

Creating new living areas

Older houses adapt well to creative space plans

BY JOHN SCHMITT

One of the challenges to owning an older home in Silver Spring or Takoma Park—loaded with handcrafted workmanship though it may be—is finding a sensible way to increase living space without building an addition. Owners are often astonished to learn that a new bedroom, family room, bathroom or enlarged kitchen can be created within their snug residence’s existing walls without sabotaging a well-rationalized floor plan—but perhaps they shouldn’t be. The 21st century is, after all, a congenial era where most people (you, your guests, your in-laws) tend to look favorably on an interior that actually accommodates the owner’s needs and tastes. Moreover, far from defying convention, such plans advance and develop important notions about how people today use and enjoy their homes.

To embrace this important concept, one must first recognize that many of the space-use notions we grew up with are no longer de rigueur. For instance, the traditional formal dining room is not less-than-essential, it is commonly being incorporated into a open floor plan focused on kitchen-centric entertaining. Along these lines, master bedrooms are found in places other than the second or third floor. Basements are very much in-play; so, too, the attic, the garage, the back porch, the second floor landing. Indeed, the evidence is clear that today’s savvy homeowner’s (and prospective homebuyers) regard the creative use of space as an uplifting breath of fresh air, quickly warming to the personalized design eclecticism such thinking invites.

All of which means that a strategy for re-deploying existing space so as to gain critical elbow room begins with seeing your multi-level structure not as a series of purpose-assigned rooms, but as fundamentally mutable chambers that can be modified—tastefully and intelligently—in almost any way that suits lifestyle requirements. And, I hasten to add, the sheer fun of “re-thinking” space is partly about finding clever ways to mainstream the changes so that they seem inevitable—even, the home’s original intention.

Case in point: The Bell family on Maple Avenue ardently embraced these principals in a makeover they did a few seasons back. Relocating from New York City, their first idea for retrofitting the house to suit a family of four entailed hiring an architect to design an addition that, once detailed, turned out to be out-of-budget. Among new requirements, the Bells wanted a spacious master bedroom with master bath; a family gathering area with a computer; a

Timeless charm on Maple Avenue

separate family room with television and a bedroom for the oldest son. This was a lot to ask of a three bedroom, one bath home with an unfinished basement and attic.

It became clear, however, that there was lot of square footage that just wasn’t being well-utilized. The attic—though accessible by stair—was for storage only. The basement—despite side elevation windows that invited natural light—was a seldom-used substandard playroom with a disreputable half-bath. Worse yet, the hot water heater took up so much room in the downstairs that carving out any additional square footage seemed impossible.

But space planning often begins with finding substitutes for comparatively small things, and one of the first revelations in the Bell home freeing-up about 3 square feet of lower level floor space by replacing the conventional hot water heater with a tankless unit. This comparatively new innovation not only reduces monthly

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energy bills, it’s smaller size frees-up room that can be incorporated into a more generous space plan: in this case, one aimed at converting a tiny water closet into a well-appointed luxury bath.

Reconfigure about 100 sq ft to accommodate the new master bath, the challenge then shifted to designing a floor plan for the entire lower level footprint. The program would include a master bedroom, a large walk-in closet, a spacious laundry room and additional family storage. Also, while the existing area offered two windows on each side elevation, it was important to maximize available natural light as much as possible, and to provide a means for directing traffic.

On this score, a glass block divider wall between the master bath and a newly created foyer (at the foot of the stairs from the upper level) invites light originating from the opposite elevation. The foyer, in turn, offers easy access to both the bath and

Out with the old.

In with the new.

the laundry room—while keeping visitors out of the bedroom.

As an added consideration to privacy, the former 1st level dining room (at the other side of the stair) was converted to a family-use office/library complete with computers and internet access. The attic became a bedroom for the oldest child, while the space at the foot of the attic stair has become a family den and 2nd level entertainment zone.

The Bells say the four-level plan has made the house far more functional than they had dared to hope—creating more privacy where needed, and more gathering zones. Yet the timeless charms of the original Victorian “four square” are perfectly preserved... and that, after all, was the whole point to buying the house from the start.

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