

Making the Most of What You've Got

by Gordon Tully

My family recently moved into a small house. The story of its subsequent renovation involves doing as much as possible with few resources.

When we bought the house, we anticipated adding a three-story addition to the rear. Luckily, we couldn't start construction right away, and in the delay, we started to question the need for the addition. In the end, we decided against adding on. Instead, we concentrated on using the space we had as efficiently as possible.

Taking Stock

The small room upstairs was unusable as a bedroom, but using the long porch-like room as a master bedroom gave us three workable bedrooms. The upstairs bath was acceptable. Downstairs, we had a tolerable kitchen, a formal dining room, and a large and pleasant living room. However, we still needed:

- a study for my wife
- a guest room
- possibly a second full bath
- a place to sit and talk
- an acoustically isolated place for the TV
- a place for the upright piano
- a place to serve dinner to at least ten guests
- a breakfast area

To meet these goals, we had the original dining room, the living room, and the remaining small bedroom on the second floor.

Solutions

The illustrations show how we achieved our goals.

Guest room. The toughest decision was where to put a guest room. We rejected such expensive options as building a guest room in the basement or closing in what is now a screened side porch. We also rejected using the kids' rooms, even though they would be away at college most of the time. We wanted them to be able to host friends during vacation, and we also wanted a place on the first floor for when an aging parent visits.

That left the small bedroom upstairs and the former dining room. After much thought we decided to put doors in the doorways to the former dining room and use it as a guest room. Since it wouldn't often be occupied, this room could also meet some other first-floor needs still outstanding:

TV room, music room, and library. Intensive shelving and very careful planning allowed us to squeeze in bookcases, the piano, the TV, and a fold-out couch.

Where to eat? With the dining room gone, we had to put the formal dining area in the living room. A lot of furniture moving and a relocated radiator made this work.

We also eat, in warmer months, on the side porch off the living room. We found it so useful that we decided to splurge and screen it in. Because the house is so compact, the trip from the kitchen is no problem.

How big a bath? We wanted a full bath next to the guest room, so I designed a little addition off the half bath to house a shower. But when we looked at the cost, we dropped this plan; our visitors use the tub-shower on the second floor instead, and we all adjust.

The attic. The attic, curiously, is the key to the plan, because it serves functions that aren't covered elsewhere in our small house:

- **Storage:** Every extra piece of furniture we own is up there, along with all the stuff we seldom use but don't want to get rid of.
- **Overflow activities:** We used left-over carpeting and some cheap shelving to create a playroom for visiting kids and future grandchildren. An extra desk became a sewing table. The room can even be used for overflow sleeping, although it has full headroom only at the ridge and you must leave the folding stair down when someone is up there. New windows in both gable ends admit some light.

The study. The small bedroom upstairs nicely filled the last remaining need: a study for my wife. With careful furniture placement and some built-in work surfaces, the room proved ideal — it is close to the bedroom and far from the living areas downstairs.

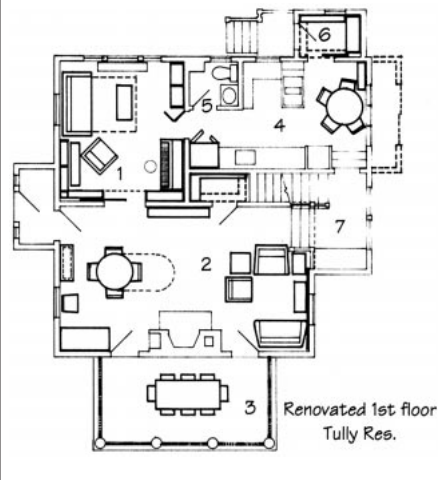
Lessons Learned

Making these decisions taught us some valuable lessons.

Wait. When you move into a house, live there as long as you can before renovating; your initial assessment of what is wrong will change. Some problems you adjust to with little trouble; others you discover and realize you must fix.

Design from the top down. First,

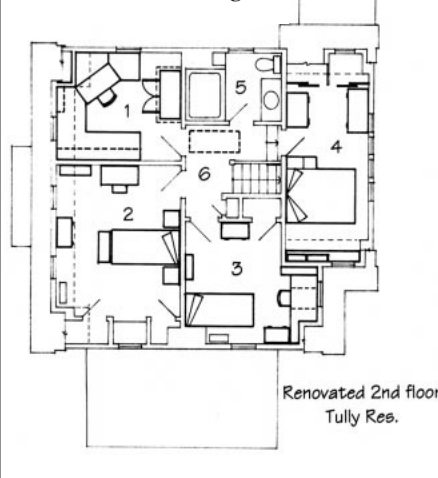
First Floor Changes



Reworking the first floor was more a matter of careful planning and furniture layout than construction. The dining room, outfitted with new doors and bookcases, became a combined guest/TV/music room. The formal dining area moved into one end of the living room, and the porch was screened in for use as a warm-weather eating area.

1. **Guest room/TV/Music room** (with convertible sofa, TV/audio cabinet, double-hinged door, piano, bookcases, and sliding door)
2. **Living/dining room** (with relocated radiator, expandable dining table, and seating area)
3. **Porch** (now screened and covered)
4. **Kitchen** (with informal dining area and proposed bay with slider to future deck)
5. **Half-bath**
6. **Back entry** (with slider and shelving)
7. **Entry**

Second Floor Changes



Here again, a lot of planning and a little modification made the most of the existing floor plan. Closets transformed a long porch-like room (far right) into a master bedroom. The other two bedrooms and the bath stayed essentially the same.

1. **Study** (with high-back desk, raised shelf over radiator, work counter, bookcases, and wardrobe)
2. **Bedroom**
3. **Bedroom** (with built-in desk and bookcase)
4. **New master bedroom** (with new closet with sliders, bedside shelves over stair enclosure, bed over stair enclosure, and bookcases)
5. **Bathroom** (no change)
6. **Stair hall** (with drop-down attic stair)

design the house of your dreams. (Even it will be full of compromises.) Then, taking as long as possible, pare down until you can't tolerate further compromises and build that design. Top-down design isn't meant to make you miserable thinking about all you've given up; it's to help you adjust your present, affordable options with your dreams down the road. If you know what you ultimately want, you can plan renovations so that later improvements can be added without redoing a lot of work.

Use existing space well. This requires measuring and drawing the space carefully and revising the design often, always concentrating on knowing and meeting the needs of the people who will live there. Draw plans at 1/2 inch = 1 foot scale, and be very precise. An inch can make a big difference. In my house, a framing error left the space planned for the piano one inch too

short, so we had to move a doorway.

Mock things up full-size. Some elements, like couches, need more room than you think; but you can also often squeeze through narrower spaces than you think possible.

Consider carefully which functions can be doubled up. For us, the TV room can work as a guest room, because we don't watch much TV and have few guests; but the study, which is used daily, wouldn't accommodate a TV or guests. In other households, the reverse might be true.

Storage. Convenient storage is crucial, especially in small houses. Without it, you will never be able to keep the house orderly and you may constantly be without things you need. Attics make better storage spaces than basements, because they are dry. ■

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