



*Time is on*  
Their Side

DESIGNER LILI O'BRIEN RESTORES HER FAMILY'S VIRGINIA ROW HOUSE AND BESTOWS EFFORTLESS SOPHISTICATED ON ITS INTERIORS

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**Living room** Partition walls in the living area were removed, opening the space into its original double-parlor format. Tall built-in shelves create a textural backdrop for Henredon chairs upholstered in Rogers & Goffigon fabrics. **Exterior** The Richmond, Virginia, row house with its Victorian turret was built in 1906. After a fire in 2009, the house was lovingly restored. **Preceding pages** A Swaim leather bench can be moved near the fireplace for additional seating. The marble-topped antique chest in the foyer was purchased at a French flea market as a wedding gift for Lili and Sean O'Brien.



**L**ili O'Brien likes her houses old—in fact, the older the better. “I grew up in a 400-year-old house in Aix-en-Provence and have never lived in a new home,” says the interior designer. So when Lili and her husband, Sean, relocated from the Washington, D.C., area to Richmond, Virginia, the two were determined to continue that practice. In a city steeped in tradition, historical plaques, and century-old monuments, the options seemed endless. Lili and Sean were soon drawn to Richmond’s bustling Fan district, with its idyllic family-friendly avenues and youthful energy. There, amid a string of historic houses, they discovered a turreted circa-1906 Victorian residence with tall ceilings, long windows, and wide-plank wood floors.

Enchanted by the home’s authentic period detailing on the exterior and the light streaming in through a bank of bay windows, the O’Briens looked past imperfections and embraced the prospect of restoring the architectural gem. “The place was in desperate



**Dining room** The O'Briens eat meals and often do crafts and play games at the antique pedestal table. "Why not make the best dining room in the house the one you use every day?" Lili asks. Layered Moroccan tribal rugs mingle with sophisticated upholstered seating by Swaim and midcentury kilmos chairs. A portrait painted by Lili's father, Samuel Bjorkland, sits atop an intricately carved chinoiserie side table.



need of a cosmetic overhaul, but the house stood tall and proud with great lines," says Lili. Over the years, it had undergone numerous dodgy remodels and shoddy repair jobs, but nothing called out louder for a makeover than the interiors, which had remained virtually untouched since the '70s. (Read as linoleum floors, yellow countertops, blue cabinetry, a mirrored wet bar, and haphazard partitions that left rooms void of natural light.)

Lili and Sean brought the home up to speed in phases over a period of seven years, tackling a long list of projects—including an interim kitchen rehab. They did much of the work themselves, with the help of a few close friends.

With structural elements intact, the interiors came together under the tutelage of Lili, with help from her design business partner, Leigh Anne Muse. The two women, who have an office near downtown Richmond, have made their mark on the O'Brien home by designing warm spaces with straightforward attitudes.





**Kitchen** Homeowner/designer Lili O'Brien had a stainless steel pharmacist's cabinet fashioned into an island and topped with honed blue limestone. Cabinets and trim painted a deep charcoal contrast with the marble countertops and backsplash. **Sitting room** Sofa and chairs from Lee Industries create a cozy landing zone near the kitchen.



In keeping with that aesthetic, Lili focused rooms around select antiques and a few oversized pieces. "The rooms aren't overly large," she says. "A lot of little furniture and accessories would have appeared cluttered." In the narrow double-parlor living room, which overlooks the street, Lili created separate seating areas visually connected by a backless bench that can be directed toward either grouping. "The challenge throughout was to make the interiors work aesthetically yet function for daily life with our two small children, Sam and Miles," says Lili. "We make the most of every inch. There is no room that we use just when company is over."

Case in point: The large, round dining table serves as the formal eating space, breakfast area, crafts table, and place for the kids to do homework, while the living room's French bookcase, a stately piece crafted from antique cherry, houses collections of toys and CDs.

The city developed the neighborhood starting at either end of the three-block-long street, squeezing this residence, which sits in the

center of the parcel, onto a narrow lot spanning less than 18 feet. Almost connected to houses on either side, the home gets light through front and rear windows. The limited exposure results in a succession of dark, dramatic rooms infused with a sense of mystery.

Instead of coating walls in white paint, which would have given the home a more open and airy feel, Lili embraced the house's natural character, covering each space with warm, rich colors. "Every time we've repainted, I consider lightening hues to brighten the overall look, but I always gravitate back to the same colors," says Lili. "They feel right in here. I don't ever want a house to feel like it's trying to be something it isn't." She completed the look with antique wood accents and heavy textiles like mohair, coarse linen, velvet, and distressed leather.

Punctuated with a charcoal-and-white scheme, the kitchen and adjacent keeping room make an exclamation point at the rear of the home. "It's the hub of the house," says Lili. "We literally live



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back here.” An old stainless steel pharmacist’s cabinet set on wheels and topped with honed blue limestone stands in as the central island. On perimeter cabinets, elongated drawer pulls cut from industrial pipe streamline the look, while Carrara marble balances the effect with old-world appeal. Over the sink, a bank of French doors retrofitted as windows floods the room with natural light.

In 2009, the home was badly damaged and partially burned in a house fire, requiring the family to move out for 10 months during reconstruction. Though the O’Briens had the option to make improvements or upgrades, they didn’t change a thing. “We loved the house so much that we reinstalled everything exactly as it was before, right down to the reclaimed oak floors,” says Lili. “This place has such a deep history. I love the feeling that we’re just having our turn with this house. We’re a part of its life rather than the other way around.”

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**Children’s room** Wood floors painted white offset the lack of light in the bedroom that Sam and Miles share. To create a border, a strip of wood was left unpainted. Lively Mexican needlepoint coverlets keep the mood playful, while a grass-cloth wall covering by Kneidler-Fauchere and an oversized midcentury pendant light ensure this space isn’t just for child’s play.

**Master bedroom** Built-in shelves flank a 19th-century French mirror with split glass that hangs above the fireplace. Embroidered bed linens, a Danish antique blue-painted chest, and a Schumacher wall covering add subtle texture and interest to the room. Lili keeps jewelry in an 18th-century English spice box that is displayed in the master bedroom’s anteroom.

**Children** The O’Briens’ two sons, 4-year-old Miles and 7-year-old Sam.