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# THE VINTAGE HOUSE

A Guide to  
Successful Renovations  
and Additions

MARK ALAN HEWITT  
GORDON BOCK



The dining room was improved with the addition of a classic Arts & Crafts style server. (Courtesy of the Johnson Family, Long House, Mattapoisett, Massachusetts)

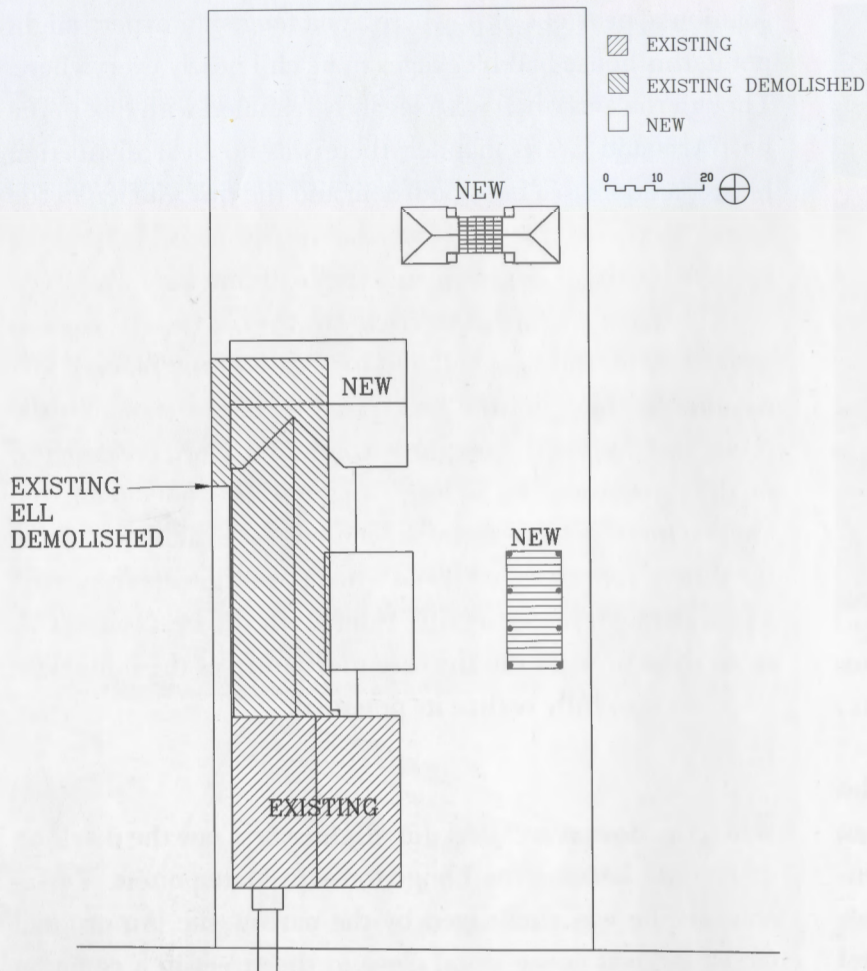
bungalows offered inexpensive, rustic, relaxed living and liked an outdoor feeling—hence the large porches at the front and rear. Despite their lack of grandeur, bungalows maintained a distinction between service areas and living spaces. Kitchens and bathrooms were squished together and tucked behind small doors and were not readily accessible.

The family wanted their renovated bungalow to be logically from front to back, and had in mind a feature that would become a focal point, not an afterthought. Their backyard wasn't roomy enough for a large garden, but the architect had one or two tricks up his sleeve that might

solution appear out of nowhere. As a firm that expert might put it, the house had blockages in its circulation everywhere. Though the entry hall was elegantly finished with oak in the best Arts and Crafts manner, there was a clear distinction between doors to a back bedroom and the tiny kitchen in the space. Moreover, the staircase was poorly located, making access to both the basement and the bedrooms near a mess.

The simple scheme devised by the architect would wonder with the stair hall and took care of the blocked circulation. By nudging the lower landing of the stair into the room, the designers gave the second floor more prominence in the circulation. By hiding the guest bedroom door, the kitchen door took on its proper central place in the hall. Even the dining room was improved when the architect converted a pass-through into a serving cabinet. In the best sense, this renovation brought out the essential nature of the bungalow, allowing it to fully realize its potential.

When the Boston architect Jim Richter 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.)**

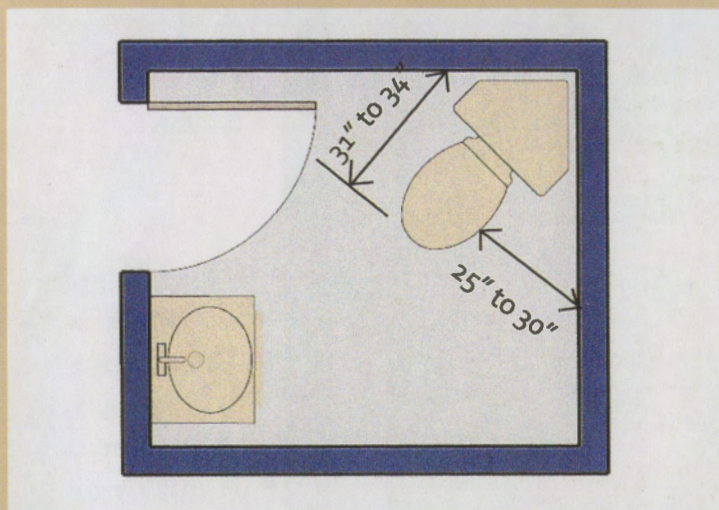
open room that is permeable from both the “service” and the garden side. Instead of the claustrophobic effect of small, interconnected rooms that had been a feature of the old building, Righter was able to strike a balance between visually open spaces and privacy by simply clearing an axis along the 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.

## UPSTAIRS AND DOWN

One of the delights of owning a pre-1920 house in New York is the discovery of underused attics and basements that were grown up in the "Leave it to Beaver" split-level bungalow ranches of postwar America never saw these areas flourish of domesticity because builders had done more with them in their drive for economy and efficiency in construction. When William Levitt erected his little GI bill houses on Long Island in a matter of days, he had no time for anything but a slab on grade and a little roof insulation. Earlier houses in California had a different selling point—they were not only less expensive and functional, they were also great places for flat abstract glass and open plans inspired by the styles of the past and a view to the future.

There are many advantages to space "below" and above the living areas in a house. One is that these are the best systems, electrical lines, and plumbing can be installed in areas that are both accessible and out of sight. Another is that vertical circulation is often already available through stairs. A third is that renovation work for kitchen, bathroom, and foundation—among the most expensive elements of construction. Finally, areas above and below the main levels are seldom fully utilized and offer an average 20 to 30% of expansion.

There are also drawbacks to finishing a basement or attic. Both are exposed to the elements more directly than main levels—the attic to rainfall and ice, the basement to ground water, insects, and earth forces. We have found that many owners seem unaware of the potential costs of waterproofing exposed areas—it is in fact impossible to waterproof any part of a house, merely to prevent the treacherous seep of water in liquid form through substances like wood, stone, or concrete. We'll cover some of the issues with water in later chapters. Attics can be drafty and basements damp, and it is difficult to make them truly comfortable without some costly extra effort—digging to install sump pumps or foundation drains, installing extra insulation, and so forth.

Occasionally a client will ask us to create a basement under a portion of the house that has only a crawl space, thinking that any area below the footprint of a building will be easily excavated for added space. This is seldom the case. Older houses were often built on shallow foundations constructed of fieldstone, lacking spread footings to distribute loads to the ground. Modern foundations are usually reinforced against lateral earth forces and are placed at least two feet below the frost line on ample footings of reinforced concrete. In order to create a full basement where there are crawl spaces, the upper walls must be supported, the existing foundations turned against lateral earth forces, and new etc. etc. etc. done by hand—a labor-intensive process that can break a budget.

These issues notwithstanding, reclaiming upper and lower floors for living space is a proven strategy that adds value to any vintage house. Clever designers make the most