

# The New York Times

ON LOCATION

## How to Cure the Renovation Bug?

It isn't easy to stop remodeling, but one interior designer in Newton, Mass., is convinced that after 16 years she's almost there.



Joseph St. Pierre for The New York Times



By **Tim McKeough**

Dec. 3, 2019, 5:01 a.m. ET



The renovation of Geoff and Liz Caan’s house in Newton, Mass., has been a 16-year work in progress. Since the couple bought the 1920s Georgian-style brick house in the Chestnut Hill historic district in 2003, Ms. Caan, an [interior designer](#) who favors rooms bursting with statement-making color and pattern, has rarely rested.

Renovating and redecorating the rooms one by one, she has overhauled some spaces more than once to suit her changing tastes and the shifting dynamics of her family of five.

“It’s like a little laboratory” for design ideas, said Ms. Caan, 51. “I think your home should evolve with you.”

When she and Mr. Caan, 50, a managing director at SLC Management, moved in, she decided to keep the kitchen cabinets, but added black-and-white striped wallpaper and painted the floor a vivid red-and-white diamond checkerboard.

A few years later, she replaced the venetian blinds with black shutters, swapped the nickel pulls and plumbing fixtures for brass ones, and repainted the floor with a pattern of interlocking hexagons in two shades of blue.



Liz and Geoff Caan at home with their younger son, Leo, in their 1920s, Georgian-style house in the Chestnut Hill historic district of Newton, Mass. The family bought the house in 2003. Joseph St. Pierre for The New York Times

Last year, she repainted the floor again, in Farrow & Ball's electric Yellowcake.

"I loved it at first — it's very bright," she said, noting that her goal with the floor has always been to divert attention from the inexpensive cabinets that came with the house. "It's funny, because people always love the kitchen, but it's really kind of junky."

The family room has undergone such extensive changes that repeat visitors could be forgiven for thinking they were in the wrong house. "When we first did it, it was light yellow, pink and green," Ms. Caan said. "It was winter when I did it, and I was in this kind of Palm Beach-y mode — like, 'Get me out of here' — so I made it look very tropical, light and summery."

That lasted five years. Then she "threw everything out and started over," coating the walls in a deep emerald green and banishing the pink accents.



Ms. Caan has overhauled the family room three times. It currently has high-gloss blue walls and trim, and a ceiling covered in Fornasetti wallpaper from Cole & Son. The tufted blue ottoman is custom, the yellow lacquer tables are vintage and the shirt poster is by Peter Birkhäuser. Joseph St. Pierre for The New York Times

Then, two years ago, “I just felt like I was more in a blue phase,” she said, so she repainted the walls a high-gloss aqua and added cloud-patterned Fornasetti wallpaper to the ceiling.

And don’t get her started on the living room.

“It’s had 500 different furniture arrangements — I just keep playing with it,” she said, to accommodate the furniture and accessories she acquires. Recent additions include a 19th-century English secretary that belonged to Mr. Caan’s mother (now used as a bar) and a taxidermy zebra mount from SafariWorks Decor.

Stuck indoors during a snowstorm last winter, she suddenly felt inspired to give the room a salon-style gallery wall. “I decided to gather all the art that was lying around,” she said. “I just started to hang stuff and added little charms and things to fill in the spaces.”

For Mr. Caan, the redesigns sometimes double as workouts. “I do help with some of the heavier lifting,” he said, “literally, in terms of moving things around.”

But he welcomes the changes. “Prior to this house, we lived in different cities, in different apartments and houses,” he said. “With this, you get a whole change without moving, so it’s refreshing.”



Ms. Caan kept the original kitchen cabinets but changed the counters, plumbing fixtures, pulls and light fixtures, installing a Hicks pendant by Thomas O’Brien (from \$599). She added the wallpaper and shutters, and painted the floor three different ways over the years. Joseph St. Pierre for The New York Times

Of course, there were less glamorous improvements along the way. The Caans replaced the heating system, going from oil to natural gas. They finished the basement. They fixed drainage issues outside, and added a bluestone patio and fence. They replaced the gutters and built a new driveway.

Between the flurries of renovation, there have been a few moments of relative calm. “I take breaks,” Ms. Caan said, recalling the time in 2016 when she finished renovating the three bedrooms and two bathrooms — the master suite and rooms for the couple’s daughter, Lilly, now 19, and younger son, Leo, 12 — on the second floor of the three-story house.

“I did the whole second floor at one time and then took a couple of years off,” she said.

But like a dormant virus, the renovation bug always comes back. “I wake up one day and I’m like, ‘Oh, that fireplace surround is awful, and I can’t live with it for another day;’” she said. “Then I make some phone calls, and it’s gone.”

When their older son, Henry, 24, left for college, she wrapped the walls and ceiling of his third-floor room in black-and-white, gingham-patterned wallcovering to make it a more welcoming retreat for guests.



Ms. Caan renovated her older son’s room when he left for college, wrapping it in gingham-patterned fabric from Romo. The nightstands are from Restoration Hardware and the Charlton Wall Lights are from Aerin (\$489). Joseph St. Pierre for The New York Times

Over the years, the Caans have paid contractors a total of about \$430,000, Ms. Caan said, estimating that they spent a similar amount on the decorating (and redecorating).

And they're not done yet. For 2020, she has big plans.

"The kitchen and the dining room will be changed," Ms. Caan said. "I'm going to open them up to become a larger kitchen-dining area."

And where there are now kitchen banquettes, she plans to add a powder room. She also intends to open up the back wall with big windows and doors.

Then it might be time to give the house another break. "We've been chipping away at it over the years," she said. "It's getting there."