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Boston

Design Re-Vision

By [Louis Postel](#) | [Boston Home](#) | Spring 2007

In a Cambridge penthouse, master cabinetmaker Paul Cusack carefully buffs a black lacquer credenza that he made 21 years ago and jokes with the homeowner about “lifetime guarantees.” He is fixing the spot where a worker left a small scuff during the home’s most recent evolution: combining it with another unit to add nearly 2,000 square feet.

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Maho Abe, director of interior design and architecture at Woburn-based Zen Associates, designed the home’s interior back in 1984 and planned its transition to a three-floor penthouse perfect for displaying artwork and entertaining.

Collectors of contemporary art, the owners had literally run out of wall space for paintings. And they knew that their grandchildren, who would soon be in Boston attending college, would want privacy when they visited. Abe’s challenge was to design a place suitable for art, as well as for guests.

“At first we thought the changes we’d have to make would be purely cosmetic,” says the homeowner. In the end, however, the new addition had to be gutted, save for a recently renovated kitchen.

After the walls separating the units were knocked down, the challenge to meld the spaces into one began. The owners wanted the transition between them to be seamless, and it is, mostly. The master bedroom's design was "timeless, with clean lines," says Abe. "So I just continued that in the new property." But Abe chose different materials this time around—wood, for one. "I didn't know the wood or respect the wood back then when I was young," says Abe. (The '80s design relied on black lacquer and a seamless version of Formica that was new at the time.) Abe worked with Cusack on the wood motif, and the space is filled with delicately stained swirls of exotic woods, from honey-hued Japanese ash (also known as tamo wood) to Cusack's green-gray anigre drop-leaf table and dyed lacewood credenza.

GALLERY SPACE

THE COUPLE'S ART COLLECTION EASILY fills the expansion. Sculptor Dimitri Hadzi (who died last year at 85) and painter-printmaker Michael Mazur are well represented, as well as many local artists and works from Boston galleries. There are international acquisitions, too. "My husband has more time for visiting galleries when we travel," says the home-owner, explaining pieces from Russia, Japan, Argentina and Africa.

Off an airy living room, in a balcony sculpture garden, a large metal piece by Hadzi sits among smooth Mexican beach pebbles and slabs of Pennsylvania bluestone. Shin Abe, Maho's husband and the landscape designer and principal of Zen Associates, designed the balcony, and even worked with Hadzi on the sculpture's display. "[Shin and Hadzi] met at a cocktail party, and they talked about the best way to align the stones," the homeowner says. The pebbles and bluestone slabs were reset at an angle to follow the sculpture's base. "It made all the difference in the world," she says. "It gives the whole thing a harmony it wouldn't have had if they'd left it where it was." Now it seems as if the stones trace the contours of the Charles River, leading the eye beyond the exterior lines of the building to stunning Harvard views.

CLEAN SWEEP

THE VIEWS INSIDE THE PENTHOUSE SUITE are equally impressive, especially from the casual living and dining areas, where, overhead, two greenish-gray-tinted mirrors sit on either end of a clerestory window topped by a domed skylight. The mirrors reflect each other, bouncing

light back and forth, creating the illusion of greater space and offering a peek at the sky that overcomes the typical low boundaries of condo ceilings.

Maho Abe's work is characteristically minimal. There's no clutter in the living room, but because of the warm wood throughout, it's far from sterile. "It's not cold, sleek steel—it's warm, just with clean lines," says Abe. "It has a clean, simplistic Japanese feeling."

The floors—prefinished steamed beech wood from Italy—see a lot of movement because the furniture there is light and transportable. "This space gives us some flexibility," says the owner. "We can easily move all the furniture to the side when we have chamber music, or for charity and fundraising events." And the furniture, from the oversize dark gray ottoman to the cozy neutral-toned chairs, is deliberately low-profile, so as not to take away from the room's impressive artwork.

Minimizing distracting elements is something the project's general contractor, David Glod, president of Dunstable-based Glod Restoration & Renovation, knows a lot about. "Sometimes, after homeowners spend a lot on contemporary," says Glod, "they come back and say, 'Hey, this doesn't look like much.'" But that's the whole idea. Structural elements need to disappear, leaving the art and the people to stand out. "Your eye is immediately drawn to the artwork and cabinetry—which is really more like sculpture—instead of casing or ornate crown molding," says Glod. "And that's really what it's all about."

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