

INhouse

Right: In the drawing room of Workstead House in Charleston, the studio's husband-and-wife co-founders Robert Highsmith and Stefanie Brechbuehler survey velvet-covered Lawson-Fenning seating and a tessellated horn table from the 1980s. **Inset:** Their Signal sconce in brass sports a pull chain. ➔



It was simple: “We wanted to be challenged,” explains designer Stefanie Brechbuehler of her move, with husband Robert Highsmith, to Charleston, South Carolina. In 2009, the couple and Rhode Island School of Design classmate Ryan Mahoney founded Workstead, a multi-hyphenate design studio in Brooklyn, New York, and catapulted to the forefront of the borough’s designer-maker scene. But in 2015 a major hotel project in the South reoriented their compass and they soon opened a Workstead outpost in Charleston, with Mahoney heading the main studio up North.

The change of scenery brought a shake-up in sensibility, the adoption of what they’ve dubbed “Southern modernism,” which reinterprets traditional regional typologies like caning, beveled glass, and breakfront cabinets, “to make them feel new again,” Highsmith explains. Their testing ground was the renovation of an 1853 row-house for a dream client: a New York-based family who gave the couple carte blanche to design the project as if it were their own. Now named Workstead House, it’s a crash pad for the family when they’re in town, an event space for the studio when they’re not.

With father-son contractors Jim and Chris Sloggatt, the designers began the painstaking restoration, stripping the cast iron fireplaces of paint, refinishing the heart pine floors, but keeping the charring on the staircase from an old kitchen fire. (“We love those types of imprints,” Highsmith notes.) Inspiration came from touring historic properties like Drayton Hall, an 18th-century plantation house, which also sparked throw-back nomenclature: It’s “drawing room” for the public space downstairs, “withdrawing room” for the more private one above. “I geek out on that stuff,” Brechbuehler says with a laugh.

Furnishings are a mix of old and new, combining antiques and vintage finds with contemporary pieces, including Workstead products, such as the Signal sconce with its gratifyingly analogue pull chain. The move South also enticed the designers to explore more with color, resulting in warm putty or dark green on walls and jewel-tone velvet and mohair upholstery. “We took a more romantic approach than usual,” Brechbuehler admits. The region does have that effect. —Georgina McWhirter

going south

The husband-wife Workstead designers swapped industrial-hip Brooklyn for the charms of old world Charleston



1. In the entry, a leather-wrapped credenza and mirror, both by Tyler Hays, and a Michael Amato pendant manufactured by Urban Electric Co. (the Charleston-based company that also produces many of Workstead's fixtures) join a manzanita branch in a vintage shell casing.

2. Workstead's Lodge pendant features oxidized oak posts.

3. Built in 1853, the Italianate row house was used as a storehouse by blockade runners during the Civil War and later owned by George A. Trenholm, said to have inspired the character Rhett Butler in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

4. In the master bath, formerly a porch, vanity mirrors are mounted on windows painted Farrow & Ball's Studio Green.

5. A vintage Adrian Pearsall sofa joins the studio's own leather chairs and an antique cot converted into a coffee table in the upstairs "withdrawing room."

6. The designers' Spool side table comes in cherry, white oak, and walnut.

7. In the drawing room, a 19th-century oil painting by Franklin Tuttle looms over a deco sideboard topped with a silver tea set and stirrup cups.

8. Cherry, marble, and caning coalesce in



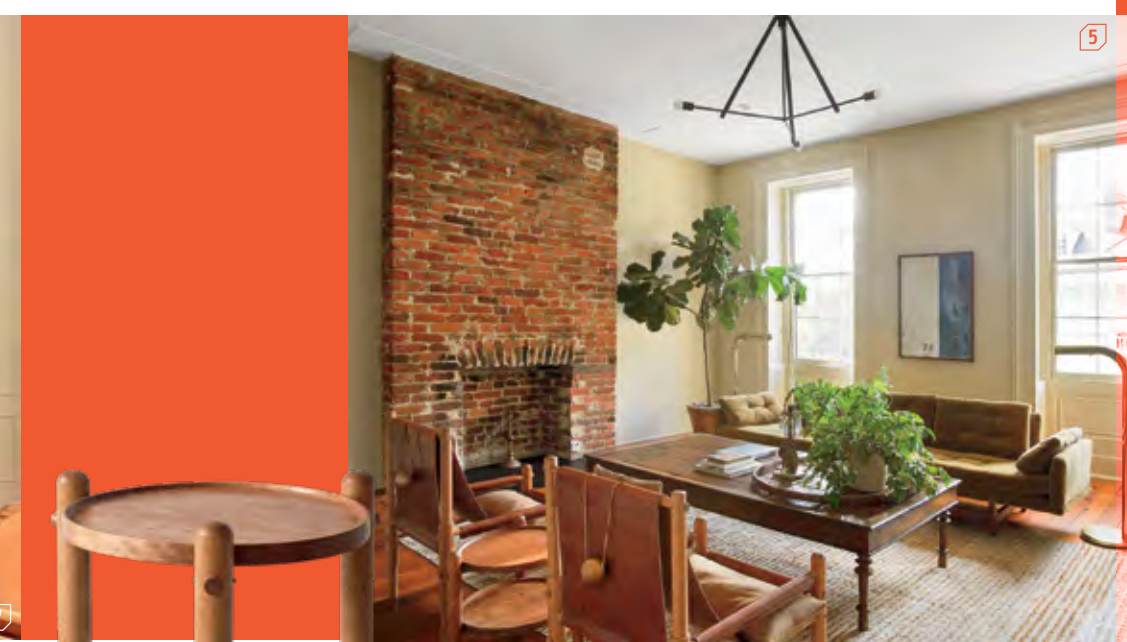
the circular kitchen island; a carved indentation in the center makes a built-in fruit bowl.

9. Orbit, Workstead's spun-brass sconce with an incandescent frosted bulb, riffs on antique candle reflectors.

MATTHEW WILLIAMS, PRODUCT IMAGES COURTESY OF WORKSTEAD



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"When we entertain here, people love gathering around

the massive island with a drink"