



Design for a Narrow Lot

by Gordon Tully

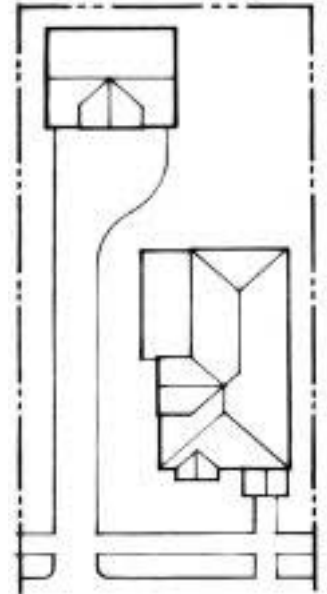


Figure 1. By reinterpreting a Victorian original, the author has created a modern design that works well on a narrow lot. Detaching the garage and putting it at the rear of the lot (right) leaves room for a porch and gardens in front, encouraging connection with the neighborhood.

Original “Double Parlor”

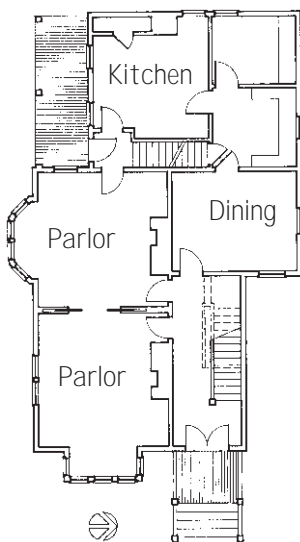


Figure 2. The original “Double Parlor” house had two parlors linked by sliding doors. Originally designed for a family with servants, the plan still works well for modern living except for the dark kitchen and the absence of a master bedroom and closet space.

Last month, we explored ways of stuffing a two-car garage into the front of a house on a narrow lot. In this article, I’ll look at what happens when you get rid of the attached garage, then focus on reinterpreting a popular narrow-lot home design (Figure 1).

We saw that garages in front can overwhelm the scale of the house and even the street. Narrow driveways leading to garages at the rear, rear alleys serving backyard garages, or (in more urban settings) no garages at all, are a better answer. Putting the parking or garage at the back lets the house present itself to the street, perhaps with a porch. This creates an inviting and friendly environment that encourages connection with the neighborhood. These ideas have gained popularity through the brilliant work of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, planners of the famous “Seaside” community in Florida.

Updating an Old Design

Getting rid of the attached garage also opens the door for some real architecture. My family lived for 15 years in a Victorian “Double Parlor” house in Cambridge, Mass. I am not sure this is the proper term for these wonderful designs, and I also haven’t a clue where the design originated, although it strongly resembles many post-Civil War Boston row house plans.

The double-parlor plan, like a row house, is designed for a long, narrow lot. The entry hall and stair, typically about 8 feet wide, is on one side; two parlors set front-to-back and connected by big double rolling doors are on the other side. The house is about 24 feet wide at the front (Figure 2).

Behind the stair, the plan usually bumps out 6 feet or so to make space for a dining room. On the other side, at the back of the rear parlor, the plan is inset by the same amount, resulting in a “dogleg” footprint. The rear of the

original house is taken up by the kitchen, scullery, and butler's pantry. The setback creates a notch for a covered back porch behind the parlors.

The upstairs is divided into the owner's area, with bedrooms above both parlors and the dining room, and a servant's area over the main kitchen. The two areas are separated by the utility stair and the bathrooms. There is usually a little room over the entry hall.

Variations on this plan are found all over Cambridge. On my street there were several of them with very similar first-floor plans, each embellished in an entirely different style. It takes a practiced eye to see the family resemblance among them. Some are two stories, while most have a third floor under the roof.

These houses are decorated with a bewildering variety of trim, all drawn from the various catalogs which abounded at the time. In those days the owner and builder "designed" the house (there were no architects) by picking out a smorgasbord of columns, brackets, modillions, cornice molding, and other carved ornaments. They would also decide where to put bays and porches and whether there was money for a tower.

Besides their intrinsic charm, these houses are wonderfully sited. On our street, which runs north/south, they are all set way to the north side of the lot, which lets vast quantities of south light into three-fourths of the rooms in the house.

Each house originally had an elaborate carriage house or barn in the back, with a driveway running along the south side of the narrow lots and on the north side of the wider ones. (Most of the modern owners of Cambridge Victorians park in the front, because the side and backyards are too valuable to use up with driveways and garages.)

Reinventing the Double-Parlor House

In my reinterpretation of the double-parlor plan, I have followed the lead of nearly every architect who has renovated one of these homes by combining the two parlors into one (Figure 3). The reason for this is evident when you live in one of the

Modern Reinterpretation

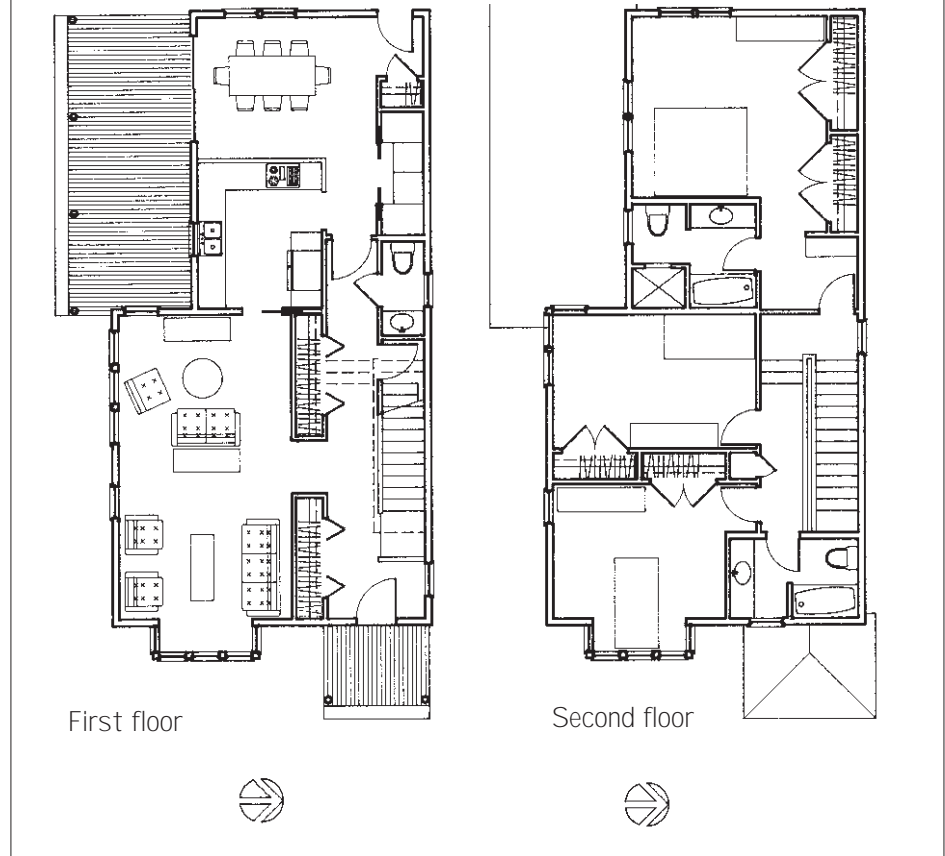


Figure 3. In this remake of the Victorian original, the combined parlors on the first floor create a large, well-lit living space with access to the kitchen porch and plenty of furnishable walls. At the back, there is a sunny "country kitchen" with adjacent laundry. Upstairs, the front bedrooms have been elevated three steps to create a high ceiling in the entry and parlor downstairs.

originals: Except in the largest versions, there are so many doors in the double-parlor plan that it is beastly difficult to furnish the rooms.

Next, I combined the kitchen and dining room into a country kitchen and provided doors between this room and the front room for acoustic separation. I also added a utility/laundry next to the kitchen (laundries belong near the kitchen, in my opinion, because you can tend the laundry while cooking and cleaning up). To cut the overall width of the house, I eliminated the bump-out on the entry side.

If a fireplace or wood stove is required, I would put it on the wall between the parlor and the kitchen. In the originals, there were usually side fireplaces and chimneys aligned in the band of space I used for the downstairs closets.

Upstairs I reversed the original plan,

putting the master bedroom suite over the kitchen, and the two smaller bedrooms over the parlor and entry.

The 12-foot ceilings with plaster crown moldings that made our Cambridge house feel so spacious are a bit impractical for an economical modern house. But, to provide variety in ceiling height, I raised the second floor by adding three steps to the front rooms while raising the ceiling to just under 10 feet in the entry and parlor. It would be very easy to reverse the design and elevate the master suite, to create a high ceiling in the kitchen.

The front porch is an essential feature, copied from the originals. The back porch has turned into a sunlit deck off the kitchen, with access possible from the front parlor. ■

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