

Michelle Oliver and John DiMaggio kick back in their remodeled loft.



BY RACHEL LEVITT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JÖRG MEYER

LOFTY



EXPECTATIONS

A California couple makes a fresh start on the top floor of a renovated South Boston building.

An antique Buddha, a beaded lamp, and a Camilla Kraft wall mural create a warm, inviting space.



A 2004 *New Yorker* story describing the gentrification of South Boston so

intrigued Michelle Oliver that she yearned for a neighborhood brick-and-beam loft of her own. Never mind that she lived clear across the country at the time. Two years later, she and her partner, John DiMaggio, were ready to leave California. DiMaggio, a Jersey boy with children on the East Coast, was eager to head home, especially since he and Oliver were squeezed into an 850-square-foot condo. So the couple did what any prudent house hunter would do—they traveled to Boston and gave themselves three days to find a place. “Now that I think about it,” says Oliver, “we were crazy, but very lucky.”

After a race through the Back Bay and Beacon Hill, Oliver divulged her secret obsession with Southie. Their broker took them to the recently renovated Court Square Press building, a six-story 1906 factory that had been meticulously restored and converted. “We walked in, and in three seconds we said, ‘Done,’” says Oliver. “This building had history and was in a somewhat gritty neighborhood that didn’t feel homogenous. It reminded me of where I grew up in Southern California.”

At the time, the top-floor, 2,300-square-foot unit was a yawning, post-industrial site. The duo struggled with how to warm the space and divide it without destroying its loftlike essence. Oliver decided they’d need professional help and consulted with “hip and trendy”

real estate agent Chris Tobeck, who recommended designer Dennis Duffy. The design guru had lots of ideas, starting with a staircase leading to a new reading level and a roof garden.

Post-construction, Oliver was inspired by the empty space and began scoping out furniture, even though Duffy had a décor plan of his own. “I wanted to do my own thing designwise and create something that didn’t appear overstyled,” says Oliver. The Roche-Bobois Mah Jong sofa, for example, was her idea. Low and informal, the bright sectional came in a fun corduroy pattern—not quite what Duffy had in mind. “At first I was scared to tell Dennis, so I just had it delivered and waited for him to get mad,” she says. But once Duffy understood the sofa wasn’t leaving, >>

Clockwise from left, Oliver prepares lunch on her soapstone countertop; inside the master bath; one of five ferrets frolics on the bed.



The Dennis Duffy-designed headboard doubles as a bureau and night tables, minimizing the need for bedroom furnishings. Opposite, the guest room showcases a Wendy Artin charcoal drawing from Gurari Collections on Charles Street.





DiMaggio's office sits inside the former freight elevator shaft. The adjacent living room houses sofas by Rolf Benz and Roche-Bobois. Inset, the condo's plan.





he worked with Oliver to place it in the guest room. “It was one of the first times this had happened to me,” he says. “It caught me off guard, but I got used to it and learned not to be surprised. Ultimately, being able to pick pieces on her own made Michelle happier.” Letting go of many of the furniture decisions, Duffy focused on designing custom pieces like the bathroom vanity and a headboard that doubles both as a pair of night tables and as a large bureau.

The result is an appealing mix of Duffy’s refined sensibility and Oliver’s quirky, colorful approach. The long white wall in the living room could have been painted a striking color, but Oliver decided a mural would add dimension; the couple hired artist Camilla Kraft to paint an expansive Asian-themed one. Kraft spent three months painting the scene (and practically living in the apartment) and incorporated incredible details into the finely drawn fantasy, like butterflies and bugs in the folds of the characters’ clothing.

Oliver, a former hospital administrator, now teaches meditation at South Boston Yoga and volunteers at the Wayside Youth and Family Support Network. She and DiMaggio are humble about their warm, engaging space. “I just bought what I liked, at first going high-end. But as I got more confident about my style, I began finding great things for less. This pillow,” she says, pointing to a large, fluffy wool cushion, “was \$200 from Design Within Reach. But I found this one [a smaller, orange synthetic-wool cushion] at Target for \$6.” The pairs—both the pillows and Oliver and DiMaggio—are here to stay. “I love the neighborhood. It’s attracting a lot of people who care about the environment, who want to be involved. I intend to be here a long, long time.” ■



DESIGNER Dennis Duffy, Duffy Design Group **CONTRACTOR** The Glendale Group