to the glorious setting. But Birkerts knew she could open up the back of the house — in time. With two children, now ages 15 and 18, and a career to manage, renovating was not a top priority.

It wasn't until 2001 that Birkerts's day of reckoning finally arrived. "Suddenly, I couldn't bear my own house's closed-in feeling anymore," she says. "I wanted to pick up a hammer and knock down whatever was obscuring the beautiful environment."

Instead of hammering, she called a personal

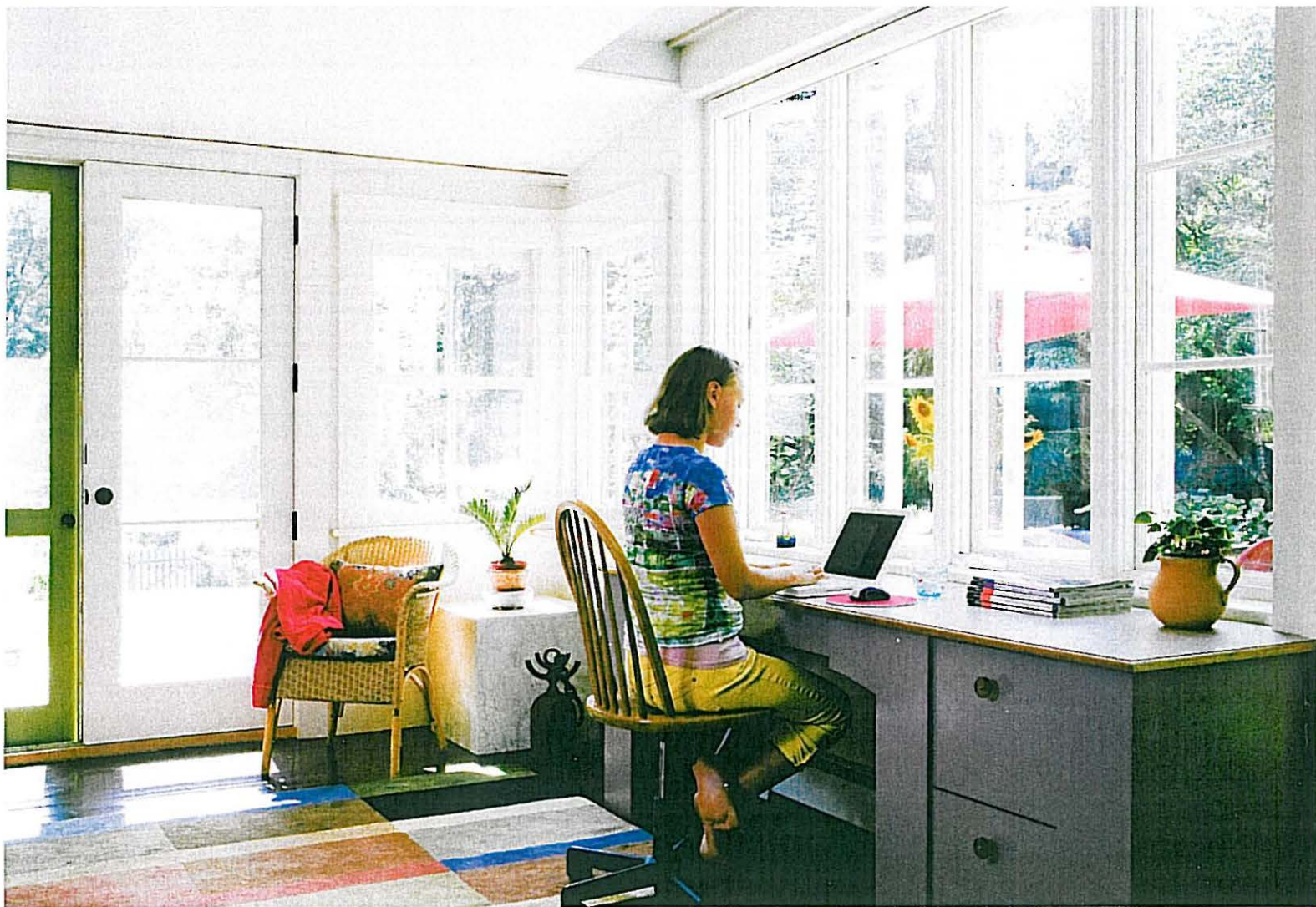
**WALLS PAINTED OCHER and aubergine define the media niche (BELOW) in the "mini great room" where the couchlike window seat is thick with cushions. The opposite end of the room (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) has a built-in desk with a pleasant view of the deck (FACING PAGE, TOP), where Harris Footer and Andra Birkerts can relax and take in the view to the Charles River.**





friend, architect Charles Myer of Charles R. Myer & Partners in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who, with associate Don Knerr, devised the relatively modest scheme that opened the house's entire back wall and 15 feet of a side wall to a new 30-by-40-foot wraparound deck with views of the property's parklike surroundings.

Manipulating space is old hat to Birkerts, who grew up in Michigan in a house with lots of glass and open spaces. The home was designed by her father, Gunnar Birkerts, an award-winning modernist architect. "Appreciation of natural light is part of my heritage," she says. "I also like clean-lined furniture, preferably that's movable and/or interchangeable, another reflection of my upbringing. But, in design, though my father

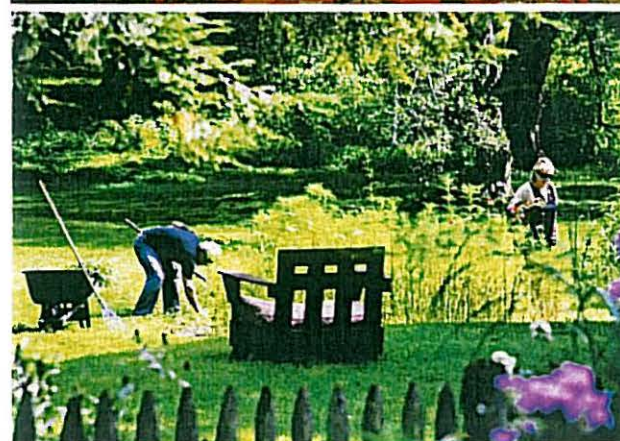




continues to be an unwavering modernist, it's more accurate to call me transitional, with comfort always a high priority."

Birkerts found her way to New England when, after earning a master of fine arts degree in Nova Scotia, she stopped off in Boston to visit her brother. She never made it to her intended destination, New York. Instead, like a bee to honey, she headed straight to an architectural firm, where she was hired as a color consultant. Subsequently, she helped found the Boston architectural firm Linea 5. Marriage and family led her to shift into a freelance career. In 1992, she opened Andra Birkerts Design. Today, her staff of five stays busy working on mostly residential projects, though there's the occasional restaurant or yoga studio to design.

Birkerts's own Wellesley home was typical of many vintage properties, with additions tacked on in less-than-thoughtful ways. A 15-by-25-foot room that spanned the entire back half of the home was built sometime in the mid-20th century



**A LIGHTEARTED HAND-BLOCKED wallpaper (LEFT)** enlivens one wall in the remodeled kitchen. The round mirror reflects daylight and creates the illusion of space. The kitchen (TOP) opens to the "mini great room" and has a view through the bank of new windows to the back garden (BOTTOM), where Footer and Birkerts tend to the lush greenery. The Charles River is just beyond the trees.

with inadequate windows that gave little more than a glimpse of the grounds. A cast-iron wood stove jutted 5 feet into the space and was "a dominating presence that we never used," says Footer, who is chief financial officer of his wife's design firm. "We were happy to get rid of it," he says.

Working with Myer and Knerr, the couple now have what Birkerts has dubbed their "mini great room," a multifunctional space where they spend most of their time. At one end, comfortable seating is oriented both to the view and to a media center. At the opposite end, a built-in desk/library table is always in use for projects. The renovation stayed within the house's footprint, but does cantilever out from one exterior wall to accommodate a deeply cushioned window seat that functions like a sofa. French doors and lots of windows bring nature indoors.

"Good design is the sum of its parts and should always meet its users' needs," says Birkerts, citing a principle that guides her own work. "This was a small renovation that gave us a whole new dimension." ■

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FOOTER IS THE ardent gardener in the family, responsible for the big vegetable patch at the back of the property. "My contribution is mostly deadheading," says Birkerts, "though I do plant sunflowers in a circle each year that grow up to be my round outdoor sunflower room."

A photograph of a large, two-story house with light-colored siding and white trim. A modern glass extension is visible on the right side of the house. The house is surrounded by mature trees and a well-maintained lawn.

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