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THE VINTAGE HOUSE

A Guide to Successful Renovations and Additions

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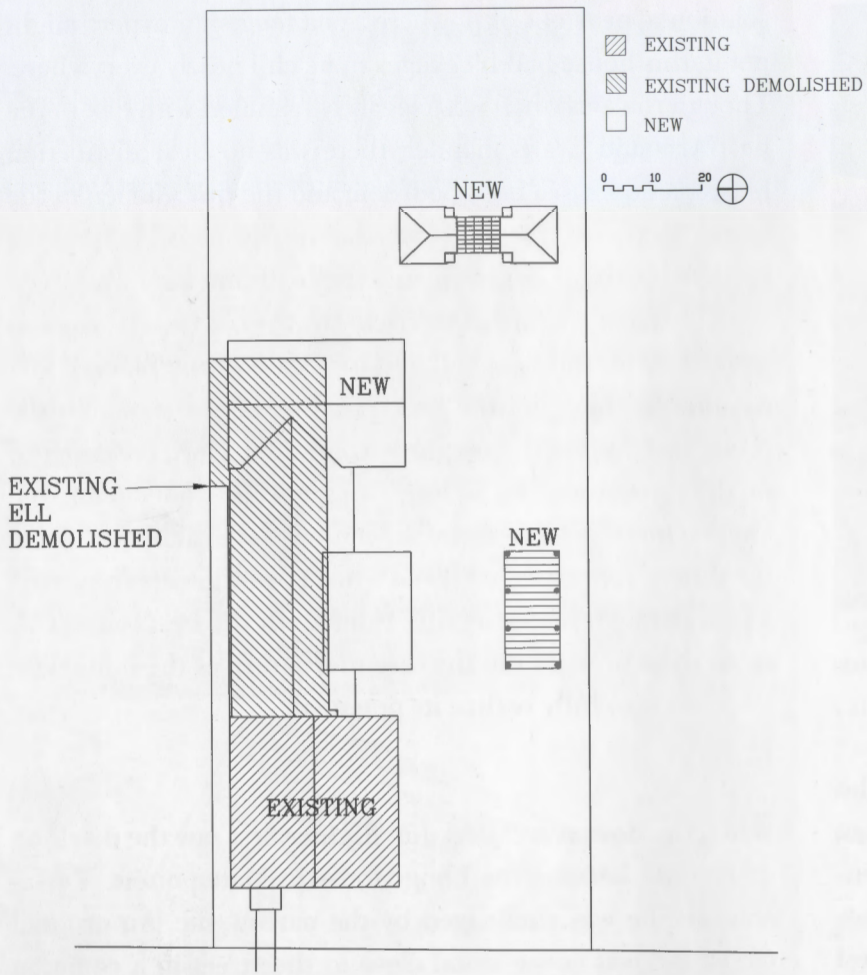
When the Boston architect Jim Righter first saw the dwelling that would become the Long House in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, he was challenged by the narrow site. An original Greek Revival house stood close to the street in a common orientation, but previous renovations had added a boxcarlike ell to the rear of the building that created a poor functional layout and impossible circulation from front to back. Moreover, the house seemed catawampus in relation to the side garden, and his clients were avid plant lovers who wanted to spend time outdoors.



The site plan of the Long House shows how Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects handled a long, narrow lot. The demolished service wing of the original Greek Revival cottage became a template for a new wing of bedrooms and a kitchen/dining area. (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

Right: The plan of the Long House. The architects created a circulation spine on the north side of the site, allowing the new rooms to open out onto a new garden and dining terrace. (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

Recognizing that circulation would drive the design of this renovation, Righter developed a clever plan that balanced the house with the garden as yin and yang. In order to solve a problem with a faulty foundation, the house was picked up while a new concrete foundation was constructed. Once this was done the new ell could be seamlessly attached to the older wing in an A-B-A arrangement. The old wing was renovated to preserve the large main-floor room, but its stair hall was rebuilt to create a continuous circulation spine running the entire 83-foot length of the site. The logic of this configuration is clear when one considers the requirements of a modern family—outdoor living and dining, continuity between kitchen and family areas, private and public zones at opposite ends of the site, and informal, open spaces in the new portions of the house. A brilliant feature of the renovated, yet vintage, Greek Revival gem is the striking gable of the street facade, with its side entrance—a subtle totem for what lies behind. Once one crosses the threshold, the view down the surprising axial hallway runs almost one hundred feet if the master bedroom door is open. It's definitely not your grandpa's kind of stair hall.

Indeed, the Long House functions as one continuous

A problematic foundation below the existing cottage needed complete replacement. The solution was to lift the house on massive steel girders (needles) and build under it (left). Once replaced, it regained its Greek Revival elegance (above). (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

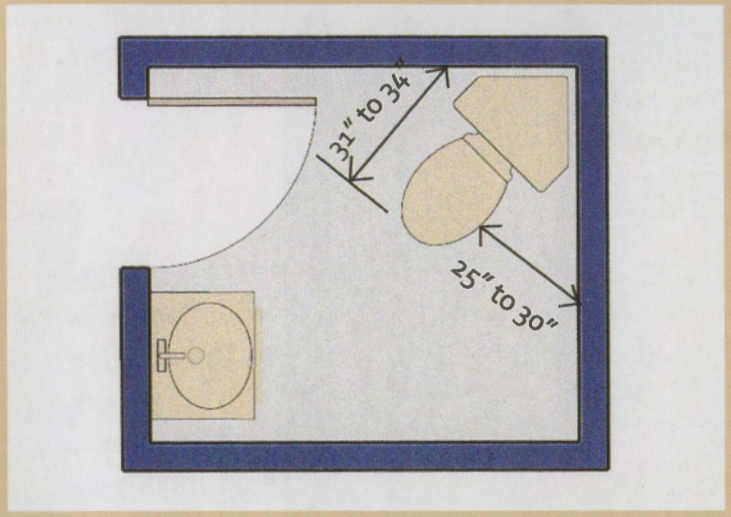
The hallway of the Long House is a dramatic space, quite unexpected after entering the front door. All major rooms connect to it. (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

open room that is permeable from both the "service" and the garden side. Instead of the claustrophobic effect of small, interconnected rooms that had been a feature of the old building, Righter was able to strike a balance between visually open spaces and privacy by simply clearing an axis along the left side of the site. A former professor at Yale, he knew the power of extending the perceived size of a room by creating visual connections between spaces and by varying the heights of ceilings from room to room.

The resulting string of spaces, each opening to a portion of the new garden, is sublime. The center section of the house—the B of the A-B-A design—contains a combined kitchen, mudroom, and dining room filled with light from an adjacent outdoor eating area. Muted colors and funky furniture give the space a charming pastoral feeling. At the rear of the site the master bedroom rises as a foil to the "temple" on the street side. Adjacent to it is a small pavilion that serves a similar formal role, terminating a new garden axis created by a gate at the street.

The bedroom has a vaulted ceiling and formal furniture arrangement that make it a kind of temple for sleeping. Built-in bookshelves and transom windows create two lower zones that reduce the apparent scale to human proportions. The pavilion next door provides a small private garden space for reading, meditation, and communion with the outdoors. In sum, the Long House is deceptive in its apparent size and scope. Though visitors may think they are in an entirely new building, virtually all of the renovated spaces are within the old footprint. The open feeling created by extending vistas

A terrace off the kitchen/breakfast area is perfect for entertaining or informal leisure. (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)



In most communities, codes require a minimum clearance of 18" to 21" from the front of the bowl to the nearest obstruction, and a minimum of 16" at either side. Placing the toilet in a corner—say, with a corner tank unit—can often provide clearance that is otherwise hard to find. (Drawing by Mark Alan Hewitt.)

Low-profile toilets

Those American-made units do minimize the tank by dropping it down close to the bowl. This frees up wall space above the toilet for cabinets or just more open area.

Of course, a wash basin is essential for any powder room, and fortunately these are commonly available in corner models and wall-hung designs (which require no space-hungry cabinetry). Whatever fixtures you choose, be sure to have them on hand before the plumber arrives to avoid costly errors in measurement while putting together the close-fitting pieces of your new powder room.

The master bedroom in the Long House is analogous to the old cottage, but turned 90 degrees to allow for south light. It's a temple for sleeping and reading. (Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

and heights creates the impression of freshness and modernity within a historic envelope.

From the street, neighbors are hard pressed to tell whether there was any renovation at all. In some neighborhoods that is as it should be. A discreet intervention such as this one attends mainly to the private realm that nurtures a family. The public face of the house may or may not telegraph what occurred when new owners chose to freshen things up. Indeed, part of the charm of the Long House is the surprise of crossing the threshold in 1820 and find-

The garden at the Long House has its own small dining pavilion on the east side.
(Courtesy of Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects.)

ing yourself in 2010, like the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.