

THE BEST NEST

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By Allison Paige | Photos by Michael D. Wilson

In Portland, Erin and Matt Hutton have made a home full of art, laughter, and birdsong.



In the backyard, the family gathers with friends around the firepit by Matt's workshop.

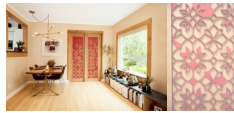
To get the full measure of Erin and Matt Hutton's 1919 gambrel in Portland, diminutive in size at 1,200 square feet but big of heart, one has only to take a look at the large ruler hanging on their dining room wall. Given to them by Erin's brother 13 years ago, when their daughter, Emma, was born, the wooden measuring stick shows, penciled at its edges, the heights of many people. "We don't just take measurements of our family. It's our neighbors, anyone who wants to do it. They can be part of our family," says Erin.

This sort of free-for-all, make-yourself-at-home ethos can be felt in the Huttons' home from the moment you walk in.

Not far from bustling Forest Avenue, the wooded property has a surprising glade-like quality—it is not unusual to see foxes, skunks, and deer, and birdsong fills the house. Erin peers out a living room window and is delighted to discover a robin building its nest in the bush just outside.



The laser-cut wood screens made by Matt to enclose Emma's room double as a work of art. The dining table, also by Matt, is hewn from a fallen catalpa tree from Westbrook. The light fixture is from CB2. The photograph is by Alissa Jane.



Formerly the director of exhibitions and special projects at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art, Erin recently launched her own business, Erin Hutton Projects LLC, a company that specializes in art acquisition, placement, and curatorial support. A painter herself, she has some of her own work on the walls of the house. Matt, a woodworker and founder of Studio 24b, creates custom woodwork on commission for interior designers and private collectors. Daughter Emma, 13, son Forest, 9, and a rescue dog from Puerto Rico named Lola complete their family.

"We got married on the fly," Erin says. "First, we bought a car, then we bought the house, then he proposed, and a month later we got married. Two days after, we brought everyone from our family back here and did an old-fashioned barn raising."

"There's no doubt, we just jumped in," Matt agrees.

"We took a huge risk when we bought a house," Erin adds. "We were young and naive, but we knew that there was something there we wanted to work on together." The home, purchased in 2004, was a two-bedroom, one-bath. The Huttons took it down to the studs and remodeled it into a three-bedroom, two-bath to suit their vision and the needs of their young family. Although novice do-it-yourselfers, their backgrounds in art and woodworking served them well.





Matt and Lola sit on the front porch as Forest whizzes by.

“There was no YouTube when we started,” notes Erin. “I could show you our stack of home repair books. We would take a book and dog-ear every page.”

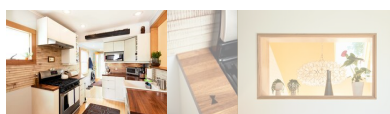
“We’re both makers; we’re builders,” says Matt. “So, it’s not very different from making art or sculpture. Once you learn the language of construction materials, it all makes sense and it’s really quite nice.”

Erin shares how the night before their housewarming party, Matt decided to demolish the living room ceiling. She came home to find the driveway covered in rubble, plaster, and lath. But rather than despair over the mess, Erin was invigorated by it. “We were diving in!” she exclaims.

Erin and Matt appear to be in constant collaboration, on their home, business, and family life. They easily complete each other’s sentences.



In the kitchen, the Huttons made a conscious decision to choose compact appliances, recessed lighting, and high shelving to maximize space.



"We do everything together," Erin says.

"The entire house," finishes Matt.

"We're collaborators," she continues.

"We're workaholics," he sums up. But for workaholics, they laugh easily and often. "We actually really like each other a lot!" Erin says.

Witnessing their boundless energy and ingenuity, I am tempted to call them a dynamic duo, not unlike the superheroes that line the shelf of Forest's room.

"All the projects have happened over time, and we've always been thinking about how to maximize space. Always," Erin emphasizes. "Matt sometimes makes fun of me, in a sweet way, because I'm always like, 'How much more space can we squeeze out of *this* space?'"

To that end, they raised ceilings, knocked down walls, tore out the chimney, replaced hinged doors with sliding ones, and added skylights.



A view of the master bedroom, where a painting by Honour Mack hangs above an antique vanity found by Matt. A television and wall-recessed fireplace make this room the ultimate haven. Rug by Angela Adams.



Erin and Matt built the studio in the backyard shortly after they began home renovations so that they could make use of the woodshop. The building's graceful lines were designed by Project Open. Door walls pivot outward, opening up the workshop to let the outdoors in. The exterior is composed of wood panels of varying widths that represent a bar code.

Clever choices were made to visually maximize the rooms. Doorways were widened and bamboo flooring was installed. "The light-colored wood helps brighten it up," notes Matt. Erin highlights their preference for compact kitchen appliances, such as a small refrigerator and mini stand mixer. "We kind of live a bit like camping. I'm a great camper," Erin jokes.

"At only 1,200 square feet, it's tough to include all that we desire in a home, but we've managed to make it work," says Matt. "It brings us closer together and forces us to be very conscious about our daily choices."

Another perk: “It only took me like 30 minutes to clean,” Erin says with a laugh.

Around their home, furniture by Matt and paintings by Erin are joined by artwork by mentors, friends, and artists they admire.

“We surround ourselves as much as possible with each other’s work and others that we really treasure,” says Erin.



An untitled work by Erin, made with paper, wax, graphite, and oil, was completed shortly after Emma was born and hangs in the kitchen.

Upstairs is the latest addition, a master bedroom and en suite bath. Erin points out that by design, a skylight in the bathroom is visible through an interior window in the bedroom wall, so that “we can be lying in bed and look out and see the stars.” Likewise, a deck Erin calls their “oasis” is built off the bedroom and allows them to treat the outdoors like “a whole other room.”

In the backyard, Erin’s studio and Matt’s workshop allow them to work from home as much as possible and prioritize family time. “Matt would be gone all the time if we didn’t have a studio on our property. So, for us, wherever we are, we always have to have this. Because that way, we can spend time together,” says Erin.

Matt’s workshop is a unique structure in its own right, built from plans by Project Open, a Boston-based company owned by Erin’s brother and sister-in-law. Used as both a workspace and gallery, the building features curving walls and only one right angle, with pivoting doors that can be thrown open in good weather.

In summer, the Huttons like to build bonfires, host parties, and play outdoor movies. Even outside there are meaningful family heirlooms. Irises from Erin’s great-grandfather’s garden border the house alongside a blueberry bush given to the Huttons on their wedding day. A weeping cherry given to Erin on Mother’s Day joins a pine and birch planted to commemorate Emma’s and Forest’s births.





The deck off the master bedroom offers a view of the backyard and side garden. Erin calls the deck addition “a game changer” that lets them treat the yard as another room. Chaise and table by Loll Designs.

“Everything has a purpose,” explains Erin. “It’s making choices based on the things that mean something to us. I rarely bring something into the house that doesn’t have a purpose or have some kind of connection, but I also am willing to let things go.”

Her words remind me of William Morris’s famous tenet: *Have nothing in your house you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.*

“Over the years, we’ve invested so much in hand-building and crafting each room,” says Matt. “It’s a reflection of us. Each and every part of it. It’s where we work and live. It’s a symbol of our hard work, energy, and commitment. It’s evidence of our growth over the past 15 years.”

Making concessions for practicality and beauty in equal measure, the Huttons have created a home where every inch counts, with the instinctive economy of a robin’s nest. Where there is space for art and design, doors are thrown wide, and even wild creatures are welcomed with open arms.

As I leave, Erin takes one more peek out the window, where the bird is still busy building its home. “Listen, listen, listen,” Erin calls excitedly to Matt. “She’s amazing! We’re so lucky to have her.”





The Hutton family gathers out back for s'mores around the fire pit.

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