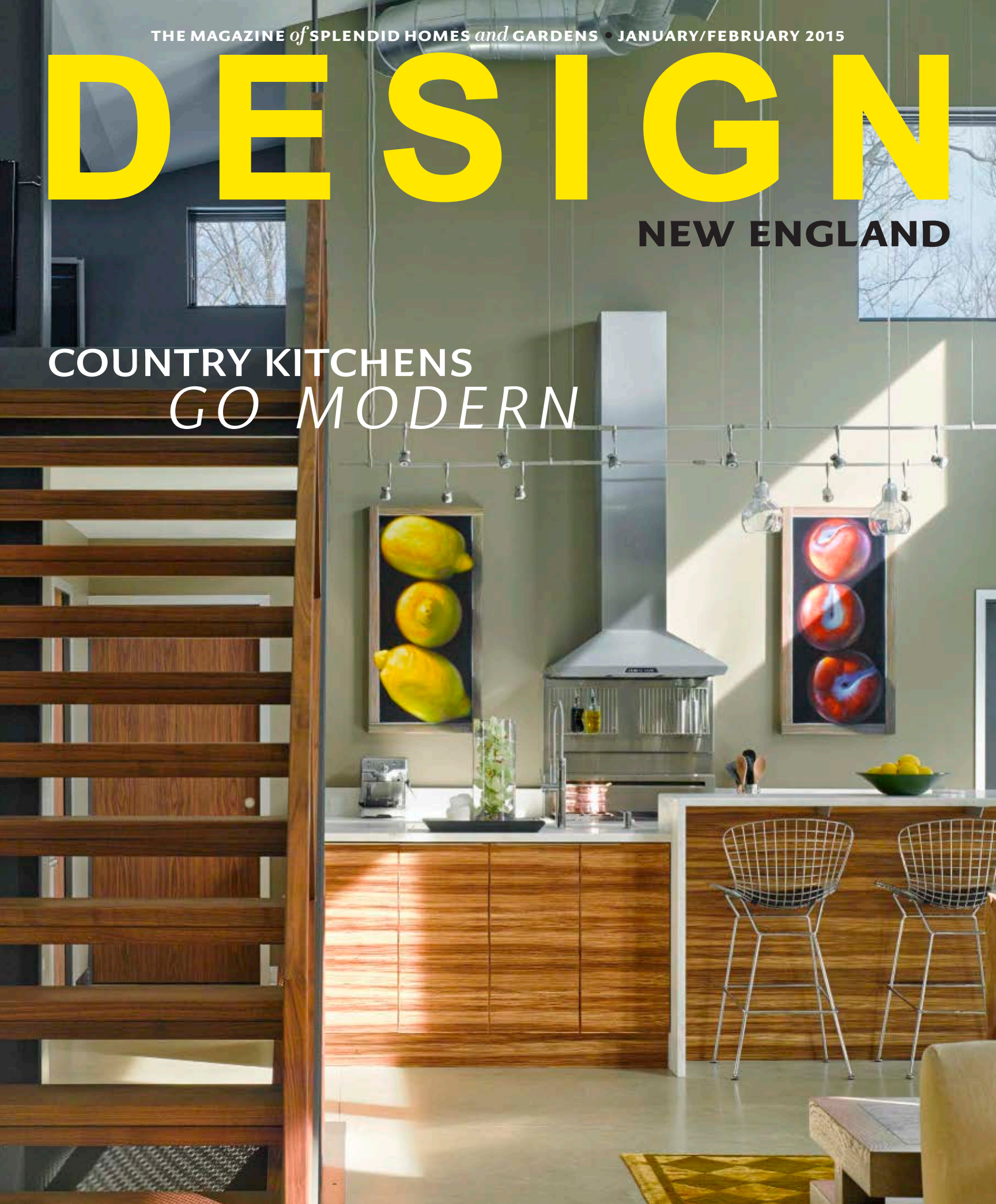


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DESIGN

NEW ENGLAND

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Under the Stoop

Imagination and innovation are harnessed to turn a crawl space into a tiny jewel of a bathroom

WRITTEN BY
MARNI ELYSE KATZ

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
GREG PREMUR

A POCKET DOOR opens to the new guest bathroom tucked under the building's exterior stairs, a space that is typically not used efficiently in urban brownstones. An opaque film covers the window for privacy.



BATH

Relegating guests to quarters akin to Harry Potter's accommodations at the Dursleys' was not quite the scenario homeowner Jill Koontz conjured when she imagined tucking a guest bath under the stoop in her garden-level condo in Boston's Back Bay. Rather, Koontz envisioned a spa-like, albeit tiny, modern oasis.

Koontz, who co-owns two local yoga studios, purchased her 1,020-square-foot two-bedroom unit in a five-story 1890 brownstone in 2000. Over the years, she's flirted with the idea of selling to buy a place with two bathrooms, but never found the right opportunity. "I didn't really want to move," says Koontz, "I just wanted another bathroom." Then inspiration struck.

On the advice of a friend, Koontz hired Oliver Bouchier



THE SPACE WAS designed as a European-style wet bath in which the entire room is essentially the shower. Porcelain faux bois tile covers the floor, back wall, and ceiling for a look that's reminiscent of Swedish saunas.

CRAFTING SPACES, CREATING HOMES



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BASIC MACHINE-CUT subway tile on the side walls is economical, practical, and in tune with the overall aesthetic. The narrow built-in medicine chest is by Robern, and the waist-high ledge is perfect for holding guest's toiletries.

of Payne|Bouchier Fine Builders in Boston to execute what could have been perceived as a far-fetched project — excavating the space under the building's exterior front stairs. Bouchier took it on with zeal. Koontz says, "It wasn't a big project for them, but I always felt like I was a big-deal client."

The area that would become a pristine 17-square-foot guest bath was initially a nothing space, a former coal cellar that was turned into a closet, and beyond it, an unfinished storage area deep under the stoop. Located down a tiny hall from the guest bedroom, Koontz was certain it could accommodate a bathroom for her guests.

Bouchier hired Kim Wyke of Hydra Concrete Waterproofing in Holliston, Massachusetts, to determine the viability of the venture. Could the space be properly insulated and rendered watertight? Was there a plumbing stack they could access for water? The answer to both those questions was yes; however, while poking around

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BATH



WITH THE HELP of Payne|Bouchier Fine Builders, homeowner Jill Koontz turned underutilized space under her building's front steps into a small but luxurious guest bathroom.

in the crawl space under Koontz's unit, Wyke discovered the floor of her condo had sunk about 2 to 3 inches from its original location. Undeterred, Koontz viewed even this news as a gift. "I can't imagine when I would have found out otherwise," she says, "or what could have eventually happened." She contacted the condo board in her building and quickly initiated a fix.

Meanwhile, Payne|Bouchier designer Chelsea Strandberg worked on various design schemes, playing with options for fitting a shower, sink, and toilet into the almost impossibly small space. She even drew a version with a step-down Japanese soaking tub. While Koontz agreed the concept was fabulous, what she really wanted was a European-style wet bath in which the entire room is essentially the shower, and the toilet and other fixtures are all waterproof. Of course, this meant the entire room had to be made absolutely watertight.

Wyke used a crystalline waterproof-

ing coating called Contite on the walls. As it is absorbed into the surface, the coating reacts with the cement to produce crystals that fill its pores, thus blocking the flow of moisture. However, there's not much new technology that can treat old sandstone, so to waterproof the ceiling on the underside of the exterior stairs, Wyke used a roofing membrane.

"You can't manufacture new space in the city," says Wyke, who revels in such challenges, "but with a little bit of creativity in design and waterproofing, you can transform spaces you never thought had potential."

In addition to waterproofing, the space needed insulation. With its modicum of square footage at stake, Strandberg coveted every inch, but to get the best results, 8 inches of "filler" material of one kind or another had to be added. "Every time I visited," she says, "the bathroom would be smaller!"

A waist-height wall that juts out on one side could not be removed without causing major structural problems. Strandberg topped it with white Caesarstone, transforming it into a functional ledge. The windowsill above, also lined in Caesarstone, holds stacks of towels.

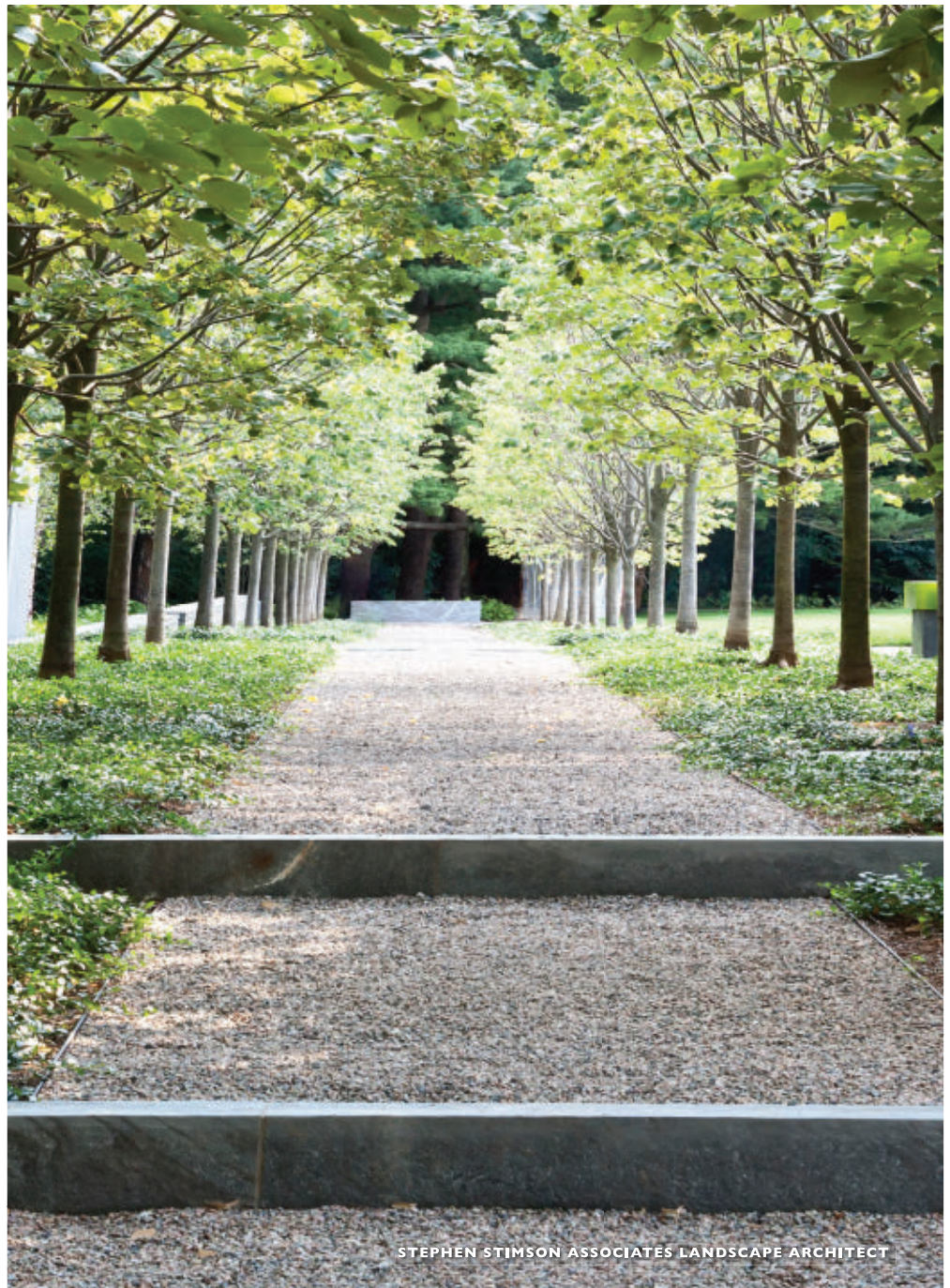
To create a sleek, spa-like feel, Strandberg ran the 6-inch-by-36-inch porcelain faux bois tile along the floor, up the back wall, and across the ceiling. Koontz says the result is reminiscent of wood walls in Swedish saunas. The 4-inch-by-12-inch white

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ceramic tile that lines the two side walls is finished with brown grout to match the wood hue. It's a detail that elevates the design and pulls

the room together. When it came to picking fixtures, there was literally little choice: a wall-hung Duravit toilet and wall-hung Duravit sink that is 14½ inches wide and 14½ inches deep got the job stylishly done.

Despite the scant space, the room functions perfectly. "It's small, sure," says Koontz, "but it's not the smallest bathroom I've seen in the Back Bay." Maybe not, but it may just be the best planned. ■



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