

Old Port

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Jessie Carroll of Whitten Architects lovingly restored this Douglas fir, post-and-beam house, adding period-appropriate furniture like the rosewood wall bar to the right. She lightened the house by removing green shag carpeting, dark wood paneling, and drapes, but she kept period features like the original Formica countertops, Chicklet tile backsplash, and birch plywood cabinets in the kitchen. The fixtures, chandelier, and textured white ceiling with glitter are original to the house.

CHARACTER & SOUL

A young Portland architect gives a midcentury-modern home the love it deserves.

BY DEBRA SPARK // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MYRIAM BABIM



Soon after architect Jessie Carroll moved to Portland in 2012, she went looking for a multi-family investment property. She figured she'd rent one apartment for income, live in the other, and be able to walk to her job with Whitten Architects, whose office is on the peninsula. A year and a half (and several failed offers) later, she was still looking. She felt lucky to have realtor Wade R. Fleming from the Bean Group assisting her, but even though he was patient and architecturally well informed, Carroll was getting discouraged, having been outbid on so many properties. Everyone else, it seemed, was a cash buyer. Then, Fleming emailed her early one morning about a single-family house she needed to see. It was six and a half miles from her office, and in Westbrook, not a city Carroll was even considering. On the phone the next day, she asked if they could plan a showing for later in the week, as she was on a job site. Fleming said no; offers were flying in. Within ten minutes of getting to the house, Carroll's offer was among them.

The 1,600-square-foot house in Westbrook was emphatically not like anything else Carroll had yet seen on the market. An open-plan, Douglas fir, post-and-beam design with attached carport, the house immediately made her think of the California homes that developer Joseph Eichler built largely in the 50s and 60s. They were inspired by the design work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, and Carroll had always been a fan. Like Eichlers, as they are often called, the Westbrook home had a low-pitched roof with substantial overhangs. Unlike them, its wide gable end faced the street and was full of large paned windows. (Eichlers have



glass gables, too, but typically they front on a back patio reached through sliding glass doors.)

When Carroll bid on the house, she had one thing to offer that other buyers didn't—a letter describing her fondness for midcentury modern design. While in architecture school at Northeastern University, she had written her graduate thesis on consumerism, the single-family market, and post-World War II design. She knew she'd do right by the house, helping it to become the Platonic form of what it already

was: an East Coast Eichler.

Or not exactly an East Coast Eichler, as Carroll learned once her offer was accepted and she'd done some research. But something quite close.

The Westbrook home had been built in 1968 by a schoolteacher, and yet all save three Eichlers were built on the West Coast. How would a teacher have acquired the design know-how to construct such a (then) forward-looking home? Carroll came to suspect (but could not

prove) that she had bought a Deck House, the name for a kit version of a house designed and produced at midcentury with similar features to Eichlers, but with better insulation and a southerly orientation for solar gains. Fabricated in an Acton, Massachusetts, factory, Deck Houses were shipped to locations throughout the Northeastern seacoast and assembled on site. (Theoretically, the houses could have been shipped anywhere. In fact, the majority were shipped to Massachusetts and Maryland, with a substantial number going to North Carolina.)



Opposite page: Carroll converted a main floor laundry room into a dressing room that holds a dresser she found on Craigslist, an Oriental rug from Portland Flea-for-All, and a storefront mannequin atop art and architecture books like *Bespoke Home* and *West Coast Modern*.

This page: This view of the dining and living room shows off the glass-filled gable that faces the street. Carroll found the yellow chairs on the sidewalk in Portland. She purchased the oval teak table from Vintage Modern Maine in Cumberland.

Carroll's house has a walkout basement that will eventually function as guest quarters. For now, she lives on the main floor, which includes a high-ceilinged, open central kitchen and living space, an owner's bedroom with an adjacent laundry room that Carroll has converted into a dressing room, and a guest bedroom, where Carroll has sometimes had a roommate and sometimes uses as a yoga or TV room.

Before she moved in, Carroll removed all the shag carpeting, drapes, interior wood paneling

(save for a small piece she left above the kitchen sink), and a structurally unsound back deck. She installed wood floors and drywall, then rewired and reinsulated, adding a new heat distribution system and sleek, white Runtal radiators on the main floor. Previously, the house had been dark. Now it is bright and homey.

Carroll left the kitchen with its Formica counters, birch plywood cabinets, and Chicklet-shaped backsplash tiles untouched, although



"THE HOUSE HAS CHARACTER AND SOUL, AND I WANT THE PIECES I BRING IN TO HAVE THE SAME."

—JESSIE CARROLL

she purchased a new refrigerator. The blue tub and toilet on the first floor were getting moldy and leaking into the basement. She renovated the bathroom, adding a modern teak vanity from Wayfair with matching sink and mirror, white vertical subway tiles for a new shower space, and gray marble hexagonal floor tiles.

Originally, the house was clad in western red cedar vertical V-groove siding. Carroll painted the wood black but left the underside of the roof overhang white. One inspiration for the look was the Japanese technique of shou sugi ban, which chars exterior wood to protect it from mold, insects, and other weathering issues.

"When you live in a small space, you have to be very thoughtful about what you bring into your home," Carroll says. She chose carefully, aiming for items that were period-appropriate and playful, while keeping to a minimalist

aesthetic. Much in the house—a rosewood wall bar, sunburst wall sculpture by Devalf, and gold framed mirror—was purchased at Portland's Flea-for-All, a Congress Street artisan and vintage market with which Carroll is smitten, admiring co-owner Erin Kiley's taste, and also her knowledge about what she sells. "If I am going to make an investment I want the story behind it," says Carroll. She bought an oval teak dining room table, which extends from five to twelve feet, from Vintage Modern Maine, a website which shows furniture by appointment in Cumberland. Carroll paired the table with white steel-framed chairs upholstered in yellow vinyl, which she found on the sidewalk in the West End.

Other items are from family (her grandmother's gleaming wooden hope chest) or were left in the home (Dutch porcelain figurines in the kitchen and rust and green accordion blinds in the guest

bedroom). Still others were simply curiosities that Carroll liked (including a torso of an armless, bald female mannequin, which sits on a tall stack of architecture books in the dressing room). "The house has character and soul," says Carroll, "and I want the pieces I bring in to have the same."

One of the surprises of homeownership for Carroll has been that she loves to garden and that she may, in the future, want an even bigger space to plant. Not that she is planning on a move. She enjoys her neighborhood, which is full of children, and her neighbors, whom she often finds outside working on their homes or in their gardens. Still, she suspects that this first of her homes won't be the last. "I have given this house what it wanted," she says. "And there are so many good homes in Maine that deserve a second life. I would love to do it again." ★

This page: Carroll painted the house black—a look that she says is trending now—and the underside of the roof overhang white. **Opposite page, clockwise from top left:** A guest bedroom with a sofa from Urban Outfitters and a painting by Carroll. The bathroom was completely renovated with a Wayfair vanity that comes as part of a set with the faucet and medicine cabinet, and hex marble tile that Carroll chose for the floor because it is period appropriate to the house. Carroll and her cat in a corner of the living room with a rug from West Elm and finds from the Portland Flea-for-All, including the Devalf starburst, which is a signature mid-century modern wall hanging, and the framed mirror.





Stories to Tell, Stories to Sell

Let the Landry team write the book on your home.

Photography by Jonathan Reece

If you own an older home, you are the keeper of an archive of stories. Whether those stories are intriguing, fanciful, wondrous, or mysterious, they and the memories they imprint are a large part of the joy of living in a home with history.



When Tom Landry and his wife bought their turn-of-the-twentieth-century home in 2001, they found remnants of its stories—old, handwritten bank notes, a homemade, papier-mâché jack o’ lantern, a rusted birdcage. “We’ve since met former owners of our home, found old pictures, and heard many of the chapters that preceded those we’ve added to the book,” says Landry.

An older home has character, charm, and a sense of place that a newer home will take years to acquire. Buying, owning, restoring, and selling a home with history takes care, attention, experience, and often an open mind. Especially if you are contemplating the future sale of an iconic older property, telling its unique story is essential to make sure that buyers understand why it is worth the asking price. “This is why long before a potential sale, the conversation between owner and trusted advisor should begin,” says Landry.

Through his two companies—Benchmark Residential and Investment Real Estate and CornerStone Building and Restoration—and his long experience, Landry is perfectly positioned to be that trusted advisor. “I grew up in a Victorian era home in rural Maine and bought and restored my first home, an 1850’s farmhouse, at the age of 19,” he explains. “Now, almost 30 years later, I’ve personally bought, sold, and restored dozens more Portland area homes and helped hundreds of others do the same.” CornerStone Building and Restoration can improve your home for both current enjoyment and maximum future value. And, when you’re ready to sell, you can trust Benchmark Residential and Investment Real Estate to help tell your home’s unique story, share it with the widest pool of buyers, and ultimately ensure you sell it for the highest price. Landry and his team are eager to “write the book on your home,” he says. “We are especially qualified to help bring your home’s past, present and future stories to life.”



Old Port magazine sat down with Landry to learn about the many services offered by his team:

Q. What is the particular expertise that sets you and your firm apart when it comes to selling older homes?

A. First, I'm one of Maine's top-producing brokers and have been Portland's number one listing/selling Realtor for more than a decade. I'm also a recognized expert, contributor, and panelist for media outlets and Greater Portland Landmarks, and I have more than 30 years of experience in owning, restoring, and selling historic and older homes.

Q. What specifically do you offer your clients who want to sell an older home?

A. We provide unparalleled marketing expertise and advertising exposure, using breathtaking photography, full-feature video, historic research, comprehensive brochures, even personalized websites, to tell the unique story of your home. Our free staging services are available to every seller, and if your home needs some improvements before you put it on the market, our craftspeople can get the work done beautifully and efficiently.

Q. What about someone who isn't ready to sell their older home, but wants to do some renovation with an eye on selling it down the road?

A. That's where my firm, Cornerstone Building and Restoration, comes in. We are expert at solving old house challenges, and can help clients prioritize home improvements for the greatest enjoyment and value. And because our qualified craftspeople are doing the work, clients can be assured that their project is a priority.

