







BOSTON  
HOME

**CRAFTY:** Jessica Lander works amid a sea of supplies in the kids' basement art room. The floor is polyurethaned with glitter, ribbon, and paper scraps, and the children's outgrown shoes line the far wall. Opposite, David's plywood loft bed—which he designed at age five—dominates his room.

# Schoolhouse Rocks

Grand conversion plans combined with touches of whimsy—a secret passageway, private mini-balconies—helped one family turn an old school into their ideal home. By Sascha de Gersdorff

**ON THE SECOND FLOOR** of a converted schoolhouse in Cambridge, Jessica Lander sleeps in a tree. A plywood forest shades her lofted bed, below which hangs a sturdy purple hammock. Sculpted blond wooden trees soar above her twin mattress, lending the entire room an *Alice in Wonderland* feel. And that's exactly the mood she was going for when she designed the space—at age 11.

The arboretum idea was inspired by a homework assignment to plan a dream bedroom. Taking notes from sculptor

Gualverio Michelangeli, whose woodcut animals she had admired on a family trip to Orvieto, Italy, Jessica got to work. Two years later, what began as a class project became a reality. Little did she know she and her fantasy bed would eventually land right back at its point of conception—her old elementary school.

Jessica's parents, Eric and Lori Lander, bought the former Fayerweather Street School in 1999. They were already intimately familiar with it: All three Lander children (Jessica, 18, Daniel, 14,

and David, 11) went or go to Fayerweather, a progressive independent school for grades pre-K through 8. The building had been on the market since 1993, when the school outgrew its walls and was eyeing a new location on Concord Avenue. Initially, developers swooped in with plans to transform the classrooms into condos, an idea the neighborhood opposed. The Landers, who lived nearby in Central Square, stood by for seven years while other offers were placed and rejected.

"Finally, I said to Eric, 'Should we buy



it?” Lori, an artist, remembers. “I told him we could make it into a great contemporary house. We called [Cambridge architect] Maryann Thompson—our kids were in preschool together—and said, ‘Can you come over and tell us whether we’re crazy or not?’”

Thompson and the Landers spent several enthusiastic hours walking through the schoolhouse, envisioning a four-level house filled with lots of light and space. The obvious challenge lay in turning a concrete institution into a warm, welcoming residence appropriate for a family of five. In the end, after receiving a reasonable cost estimate from Newton-based Marvel Construction, the Landers made an offer.

Today, only whispers of the old school remain. Of course, there’s the original third-floor gymnasium/basketball court. But at first glance, a visitor might not know that hundreds of adolescents once roamed the halls of this airy, modern house. Just a few subtle interior details—overhead exposed piping, a concrete stairwell—hint at its former incarnation. As is exemplified by Jessica’s bed and those of her brothers (they followed suit with giant-tree and castle lofts of their own), the space has taken on a new life: one that’s awash in creativity, color, and unique design.

**THE LANDERS HIRED** a crack team, headed by architect Thompson and contractor Marvel, [continued on page 116]



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**GOLD STAR:** Clockwise from top, Lori designed the cabinet doors using actual leaves and then hired a professional sandblaster to fabricate them; a secret passageway connects David’s bedroom to his parents’; the sundrenched kitchen is home to the Landers’ *Iron Chef* tournaments. Opposite, Lori’s bold mural hangs above a 1950s walnut dining table and chairs.





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[continued from page 110] to completely gut and redesign the interior. Through a process that took 13 months, nearly every indoor wall was knocked down and all the electricity and plumbing replaced; the only schoolhouse rooms that remain relatively untouched are the gym and the third-floor space that now serves as Lori's studio. Gray concrete outer walls and floors that couldn't be torn down for structural reasons were covered in wood or tile or painted softer, more appealing hues.

On the outside of the house, concrete walls were covered with smooth mahogany slats, while existing brick remains exposed. A slate and riverstone outer walkway continues beneath the Landers' front door and across their foyer, culminating in a trickling Japanese-style fountain. The dark gray stone combined with the deep-red oak floors sets the tone for the house's contemporary, clean style.

"We wanted to blur the boundaries between outside and inside," says Thompson. "The stone walkway makes for a nice transition, and the fountain creates a cleansing effect. There's this whole idea of unfolding into the house—a way of getting away from the world and into a sanctuary."

The Zen-like atmosphere is pierced by vibrant paintings—Lori's own—of Balinese women. The paintings line

the hallway leading to the kitchen and living room. Her canvases are a constant throughout the house, infusing various spaces with bold brushstrokes and bright depictions of international market scenes. Much as the slate ties together inside and out, Lori's art acts as a conduit between rooms. "It's no accident that the color scheme of the house is golds and oranges," Lori says. "Those are the colors I love to paint with. When we chose materials like woods, stones, and fabrics, we chose them in colors right out of my paintings." In some cases, entire sections of the house, such as the entryway, were designed around particular pieces of art.

The result is four floors decorated in warm golds accented by quick slashes of deep blues or rays of fierce yellows. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the cavernous living room, which is decorated with orange furniture and five of Lori's representational canvases. A two-story concrete wall with small windows was replaced by massive 18-foot-tall mahogany-framed plates of glass that let in so much sunshine that the Landers rarely need to turn on the heat. The area's original concrete ceiling was demolished to create a vaulted space interrupted only by an indoor wrap-around second-floor mahogany balcony. A cluster of narrow hanging lamps from Wolfers Lighting descend from above.

**KING OF THE CASTLE:** Mango poses on a Crate & Barrel chair in the master bedroom.



PHOTOGRAPH, KELLER + KELLER