

Decor Maine

ISSUE NO. 6

THE INTERIORS ISSUE

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10
INTERIOR
DESIGNERS

SHARE *ultimate* **INSPIRATION**
& HAVE US ASKING...
What's Coming in 2025?

AN 1800S RENO
in **KENNEBUNKPORT**
with TIMELESS DETAILS *and*
RECLAIMED WOOD

Plus!

A CAN'T-MISS
BRUNCH SPOT *in*
Portland's West End

You can't always get what you want—but sometimes you do, only to later realize it's not what you *need*.

Living the Dream

How a candy-colored plastic mansion still occupies prime real estate in this writer's memory.

by Allison Paige

If you stayed for supper at my house in 1979, chances are you would have been served my mother's famous chicken and dumplings and heard me, the youngest of six, the runt of the litter, say grace. It went a little something like this (hands folded, eyes closed): "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food. By His hand, we all are fed. Thank you, Lord, for our daily bread. And pleasepleaseplease let me get the Barbie Dreamhouse! Amen." I recited this secular addendum faithfully before every dinner of my seventh year. My older sister, wearied with pity, would roll her eyes dolefully toward our parents, and say, "Just give it to her, already!"

A neighborhood friend was the proud owner of the Barbie triplex, which featured a mod yellow elevator that her glamorous city-living Barbies rode up and down in seeming perpetuity, hardly ever arriving at their well-appointed rooms. My Barbie and I, banished to the suburbs of her former dollhouse, would gaze toward the townhouse and dream. That nascent longing, along with Saturday morning cartoons and the Mattel commercials that bracketed them, induced in me a newfound

lust for real estate. I was in luck. The Barbie Dreamhouse, the doll's newest, biggest pad had just come on the market. And I wanted it. With all my covetous, girlish heart.

Whether by divine intervention, sisterly exasperation, or my own perseverance, I received a promisingly large box for my birthday that year. A swipe of rainbow-festooned paper revealed a glimpse of the prayed-for orange-and-yellow manse and unleashed my euphoric shrieks. It was my answered prayer. My dream-come-true!

Then a funny thing happened. Hardly had the paper been torn, the box unpacked, that the magic began to wear off, invisibly, like the dust on a butterfly's wings. My all-thumbs father sweated hours over the airy A-frame blueprint, its inscrutable plastic latticework, using a litany of cuss-adjacent words: "Dadgummit. Dagnabbit. This dadgum thing is for the birds."

At last, I, or Barbie, had everything I (she) wanted. Breezy French doors lead to a Juliette balcony, a jacuzzi-style bathtub, a refrigerator packed with miniature food, a toilet that really flushed. The three-foot-high, four-foot-wide, fully furnished dwelling occupied my bedroom's

prime real estate. But. That left less room for impromptu dance recitals and ad hoc fashion shows. And I began to find it a bit of a strain to stick my arms through the rectangular skylights in an effort to ambulate my diminutive owner through her newfound digs. Never mind if Skipper came over, or Superstar Barbie, whose copious blonde ringlets and diamond rings practically required a room of their own. The joint was a feng-shui nightmare, possessing every modern accoutrement and absolutely NO flow.

It was not my first such disappointment. "Baby Alive's" mouth moved as advertised, but the audible motor scared me, and when I fed her the packets of powdered fruit puree, her diaper instantaneously filled and attracted ants. The Sea-Monkeys never grew into amphibious primates sporting tridents and crowns. They strictly stunk, fishy and brackish, like the rehydrated brine shrimp they were. Why should Barbie's Dreamhouse be any different? It was a second-grader's version of buyer's remorse.

My friend Michelle and I spent afternoons dressing and undressing our dolls, which, as any veteran Barbie-owner knows, was

ILLUSTRATION BY VICTORIA GORDON

expedited by first yanking the dolls' hair and popping off their heads. With equal pragmatism we vacated the dreamhouse premises altogether, unceremoniously lifting the bubble gum-hued bedroom suite, the fridge with its tiny T-bone, the miraculous mechanical toilet our dolls took turns using, and tossed it onto my green shag carpet. My mother leaned on my bedroom doorjamb and noted with growing dismay, "You're not even playing with it!" After all my begging, wheedling, and genuflecting, the residence my parents reluctantly funded, plunking down a cool \$97.99 (given inflation, a criminal \$424 today), remained sadly vacant, a cotton-candy-colored haunted house, until puberty came along and condemned it all together.

That I would grow up to eventually write about houses is perhaps no accident. For this very magazine, I have profiled interiors that far exceed my childhood notions of charm, elegance, and sophistication. But my reality of homeownership has taken a similar path to my adolescent misadventures. I fled the Florida suburbs to rent a series of cockroach-colonized apartments in Manhattan prewars, riding up and down their elevators with wild abandon. Then on to Portland, where a fanlight-windowed Old Port loft offered mesmerizing views of the harbor and the paper-thin walls left none of our neighbor's bachelor-pad shenanigans to the imagination. When at last, my husband, infant son, and I landed a circa-1860s cape perched on Munjoy Hill, it felt like paradise. A sweet home-sweet-home of our own. Then, slowly but surely, reality encroached. The humble little charmer inexplicably sweltered in summer and remained frigid all win-

ter. Though fireplace-less, it smelled mysteriously, intractably, of soot. A decade on, during Covid lockdown we seemed to outgrow it overnight. Like a post-libation Alice, our limbs threatened to burst out the doors and windows. That old aspirational impulse returned, and off to Zillow I went, fashioning a laundry list of fanciful for-sales. There was the wooded Hobbit-y house beside a babbling brook (verily, it babbled!) with a forest school to the left and an herbalist nested on the right. I daydreamed about drying lavender for sachets, foraging for chanterelles, learning to pickle things.

A KITCHEN TABLE
PATINAED WITH ENDLESS
CONVERSATIONS OVER
ENDLESS CUPS OF POUR-
OVER COFFEE

Next was the painstaking replica of Maine's oldest home, handsomely timber-framed and horse-haired plastered; it beckoned me to pull up an unforgiving ladderback chair to its cavernous kitchen hearth and pen a compendium on animal husbandry. At the last, a charming house in town, where a prohibition-era speakeasy once debauched its basement, I imagined throwing legendary bathtub gin-soaked parties with Gatsby-level panache.

Surprise. None of those places worked out. And each time, we returned home discouraged, disappointed, and...relieved. Elated, even. If we didn't get our dreamhouse, it meant we would have to keep our old house, our sentimental tween always reminded us. Our "now" house. Not

some pie-in-the-sky notion of how our lives might be between another foreign four walls, but life as it was and is, the fulsome reality of it, warts (leaks), and all. A front door that swells and sticks in summer so that you must grip the handle and pitch all your weight forward, as though hurtling through a wardrobe, Narnia-bound, movie nights curled up on our thrift store loveseat with popcorn and peanut M&Ms, and a fire alarm that serenades us every time I roast Brussels sprouts. Here, in the exposed-beam living room, our son took his first steps, and the bookcase lists with re-read volumes; there, on the top shelf, the ashes of our dear, departed dog repose in a wooden box. While beneath our feet, the baseboards have retreated, near-imperceptibly, from the scuffed floors, just enough to catch an untold number of stray pine needles from Christmas trees past. Not a dreamhouse, to be sure, our house is earth-bound and flawed, just like its inhabitants. It is also, I suspect, the richer for it, growing more so, incrementally, like the inch marks of our son's height ascending the kitchen doorframe. With every post-dinner dance party, every whispered argument, each heap of dryer-warmed laundry. It is, at best, a reality house, no airs, no pretensions. It is, like most homes, however grand, shaped in equal measures by vexation and relaxation, made richly complete by the people who dwell there. Where Thou art—that—is home, wrote Emily Dickinson, the world champion homebody. Or, to quote the Beatles: All you need is love. Or maybe, just maybe, all you need is a roof over your head, a fridge full of food, and a toilet that really flushes. But a girl can dream ... ■