

Archive Menu

[Arts + Culture](#)
[Design](#)
[Essays](#)
[Feast](#)
[History](#)
[Profiles](#)

Testimonials



Events



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Under the Portland Sun

REMARKABLE - OCTOBER 2007
 By Joshua Bodwell
 Photography François Gagné

A big city brownstone gets an Italian villa makeover



In the grapevine- and olive grove-filled valleys of Tuscany, there are moments in the late afternoon when a patina of golden sunlight falls heavily across the stone villas and piazzas, across the shimmering cypress trees and lolling hills. The balmy air fills with a pungent, earthy scent and the whole region seems to draw in a long, deep breath of contentment.

It's moments such as these that lead many travelers to feel a twinge of longing and nostalgia for Italy—almost as though they lived in the country in another life and the cast of afternoon sun has somehow unlocked the soul's memory. Portland's Kerry Courtice is just such a person. Born and raised in western Pennsylvania, Courtice has lived in Maine since the late 1970s. And while Courtice's enthusiasm for her adopted state is palpable, the passion she exudes for Italy runs just as deep.

So, Courtice reasoned, why not combine the best of

both places into one?

With the help of seasoned interior designer Christine Maclin, of Maclin Design in Portland, that's exactly what Courtice did. Together, the pair turned a derelict three-story, 19th-century brownstone into an homage to Italian life, one complete with a courtyard oasis so reminiscent of a Tuscan village that it is hard to believe it's located only one block from Portland's bustling Congress Street.

Gathering the Courage

Courtice and Maclin have known one another for 15 years, and in the early 1990s, the pair even traveled together through Italy. Courtice, who has a master's degree in art history and who has long been fascinated with the Italian Renaissance and the Baroque period that followed, simply drank the country in during their trip. The feeling was shared by Maclin, an avid traveler who had lived in the Philippines for some time.

Back stateside after their Italian odyssey, life for the two women went on: Maclin continued her design work and Courtice in her senior position as a financial advisor at Merrill Lynch. Then, in 1996, while Courtice was living in a condominium across town, Maclin purchased a large, dilapidated brownstone on Portland's Deering Street. Little more than a two-block stretch that runs parallel to Congress Street, Deering Street is loaded with lovely turn-of-the-century homes that have been repurposed over the years. When Maclin first bought her building, which now houses both her office and home, it had been divided into six separate one-bedroom apartments.

"It was in horrible shape," Courtice remembers of her friend's home when it was first purchased. But then Courtice watched carefully as Maclin transformed the house. "Truly, it was watching what Christine accomplished that gave me the courage to buy my house," Courtice says today. In 1999, she bought an ailing brownstone of her own directly across Deering Street from Maclin. And, of course, it only seemed fitting that Courtice hire Maclin, her traveling partner and inspiration, to help create her dream home.

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Reclamation

Once a single-family house, Courtice's brownstone, like Maclin's, had been converted into apartments and offices. By the time she purchased it, several of the once-regal rooms had been broken up with haphazardly built walls, and many of its antique features had been cast aside: for example, twenty hardwood doors, including the elegant front doors, were rescued from their exile in the home's dark basement. The house was also filled with oddly placed bathrooms and kitchenettes. "I think there was a toilet or kitchen sink in every room!" Maclin laughs. "Most of the time a building of this age has a fabulous floor plan," she continues, "but with Kerry's place, we could barely figure out what the original plan had been."

It wasn't until nine 30-yard commercial dumpsters filled with debris were hauled away that the home began to take on a semblance of its original proportions and nobility. While the house was torn open, Courtice took the opportunity to install something very few homes its age have: all new heating, plumbing, and electrical systems.

Maclin, who takes a "function first" approach in her design work, says she knew early on that the kitchen, in particular, would become the hub of the home. It was a lead she took instinctively from Courtice—as with many lovers of Italy, Courtice is an avid gastronome. "I simply love to cook," she says succinctly.

The aura of the kitchen beckons visitors even as they enter the front door at the other end of the house. This visual allure is emphasized by the over 10-foot high ceilings and painted checkerboard maple floors—which were done by Raff & Sons Painted Finishes—that stretch down the long entry hall to the red-tinged Honduras mahogany kitchen cabinetry. "This floor brings a feeling of flow and unity to the space," says Maclin, who is very particular about making sure her clients' hardwood floors contain the longer strips of maple that were standard in older homes.

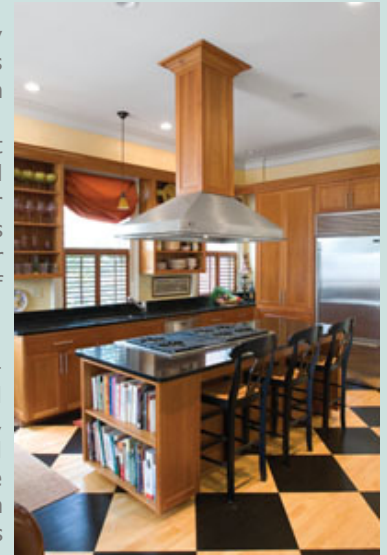
Like the rest of the first floor, the kitchen is high-ceilinged and bright. With a foundation of pigmented wax beneath the faux-finish paint, the room's soft, golden-hued walls take on the irregular contours of old villa walls. "It's very subtle," says Courtice of the painting technique, "but it adds such warmth." Though she moved into the home in 2000, Courtice still marvels at the level of detail and craftsmanship throughout her home. The cabinetry and millwork were executed in the workshop of Courtice's contractor, Roland Morrison of R.P. Morrison Builders in Windham. "Look at this," she says, pointing to the substantial vintage-looking crown molding that wraps around the room. "It strikes just the right tenor for this old house." In fact, nearly every room is a flawless blending of old and new—in the front parlor, for example, the new wall of built-in bookcases appears original to the house.

At its far end, the kitchen flows into a comfortably sized dining nook and a small sitting area with a couch and armchairs. Beyond, two sets of striking French doors open onto a walled courtyard and garden. The French doors are by far one of the home's most dramatic features—that is until you step through them to the garden beyond.

Urban Oasis

Knowing that no villa is complete without a courtyard garden, Courtice turned a paved parking lot at the rear of the house into a breathtaking, Italian-influenced garden in 2004. For inspiration, Courtice relied on the elegant gardens of La Foce, a lush estate in Southern Tuscany whose grounds include a 15th-century villa and a medieval castle. Courtice brought in the team from Gnome Landscapes, Design & Masonry in Falmouth to execute the transformation.

Today, the backyard is nothing short of an oasis in the middle of a city landscape. Against the backdrop of tall yew trees—an evergreen that mimics, in many ways, the look of Tuscany's famous cypress trees but that can thrive in Maine's climate—the garden includes a large solid-based marble table surrounded by wrought-iron chairs. The table sits beneath a concrete-pillared pergola with broad-leafed grape-vines creeping up it. Beyond a half-round garden fountain sits an ornate corner bench that Courtice had custom made out of concrete from drawings in a book about La Foce. "I wanted an urban courtyard," Courtice says, "and I knew Italy was just the flavor it needed."



The ultimate success of the garden, says Maclin, can be seen in how simply and effortlessly it is joined to the home. There are no steps leading down into the courtyard; the threshold is flush with first floor of the house, making the transition between the inside and outside seamless. "The connection is elemental," Maclin says admiringly.



Designed from Within

In the end, the great success of the Portland home's interior is in how Maclin focused Courtice's passion into a design that is at once authentic yet original—it's almost as though Italy was the canvas of inspiration upon which the two women painted their own unique landscape. "Good design is always sensitive to place," Maclin says.

Maclin practices a design approach that is dictated by people's behaviors and passions, and she prides herself on not forcing her vision onto clients but, rather, drawing out and focusing her clients' own ideas. Courtice—who sometimes still trails her hand along the textured walls of her kitchen, or stands enraptured at the balcony in her bedroom that overlooks the garden below—couldn't agree more. "Christine's great talent is her ability to bring you out of you," she says.

[- Back](#)