

Renovated staircase, with row of small windows opening into the second floor office.

# The House of the Four Bell(e)s Rejoins Society

All photos © Jesse Gerard/Hoachlander  
Davis Photography, except as noted

## Eclectic Blend of Old and New Rejuvenates a Logan Circle Dowager

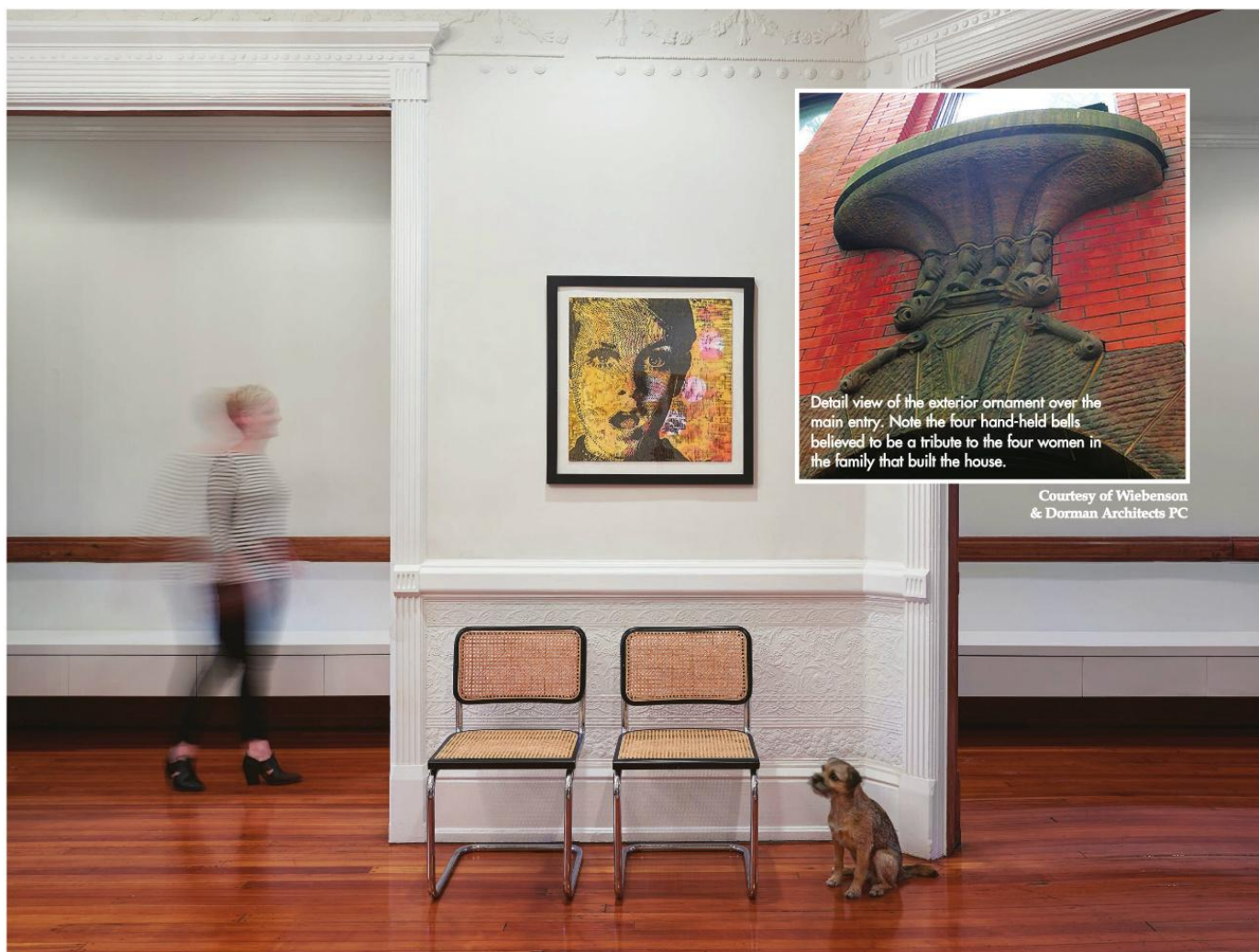
by Steven K. Dickens, AIA, LEED AP

The role of the architect can vary considerably from project to project. For most custom residential projects that win awards and are published in venues like **ARCHITECTUREDC**, the architect is usually the primary design actor, sometimes creating what the Germans called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a complete, unified work of art, architecture, interior design, and landscape. Clients have their magazine clippings and Pinterest pages, and of course are consulted every step of the way, but the architect is the lead creator and selector. At the other end of the spectrum of services, sometimes the architect acts as a sort of creative director, coordinating the

efforts of specialty consultants such as interior decorators, kitchen designers, and lighting designers.

For the renovation of this spacious circa-1890 Logan Circle row house, architect **Kendall Dorman**, principal of **Wiebenson & Dorman Architects PC**, served as a trusted advisor during a multi-year, ongoing process. In 2009, a DC couple, having completed a 13-year renovation of a Tenleytown house, decided to return to more urban living. They first engaged architect Dorman to help “test-fit” houses, then, following the purchase, to guide them through the design and construction process. Decisions often





Courtesy of Wiebenson  
& Dorman Architects PC

View from the main living room into the entry hall, with long bench that can serve as supplemental seating for large dinner parties.

followed months or years of evaluations and musings between the architect and his clients. At one point, Dorman produced three different renovation plans, each emphasizing a different functional aspect. The problem was an overabundance of good options, explained the husband of the client couple, and the different plans helped crystallize priorities.

The house, on Rhode Island Avenue, one of the spoke streets coming off of Logan Circle, was designed by the estimable Glenn Brown, FAIA, founder of the DC Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. The historical record suggests that Brown's client, John Ewans, may have died before the house was completed, and his widow and daughters lived there for only a few years. Starting in 1894 and lasting over 50 years, two generations of the prominent Trimble family made it their home. Their parties, including at least one "cotillion," were fixtures of the society pages. At some point, probably in the 1940s, the Trimble heirs started renting out the house—or rooms in it—and it was eventually sold to a succession of owners. Unlike the solid majority of once-grand houses in the area, however, not only was it never abandoned, but it was never

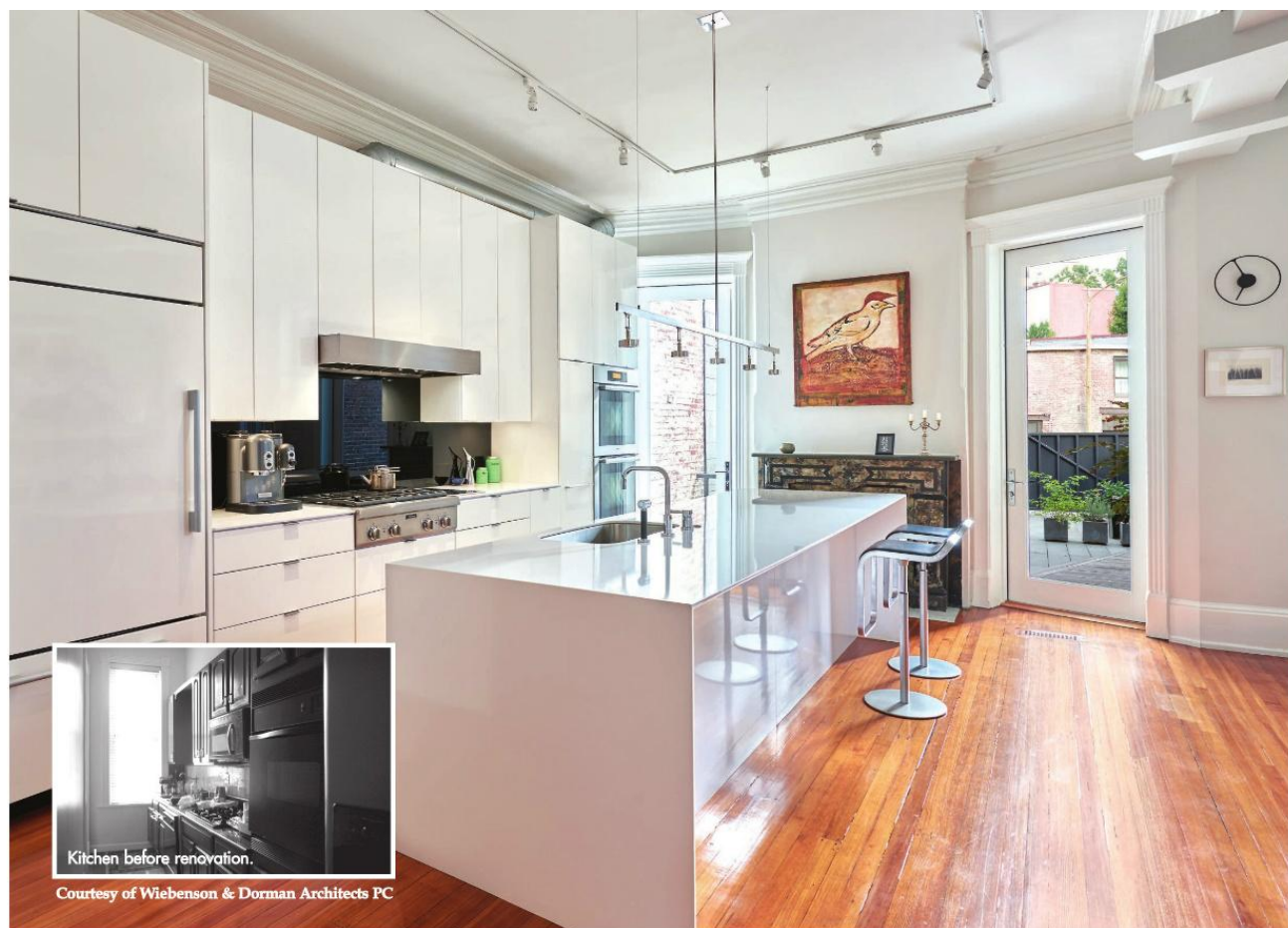
**Project:** House of Four Bells,  
Washington, DC

Architects: **Wiebenson & Dorman Architects PC**  
Structural Engineers: **JGK Structural Engineers**  
Landscape Architects: **DC Gardens**  
Contractor: **JV Improvements**

converted to apartments, and the basic layout saw little change. Research suggests that in the 1960s one of the occupants ran a community dentist's office out of some of the rooms. It is speculated that this spared the house during the 1968 riots, during which many row houses on the block were burned or looted. In the 1970s, when abandoned row houses on the block were for \$30,000 to \$50,000 each in government tax sales, a preservation-minded owner did substantial stabilization work, but serious modernization did not happen until the 21st century.

Dorman's clients regularly host dinners with up to 30 guests, so, in addition to more general analysis, Dorman specifically explored the dining capacity of different houses. None, of course,





Kitchen.

came ready-made for such large dinners, so the design question was how easily and elegantly modifications could fulfill the goal. The clients weren't in any hurry, but when the Rhode Island Avenue house came up for sale, "we fell for it completely," said the husband. "It had the right character. We immediately felt it was the right fit for us." Dorman verified their instincts on many levels, not least of which was noting how the entrance hall, running by the living room, was wide enough to serve as a supplemental dining space. A long permanent bench in the hall, plus a banquette in the main dining room, can comfortably seat a total of thirty for seders and other occasional large dinners. But the rest of the time, it doesn't seem empty: the entry hall bench looks like a display shelf.

The house had survived through the ups and downs of the neighborhood with most of its detail intact. The exterior's masonry ornamentation, including a unique rendering of four women's hands holding bells, stands out, even on one of the best preserved Victorian blocks in the city. (The bell motif is thought to be Glenn Brown's tribute to the four Ewans women—a lovely example of architecture extending memory.) Inside, the heart pine floors, embossed plaster and wallpaper, and elaborate wood ornamentation were in fairly good shape. The immediate previous owners had done upgrades to mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems. The new owners lived in the house for two years, engaging themselves and Dorman in a slow-motion design exercise, from which gradually gelled the vision for renovations.

In an architectural project, "you want an overriding theme," said Dorman, "but here there were already so many existing elements," referring to the generally charming mishmash characteristic of the Victorian era and subsequent alterations. Design decisions came slowly, element by element: "Is it genuinely historic? Does it lend character to the house and space? Do we like it? Do we like what it does to the house and space?" were among the questions asked. "In the end," said Dorman, "we kept most everything pre-existing, but we did straighten out a lot of little things."

The new things that emerged tie into the original, but in compositional rather than stylistic ways. They have their own voice, and overlay a new personality on the house's original character. For example, a wall was removed between the kitchen and dining room, creating one large space. Rather than unify the ceiling, however, in the area over the dining table (which had formerly been a narrow kitchen) Dorman created a series of "beams" dropped below the ceiling, subtly angled to match the adjacent bay window. Uplights in the beam elements provide soft, indirect illumination for the dining table and upholstered banquette.

The angle reappears in the rear yard as a dramatic green-painted steel "gateway." This element was structurally necessary for a new third-floor balcony because the adjacent brick wall is not a party wall (that is, not legally available for both sides to use). The balcony needed support; the yard, Dorman and his clients decided, needed a focal element and a frame. There is also another long bench—this



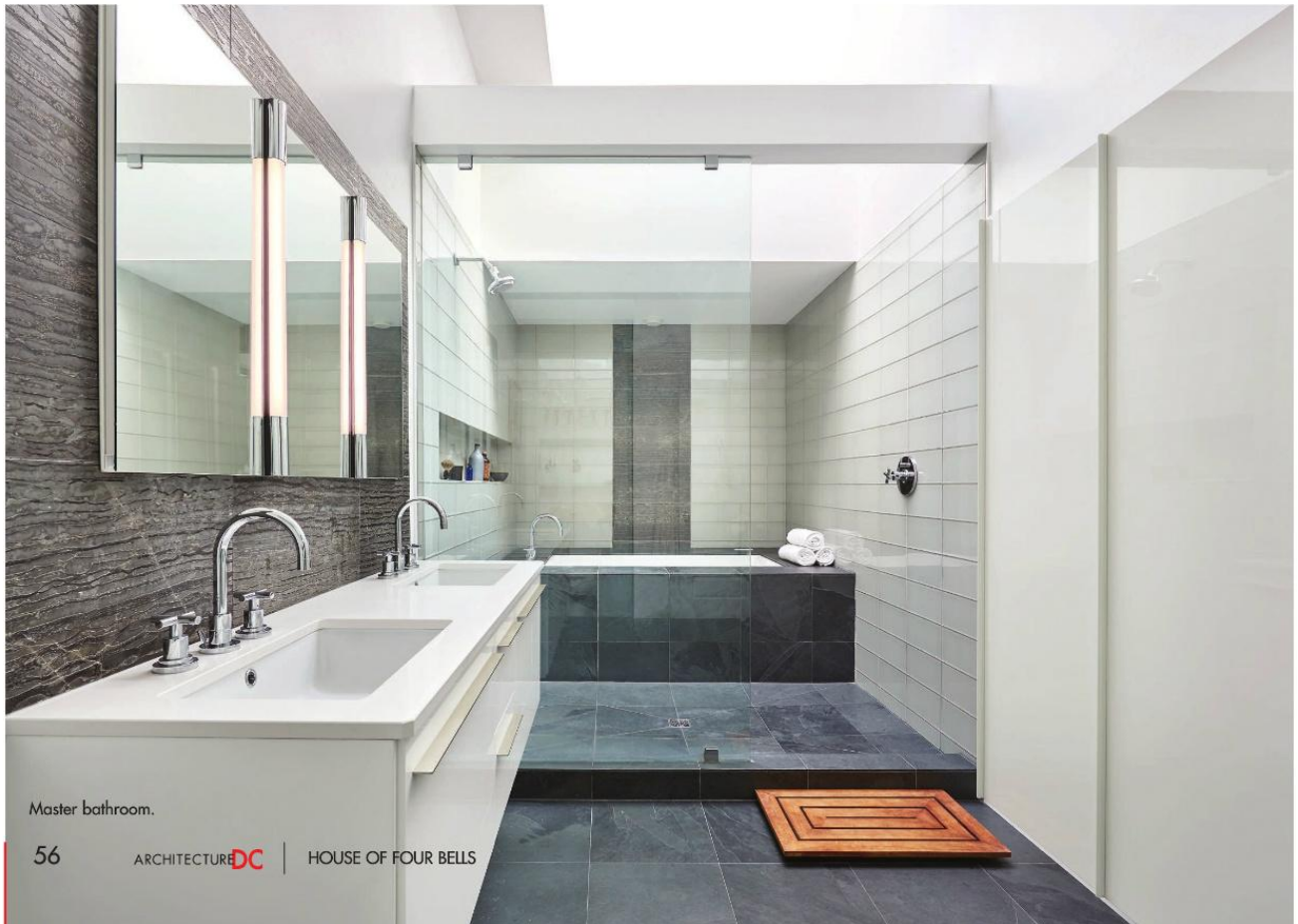
Main dining area, with partial beams angled to match the angle of the rear bay window.







Third floor office, with the upper landing of the stair hall in the left background.



Master bathroom.



time of steel—which can substitute for the entry hall bench in nice weather.

Years of living in a house under renovation would be too much for most people, but these owners had done so for several previous residences, and this time, they hired a general contractor instead of doing the work themselves. One advantage of the lengthy timeline, noted Dorman, is that they could keep an eye for sales on selected and desired fixtures and fittings. This saved considerable money.

Over time, a *modus operandi* emerged. Dorman proposed various plan refinements. The husband would pick candidates for the finishes and fittings; the wife would cull these down. The remaining choices were reviewed by Dorman, whose role, often, was to “reign in” the husband’s ideas, he says, which might include things like entirely different ceiling fans for each room. “It was very collaborative,” said Dorman, “and very fun. The fun part of design is all the what-ifs and options, and [this client] always produced lots of things for consideration.”

Most of the house’s historical character remains, from the frilly Victoriana that witnessed the Trimble’s society parties to an area of blackened wood flooring, believed to be the char remaining from a fire set during the 1968 riots. New elements include four windows added between the stair hall and an inboard office, the green steel frame in the rear yard, and the sleek cabinetry (much of it from IKEA). The roof required almost complete reconstruction; the decision was made to pull third floor ceilings up to the roof height, leaving former joist pockets exposed in the unfinished brick walls. Replacement of the roof allowed the addition of multiple skylights, with new sculpted ceilings, including a scalloped form reminiscent of the shiplap wood details.

The result of this is a calmly eclectic house, brimming with the personalities of current owners and past residents. One delightful detail combines old and new: paneled pocket doors, previously separating the kitchen and stair hall, were re-employed as surface-mounted sliding doors (or “barn doors”) at the inboard office. The doors and their original wheel guides were restored and set into a new track that Dorman designed. It’s a practical and straightforward reuse of a historic element, in which formerly hidden inner workings are exposed and celebrated.

Like Glenn Brown’s ornamental homage to the Ewans women, Dorman’s thoughtful and creative weaving of old and new throughout the project is ultimately more than just an aesthetic endeavor: it tells a story about the people who make this their home. 🏡



Second floor office, with repurposed sliding doors in a new track making the machinery visible.



Steel frame in the rear yard supporting a new upper-level deck.