

# Inverting Front and Back, Comfortably

by Jamie Fisher

**H**ouses, like people, generally have clearly defined fronts and backs. Yet our conventional notions of front and back can get confused when a house's most prominent side is not the side from which you enter, or when private rooms like bedrooms are right inside the entrance, while public spaces such as the living and dining rooms are farther removed.

Either or both of these situations can be forced on you by an unusual site. When that happens, you must somehow accommodate the unconventional arrangements without clashing too heavily with the conventional hierarchies we use to organize our houses. A

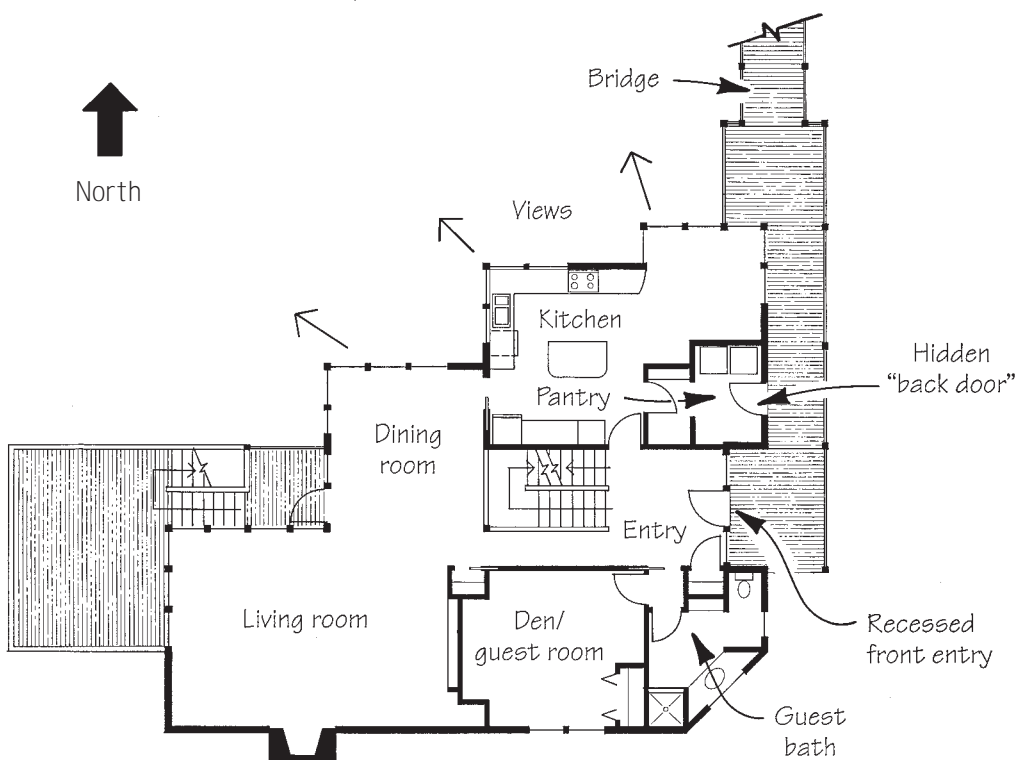
successful solution will make the unusual work while conforming comfortably with our expectations of how a building's parts relate to one another.

Such was the challenge architect Fred Baxter and I faced in a spec house we designed and built. The large, steep site had dramatic water views to the northwest. Yet the site had to be approached by a narrow easement from the east. How could we design a house that would be oriented to the view without seeming to turn its back to arriving visitors?

## The Outside Problem

Arrival had to be by the northeast corner because that's where the ease-

ment brings you in. Meanwhile, we wanted to locate the house in the lot's southeast corner to push it up the hill for the best view. Rather than fight the site, we first separated the garage and house. This means that both visitors and residents park at the property's northeast corner, then approach the house over a covered footbridge. This siting minimized the amount of yard given to driveway, but it left little room to maneuver people into any kind of "front" east entrance. We felt that a vastly improved house and yard justified the small hike. But we also felt pretty sure that anybody shopping for a half-million dollar house would want



The author had to find a way to not only to emphasize the recessed front door, but also to move arriving visitors gracefully from the door to the main social rooms at the house's rear.

something that felt like a front door.

To exploit the view, we arranged the three major social rooms — kitchen, dining room, and living room — across the house's northwest side so that each could have big wraparound corner windows. The deck, treated as an equally important outdoor room, was given the same orientation. We used the nonview south side for support spaces (powder room and pantry) and a den/guest room. Bedrooms went on floors above and below the main level.

### Finding the Front Door

The bridge brings you in along the uphill side of the house rather than perpendicular to it, so you don't actually see the front door until you are almost upon it. Without the familiar axial approach, we had to use other architectural cues to say "Here's the front door." A front door needn't be grand, but it must be prominent enough to be a focal point. You should be able to tell at a glance where you should enter. That's why the area immediately outside the door is usually covered or recessed — to provide both physical and psychological shelter, a sense of invitation.

We recessed the front door and used other familiar front-door trappings, such as symmetrical flanking sidelites, strong lighting, a custom raised-panel door with a bright brass latch set, and a prominent door knocker. We also "hid" the back door (which is just off the kitchen, and which you actually walk right past to get to the front door) by using an unadorned, unrecessed flush door stained the same color as the siding. We further directed people to the front door by the structure of the walkway. As a result, people arrive at the front door perhaps a little out of breath but with no doubt they are in the right place.

### The Inside Problem

Once we got people inside, we still faced the challenge of moving them 30 or so feet to the public rooms while playing down the fact that they were passing through the service portion of the house. Anytime you move people through a building it's an opportunity to

create anticipation, drama, surprise, even humor. Think of it as architectural foreplay — an experience to be relished for all it's worth rather than impatiently dispensed with.

Again, we used architectural cues to accomplish our goals. In the foyer, we kept both the ceiling and light level low to make the point that you haven't arrived yet, that you are in a transition space. Typical interior doors lead to the guest suite/powder room on the left and the kitchen on the right, but these don't beckon you nearly as much as what lies straight ahead: a richly detailed stair hall, nearly 20 feet tall, dramatically lit from above. As your eyes are drawn skyward your feet move forward: You're on your way. By the time you're halfway down the stair hall you catch your first glimpse of the large windows overlooking the view beyond. Your vision is immediately drawn to those windows, as are your feet. Thus, while the living room is not the first or even the second room encountered, it is the culmination of an orchestrated sequence of architectural moves, and the natural focal point of attention from the entry area. The spaces beyond the entry tell visitors quite unambiguously where they are supposed to go, and when they get there they know they have arrived.

This being a spec house, it was all the more important that these various cues work well to make first-time visitors feel welcome and comfortable. Apparently they did; The project was well-received by the area's real estate agents, who showed it often and soon sold it.

These solutions and cues can work in any number of situations where a house's exterior or interior must vary from the usual notions of what's front and back. I no longer flinch when a site forces me to invert a house's front and back. As long as you respect (and use) many of the conventions that establish a house's hierarchy, you can wander from the traditional spatial arrangement without causing discomfort or confusion.



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