



Behind a restored Victorian façade (opposite), a gut remodel gave this rowhouse the openness of a Manhattan loft. A garden patio, open to the sky, brings light into the core of the house.

Civic Virtue

A PHILADELPHIA ROWHOUSE RISES TO A NEW DAY. BY BRUCE D. SNIDER

Reduce, reuse, recycle. It is the mantra of resource conservation, but it could also be the unofficial motto of urban remodeling. It surely serves as an apt shorthand for the history of this much-remodeled Philadelphia rowhouse. First built around 1870 as a family residence, the four-story structure was reused in the 1920s as a private men's club and, later, as three office suites. By the time its current owners bought it, the property had been reduced both figuratively, by decades of hard use, and literally, through the sale of its backyard to a next-door neighbor. Now, a down-to-the-bricks remodel has rewound the building's exterior to its original Victorian spec while fast-forwarding the interior to the current architectural moment. Recycled products should always look this good.



A frosted-glass bridge gives the living room entry a sense of ceremony. With its split-level location, the dining room enjoys views of both the kitchen below and the living room above (opposite, top).



Details: Urban Renewal



definitive signal that we are not in the 19th century any more. To further the contemporary agenda, and to fit the modest budget, Kass kept the finishes clean and simple. "We did it all with spatial gymnastics and not a lot of detail," he says. To make the most of a limited footprint, the

Like Philadelphia itself, the house's center-city block is in the midst of a renaissance, as young professionals rediscover the pleasures of urban living. Its handsome brick façades hum with a vibrant mix of homes, shops, and even a small theater. A preservation commission holds dominion here, requiring that any visible alterations return a building to its original appearance. But the original appearance of this house was a matter of some debate. Back in the 1960s, its façade was covered with a simulated-brick stucco. An earlier photograph seemed to support the preservation authorities' contention that the original finish below was brick. On closer inspection, however, architect Spence Kass found that what appeared in the photo as grout lines were actually painted onto a stucco finish called "hardcast." With the blessings of the preservationists, Kass specified a smooth, painted stucco with a new marble base. The ornate cornice, dormers, and slate mansard roof were likewise faithfully restored.

But this painstaking historical authenticity goes no further than the very Philadelphian raised-panel front doorway. In their living environment, the owners sought something more akin to a Manhattan loft. And true to that program, Kass's gut remodel employs the original building shell as the backdrop for a thoroughly contemporary urban residence. Floors of clouded earth-tone concrete are a

kitchen stands front and center at the entry level, its windows opening directly on the sidewalk. The unconventional layout works surprisingly well, in part due to understated cherry casework that Kass describes as "more like furniture than just a bunch of kitchen cabinets."

From the kitchen, a ramped hallway leads down-slope past a small, landlocked patio garden to a private sitting area at the rear of the house. Over the sitting area, a half-story above the kitchen level, is the dining room. A half-story higher, over the kitchen, is the living room. The house ascends this way, in half steps, because floor elevations at the rear are "out of phase" with those at the front. While the building is four stories high, Kass notes, "It really has seven floors." The arrangement yields two unexpected benefits. Each level enjoys views of two other levels, increasing the perceived sense of interior volume. And the stair becomes the primary means of circulation, reducing the need for space-eating corridors.

But this stair does more than lift people through the house's 3-D floor plan. Sharing the patio garden's opening to the sky, it also acts as a giant light shaft. Kass enhanced the effect by lining the stair walls with glass, mounting skylights above, and splay-



ing, Handman had to negotiate access via the neighbor's Japanese-style courtyard. "We actually scaffolded in the fish pond," he says. ■ Structural decay in the 130-year-old shell went from dry-rotted first-floor joists to crumbling brick parapet walls. "They were like powder," Handman says, "They had the shape of brick, that's about it. Every time you turned the next corner it was something else, and the dreaded phone call to the owner to say, 'We found ... this.'" Such surprises are all in a day's work for an urban remodeler. But even Handman had to laugh the day his men, repairing a brick party wall, appeared unannounced in the neighbor's upstairs bathroom. "Every kind of crazy element I can think of, this project had it." —B.D.S.



Located at the street side of the house, the kitchen enjoys a front-row view of the sidewalk scene outside. More private spaces are located to the rear and on upper floors.

The Builder: Numbers Man

Mitch Handman is a great example of how cross-pollination from other professions benefits the custom home industry. Sixteen years ago, as a



computer consultant to construction companies, Handman met custom builder Bob Legnini. Legnini's reputation for fine work had brought him a lot of business, Handman says. "But was he

making any money? No." Joining up as partners allowed Legnini to concentrate on building houses while Handman steered the company toward profitability. ■ Today Handman's expertise in scheduling and job-cost accounting has made R.C. Legnini a thoroughly systematized company. "The schedule kind of directs the whole job," Handman says. "It really helps move the project along." But Handman understands that numbers tell only part of the story. "We try to make money on our projects, but not at the expense of the quality of a project or the relationship with a customer. You can't always look at things from the dollars-and-time standpoint. I think we maintain a balance." ■ Handman has sought balance also by diversifying the company's job list, which includes new custom homes, remodels, commercial build-outs, and lots of handyman projects. "Last year we did 198 small jobs," Handman says. "We literally hang pictures for people." And while R.C. Legnini has benefited from expertise gained outside the industry, the door swings both ways. Bob Legnini, who retired from the business five years ago, is now a professor of western civilization at Villanova University.—B.D.S.

ing the stair runs to allow light to spill through. By bringing natural light into the core of the house, Kass was able to forgo windows to the rear—with its view of the neighbor's parking pad and an alley full of trashcans—without turning the house into a four-story cave. The stair itself is the focal point of the interior views. Fabricated from unfinished steel with treads and railing caps of Brazilian cherry, it provides the visual center around which the rest of the house revolves. "It's a major piece of sculpture," Kass says.

Getting that sculpture into the house required a major logistical effort. "We did a kind of design/build on the stair to make that work," says builder Mitch Handman, who huddled with Kass and a steel fabricator to work out the details. "There was a lot of welding that was done on site, and it was done on purpose, because they wanted that rough, raw look." But every piece of steel also had to fit through the front door, because that is the only access into the house. Because the stair was conceived as a fixture to be installed during the finish phase, Handman's crew had to keep the stair hole open until late in the job. "They were climbing scaffolding for 80 per-

cent of this project," Handman says.

The same trip today is accomplished in a more relaxed fashion. A modest run of steps brings guests from the kitchen to an intimate dining room. Up a few more risers and across a frosted-glass bridge, one reaches a living room whose elevation gives it a fine view of the streetscape below. Another half flight toward the rear of the building reaches a compact guest room and bath; the master suite is a half story higher, above the living room. The final two flights access a roof deck and an attic-level study with a commanding view over rooftops to the city center. Today, the skyline is spiked with construction cranes, as 300-year-old Philadelphia remakes itself for yet another generation. Like this renewed rowhouse, it's all part of the great recycling program known as the American city. ■

Project Credits: Builder: R.C. Legnini, Malvern, Penn.; Architect: Kass & Associates, Philadelphia; Structural engineer: Bevan Lawson; Living space: 2,555 square feet; Site: 1,000 square feet; Construction cost: Withheld; Photographer: Barry Halkin (except portrait).

■ Resources: Concrete floor: Stan-Kemiko Concrete Products, Circle 400; Concrete sinks: Get Real Surfaces, Circle 401; Dishwasher: Bosch, Circle 402; Electric shade: Vimco, Circle 403; Fireplace: Temco, Circle 404; Hardware: Bouvet, Circle 405 and Omnia, Circle 406; Skylights: Velux, Circle 407.

