

HOME & DESIGN

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CHANGING SPACES

In this issue we celebrate the art of renovation. Interpreted literally, there's no better example of a successful renovation than the Delancey Place townhome shown here. A Center City couple, with the help of a talented team of architects and designers, gutted a dilapidated, four-story office space (left) and transformed it into a sun-drenched, multilevel home (right). Along with the story of this home, we introduce you to Henry Cobb, the man who gave the Constitution a home, share the story of Independence Mall's renovation and detail the East Falls real estate boom that's turned the neighborhood into a happening place to live. To get your own renovations under way, we'll also show you how a frame can transform a piece of artwork and how a fine rug can reform a room.

STEPPING UP

**A Center City Couple
Follows Their Gut
Instincts to Remodel.**

BY GWEN SHAFFER AND
JOSEPH DENNIS KELLY II

A staircase connects the eight levels inside this four-story home.



A view of the open-plan building that connects the kitchen and dining room.

Few undertakings could present more obstacles than transforming a dark and dilapidated office building into a bright, multilevel new home. From the outside, this Federal-style home resembles many of the other brick houses that line Delancey Place, but inside it opens up on eight levels and allows an interplay of light and visual lines.

Philadelphia architect Spence Kass refers to this charming building as a townhouse to distinguish it from the more generic row houses found throughout the city. The four-story building was originally constructed sometime around 1870 as a single-family home. According to city real estate records, the stagehands' union bought it for a mere \$1 in 1925. The union used the building as a clubhouse and office. By the time a Center City couple stumbled upon it nearly 75 years later, the union still owned it, but a masseuse operated out of the ground floor and several businesses rented space on the upper levels.

The couple paid \$190,000 for the 2,555-square-foot building in October 1999. Under Kass' guidance, this former shoebox has been transformed into a series of multilevel sunlit rooms. The result is an interior that visually extends into the exterior environment, which includes a rear garden. The delicate balance of this dynamic rela-

tionship establishes a spatial continuity that seems to expand the house's limited structural configuration. By removing the existing corridors—which allowed the stairs to become the interior's main conduit and central architectural element—Kass developed dramatic views that allow the owners and their guests to view rooms on the upper and lower floors simultaneously.

The couple enlisted Kass & Associates to design a contemporary home that created warmth while maintaining a sense of history. About 5,000 individual houses throughout the city are designated "historic" by the Philadelphia Historical Commission, estimates John Gallery, executive director of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia. Another 4,000 are located inside historic districts and are subject to historic restrictions. The historical commission's architecture committee reviews about 30 renovation requests each month. Projects range from porch repairs to complete guts. Several of Philadelphia's hottest residential neighborhoods—Queen Village, Northern Liberties and Bella Vista—are full of older buildings, Gallery says. "Even if the properties aren't certified historic, most people want to fix them up properly because, in the long run, it will add value," he says. "A lot of people make an effort to preserve wood molding and original



Large windows channel natural light into the core of the building and visually extend the interior into the rear courtyard and garden.

fireplaces." The City of Philadelphia offers a 10-year real estate tax abatement to owners who renovate their historic homes.

The vast majority of the homes on Delancey Place tend to be careful restorations. The homeowners wanted to stray from the classic, Kass says. "Nothing that conjured up images of an early townhouse was allowed."

The Delancey Place residence is unconventional in several ways. The final design resembles the openness found in a New York loft rather than the rigid partitioned plan of a traditional Philadelphia townhouse. While the building is only four stories, it consists of eight distinct levels because the front of the house is "out of phase" with the back, Kass says.

Making the long ascent from the ground level to the roof deck is eased when one realizes they are climbing a staircase that alone is a beautiful piece of sculpture. The raw steel staircase—meant to rust over time—is topped with Brazilian cherry treads and supported by a center stringer. This unusual staircase consumed more than 10 percent of the construction budget. It was also the project's biggest challenge to realize, Kass says. The stairs ultimately ended up defining the house. "They are not just art and architecture," Kass says. "They serve as a promenade." It's this focus on thoughtful functionality that gives the designed elements a striking visual power that transcends traditional ideas and expectations of residential aesthetics.

Originally, Kass wanted to introduce light into the house by designing an indoor atrium behind the kitchen. Instead, the architect came up with the idea of cutting out some of that space and creating a courtyard. A wet spring helped the rhododendron and jasmine plants flourish above the footstones that the homeowners handpicked from a quarry. "By the time we moved in, it felt like we had lived here forever."

Because the couple believed strongly that the design of their home should reflect their lifestyle, they wanted the front door to lead directly into the kitchen. This non-traditional set up takes some visitors by surprise, but to the couple, it makes perfect sense—they spend more time in their kitchen than any other room in the house. To give the kitchen a warmth not usually associated with contemporary-styled homes, Kass and his team—which included designers David Nordone, Kristina Duveneck and Michelle Ferrero and interior designer Linda Kass—created custom millwork specific to the space. The kitchen cabinets are cut from a knot-free, cross-grain of cherry; black marble countertops complement the steel appliances; and the concrete floor has an earthy stain applied to it. A sloped hallway leads to a den and bathroom.

In an unexpected twist, Kass and his team positioned the second flight of stairs leading to the second-floor dining room to jut out and over the courtyard. This ascent serves as a transition into the dining area and sparks interesting responses from visitors. Because this room gets the least amount of natural light, Kass designed it to accommodate a de facto art gallery. The darkness of this space enables the couple to hang dozens of drawings and prints that require protection from the sun. The art is complemented by a long, narrow Spanish alter table and a German cabinet, both family heirlooms.

Another half-flight of stairs leads to a frosted glass bridge connecting the dining room to a living room. Despite its concrete floor and simple lines, the room manages to avoid feeling the least bit industrial. A cut-out in the plaster wall reveals a glimpse of a colorful mural painted circa 1920. A short climb up from here is a small guest room and bathroom and the master bedroom sits another half-story high, directly above the living room. The master bath is one room where the couple did not skimp. A marble Italianate floor, dry sauna, double-head shower and twin cast concrete sinks are a few

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—John Gallery, executive director,
Philadelphia Historical Commission



The façade of this Federal-style building resembles many of the other brick houses lining Delancey Place, but the similarities end there.



A custom-fabricated steel catwalk and railing enhances the spatial drama of the study entrance.

"When you open up a house of this vintage, it is like opening a Cracker Jack box. There's a surprise in every one."

—Mitch Handman, president, R.C. Legnini Co.



By carving windows into the rear wall, the architect transformed a dark office building into a sun-drenched house.

of the highlights. Center City's tiered architectural landscape greets anyone peering out the window. The two top flights lead to a roof deck and his and her studies separated by walk-in closets.

Such a renovation is not easy and should only be handled by the most qualified of design and construction professionals. To help Philadelphians find the right professionals for their home projects, the Preservation Alliance maintains a database of 500 contractors and architects specializing in historic renovations. R.C. Legnini Co. worked within the parameters for renovating historic properties because they knew what to expect. "A lot of issues are resolved before we ever put a shovel in the ground," says Mitch Handman, president of Legnini. Unforeseen challenges plague even the most well-planned project, he said. For instance, the staircase wasn't installed until about six weeks before the entire job was completed. "Hurdles like this are part of the fun," he explains. "When you open up a house of this vintage, it is like opening a Cracker Jack box. There's a surprise in every one." ■



The kitchen features custom-designed wood cabinetry and stainless steel equipment.