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TRADITIONAL BUILDING

BEACON HILL BOOKS & CAFE

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Design

Beacon Hill Bookstore Restoration, Classic Design in Georgia, Affordable Housing in Providence



Melissa Fetter with architects Monika Zofia Pauli and Juan Guillermo Uribe Rubio to convert a 19th-century Greek Revival townhouse into Beacon Hill Books & Cafe. Below: The Greek Revival building is 25 feet across and 40 feet deep with an entry at grade level for the café.

BOOK SMART

A Boston visionary and her architecture firm create a wildly successful Beacon Hill Books & Cafe.

THE 2020 PANDEMIC WAS A BLESSING IN DISGUISE for Melissa Fetter and her Beacon Hill Books & Cafe on Boston's Charles Street.

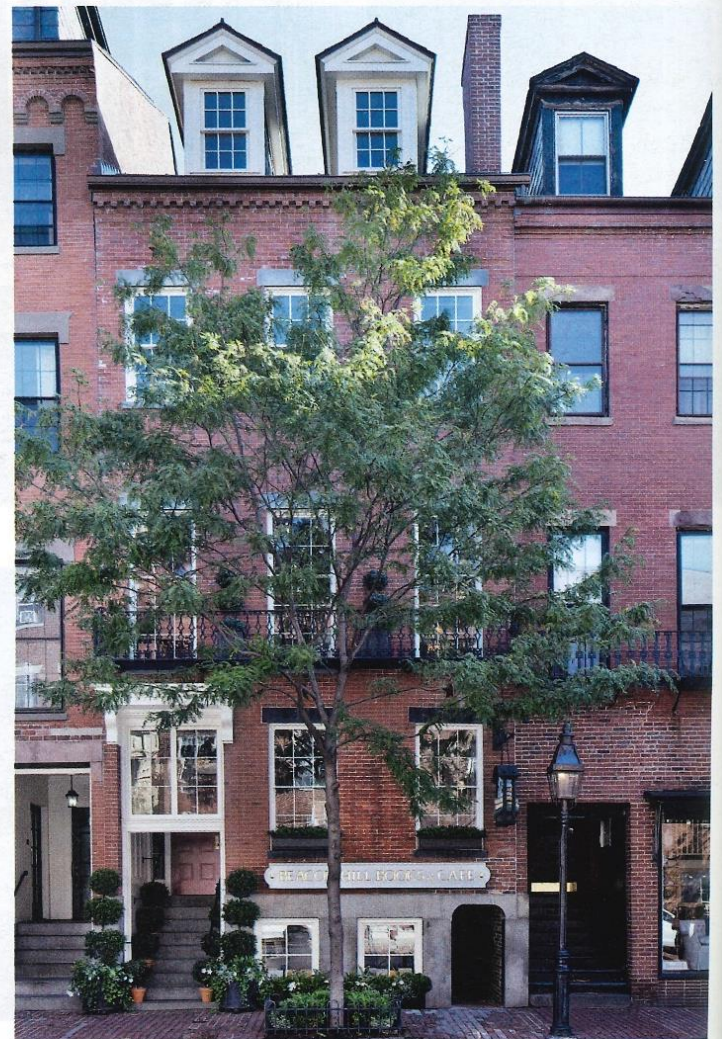
Fetter bought an 1845 Greek Revival townhouse in 2019, eager to fill a void in a historic neighborhood with no bookstore. By early 2020, she and her design team from Pauli & Uribe Architects had their plans ready to submit to the city.

Then came delays due to Covid.

"It took three years to open in October 2022—and that gave me time to keep inventing," Fetter says. "Now the space is very touching to people because of its level of detail—it enchants them."

It also allows them to see the interior of a classic, 19th-century townhouse with a long and storied past. For its first 50 years of life, it served as home and studio to Gilman Joslin, the pre-eminent globemaker who

By **J. Michael Welton** | Photos by **Sarah Winchester**



The second floor is for nonfiction books, the third is for fiction, including a small room with design, architecture, art and art history books. The fourth floor is for the children.



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created “terrestrial and celestial globes” on site. From 1981 to 2019, it was home to the Hungry I restaurant, whose French cuisine was a favorite of poets, artists, and even Mick Jagger.

Once she’d bought the property, Fetter approached Polish-born Monika Zofia Pauli with her idea for a bookstore and cafe. Pauli, a partner in Pauli & Uribe Architects, along with Uribe and senior associate, Richard Pignataro, are known for precise detailing and artistic integrity. She’s also a perfectionist who collaborates with artisans.

“I felt she had a respect for historic architecture with a European sensibility—and knew and understood that this was not to look like a typical bookstore,” Fetter says. “We worked together well and were good partners

on a lot of the concepts and details throughout.”

It was no small undertaking. The townhouse exterior was sound, but inside was a dilapidated building that housed rental apartments on three of its five floors. It required a complete gut renovation to bring it up to Fetter’s standards. “We went down to brick walls, dirt on the ground floor, and up to the sky through the ceiling,” she says. “We took it down to bare bones.”

Total square footage for the townhouse is 3,750 square feet. It’s a slim 25 feet wide and 40 feet deep, with an L-shaped space for cafe and kitchen below grade. Three levels above are 750 to 800 square feet each; the top floor is 500.



Above: The material palette is painted wood, designed for an historical house with the same details inside for custom cabinets and bookcases. **Right:** The entry to the bookstore is up a flight of stairs from the original building. **Below right:** The stair layout is typical with steps on one side and a hallway on the other.

The entry for the below-grade cafe was a true head-banger where the owner of the Hungry I had painted “Ouch” above its low archway. To make it handicapped accessible, Fetter and Pauli first created a tunnel paved in brick to deliver patrons to the cafe and courtyard beyond, then took space from the second floor for ease of entry. “There was already a little alley and we wanted to get rid of the stairs with a sloping ramp to allow for a wheelchair,” Fetter says. “We had to create head space, and Monika came up with the solution by infringing on the space above.”

Now the second floor, with its separate entry, houses nonfiction books, while the third is for fiction—with a small room dedicated to architecture, art, and art history—and the fourth is reserved for children’s books. The fifth floor is a business office for the whole affair.

There were practicalities to consider. The owner and architects kept the stairways, though narrow with tight turns, because the city building code preserves them. They added an elevator for easy access to all floors, then set about installing new HVAC systems, pipes, and electrical work.

“One of the things that Monika was most skilled at was how to snake HVAC and pipes through cleverly created chases that run over the bookcases and are covered in moulding,” she says. “It was not design, but a

matter of how to channel all these pipes.”

Fetter likens the tiny spaces tucked throughout the house to those aboard a boat. There’s storage under the stairs, and every nook and cranny is used to display books. “It’s like Aladdin’s Cave—the space keeps revealing itself,” she says.

For signage in each section—an acorn here, a feather, glove, open book,



“It’s all quite charming—there are bookcases with sconces, we didn’t leave anything untouched.”

or artist’s palette there—Pauli tracked down a French woodworker living in Dayville, Connecticut, named Laurent Robert. His *pièce de résistance* hangs outside the front door, a 3-D sign carved from a block of mahogany two by three feet.

It depicts a squirrel sitting atop a stack of books. “We showed him the logo, he did a maquette, we approved it, and he did the sign,” she says. “And Monika painted it for us, which was along her artistic talents as a painter.”

Fetter worked with interior designer Cathy Kincaid on a color palette she calls “very upmarket.” That means Farrow and Ball for all the paints. “In one room all the bookcases are in Rectory Red and in another two they are deep-blue De Nimes—the color of denim jeans,” Fetter says.

Wallpaper and chair or window-seat cushions came from Sister Parish Design, a company Jackie Kennedy used in the White House. “It’s all quite charming—there are bookcases with sconces,” she says. “We didn’t leave anything untouched.”

Left: The children’s bookroom is scaled down for smaller readers. Below: Interior designer Cathy Kincaid created a feeling that’s very upmarket, using Farrow and Ball for all paints.





Above: Each floor has its own character, with different windows, different heights, and different feels. Right: The architects were able to keep the stairs throughout because of the building code that preserves them. Opposite page: To enter the cafe, guests walk down a ramp through a tunnel, moving along a brick floor, with a raised floor above.

The result has been a runaway success that no one could have anticipated. It's been profitable since its first day of business, selling 200,000 books in 15 months. A Tik Tok video went viral and people now stand in line on weekends to get inside—after adding it to their “must-see” list for Boston visits.

“We were told we’d be lucky if our inventory turned over four times in a year—and it’s turned 17 times,” Fetter says. “That goes to the architecture, because it’s so compelling and interesting.”

The pandemic played a role, too, and not just with extra design time. “Coming out of Covid, people had reacquainted themselves with reading a real book, not an electronic one – and they were craving in-person interactions,” she says. “And the only way retail survives is to create a compelling experience where people want to come inside the store.”

That’s something Beacon Hill Books & Cafe now delivers with high style. TB

J. Michael Welton is the author of *Drawing from Practice: Architects and the Meaning of Freehand* (Routledge: 2015). His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Metropolis*, *Dwell* and *The News & Observer* in Raleigh. He is editor and publisher of the digital design magazine www.architectsandartisans.com.





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