

## An Urban House

by Gordon Tully

Recently, my family and I sadly decided to leave our Victorian house in Cambridge, because it needed major renovations and we needed to reduce our mortgage. Before settling in Arlington, a neighboring town, we made a stab at acquiring a vacant lot in Cambridge. I won't describe the fantastic development strategies we had to work out to make an offer (which was then rejected by the sellers). But I would like to present the design I developed for this fairly typical urban lot.

### The Program

At 48 feet wide by roughly 100 feet deep, the lot was fairly narrow, and long. So a typical urban house developed: narrow and long, with the narrow end toward the street. The townhouse development rules let us put the house very close to the north lot line, leaving some room for a yard along the south side of the house.

Our program for the house included:

#### First Floor:

- an open living/dining/TV space
- kitchen with dining space for four to six people
- guest room and full bath with shower

#### Second Floor:

- master bedroom with dressing room/closet
- two large bedrooms for our teenagers
- office for my wife
- one full bath with tub
- room to add a separate master bath (for future owners)

#### Basement:

- my architectural office, preferably with separate outside entry
- storage space
- if room, space for ping-pong

### The Constraints

Land costs, legal fees, and temporary quarters during construction would claim most of our budget, leaving about \$165,000 for the building. Despite many attempts, I couldn't get the two upper floors to work out in less than 2,052 square feet. If we could build that much house for \$70 per square foot, we would have about \$22,000 left to finish out the basement office and ping-pong space. This seemed just possible.

### The Design

With the house hard on the lot's north border, it made sense to put the services (bath, halls, stairs) along that side, and put most of the main living areas along the south side. This fit beautifully with an idea I'd been playing with for years: a long, 24-foot-wide house with a 16-foot strip of rooms along the south side, and an 8-foot strip of services on the north.

To keep the centerline clear, the off-center post-and-beam wall bearing wall in the service half carries that side of the gable roof (see Figure 1). The ridge supports the roof's other side, allowing cathedral ceilings with roof windows to enliven the second-floor

rooms. The first floor has a 9-foot ceiling.

**First floor.** The first-floor rooms fell into place fairly easily: the kitchen and breakfast area and the main dining/living/TV area open in succession off the long front entry. On the north side of the house, a full guest bath and bedroom fall in line beyond the staircase and entryway.

To accommodate these spaces, the first-floor plan, which started as a simple rectangle, developed several pop-outs: two 2-foot-deep bays for the living room (one housing a wood stove, one a seating area); plus a 16-foot-wide extension that reaches 6 extra feet into the front yard to make room

for the kitchen. Extending the roof from that extension across the front of the house creates a nice entry porch.

**Second floor.** Upstairs, the post-and-beam arrangement allows cathedral ceilings throughout and the free placement of walls, so that each bedroom gets a corner, with two sources of natural light. For us, an office was more important than a separate master bath; but there's room to create one, should a future owner want it.

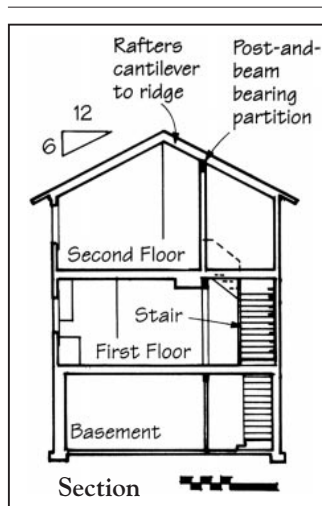
Though the rear bedrooms are mirror images of one another, the rooms allow flexible furniture arrangements, so the kids don't feel like clones.

**Basement.** The basement (not



The house makes the most of its long, narrow, urban lot. A long entry hall leads to either the kitchen, the main living area, or the side yard. To give a sense of spaciousness, the main dining and living areas open to one another, with furniture separating the spaces; a pop-out on the north wall enlarges the main seating area and adds interest.

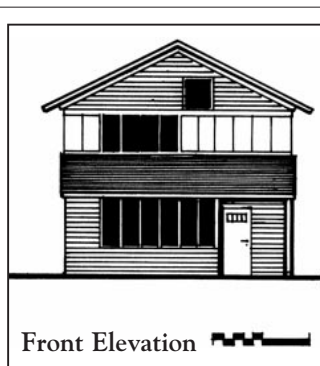
The second floor holds three bedrooms, an office, and a single bath. Every bedroom gets a corner with natural light from two sides. The master bedroom's large closet could be converted to a master bath if a future owner desired; a new, 2-foot closet could be knocked into the study.



**Figure 1:** An off-center post-and-beam wall helps support the roof, leaving both the centerline and the floor plan open.

pictured here) holds two things important to me: at the rear, my offices, with a separate, basement-level entrance (the lot slopes back just enough to allow this); and a large room holding my ping-pong table, along with the washer and dryer and storage space. The office entrance has its own approach, along the north side of the house, away from the private south yard.

**The staircase.** The key element to pulling the final plan together was, as commonly happens, the staircase. As I noted in a recent article ("Building With Style," 10/91), changing the configuration of the stair can radically alter a plan. I must have explored 20 different stair designs before settling on the one shown. With its full-height "screen" railing and bookcases along the side wall, it borrows ideas from two elegant houses designed by my friend Jeremiah



**Figure 2.** The scale of the front of the house is broken up by the kitchen pop-out at left; extending the shed roof over the recessed front door makes a nice entry porch.

Eck. The upper railing is removable to ease furniture moving.

**Exterior.** Outside, the second-floor casement windows alternate with painted plywood panels divided by vertical battens to form a horizontal band around the second floor, which is painted light greenish gray. The 6/12, reddish-brown roof sits like a plate over this band, visually resting on a crown molding. The trim is dark green.

The walls below this window band are red-cedar shingles finished with Flood's CWF. The concrete basement walls are stuccoed and painted gray. The metal chimney rises free of the building within a wooden enclosure.

I don't have plans of this house for sale, but you are welcome to make your own from these sketches. Just make sure you hire an engineer to design the roof and the post-and-beam carrying wall. ■

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