

# Coping With a Hillside Lot

by Gordon Tully



**T**ake a look at the photo above. What's wrong with this picture? Nothing, if you view it from a developer's perspective. Clearly, the house is too big for its lot, but that's a zoning issue, and one can't blame the designer for trying to maximize his return within the law. In addition, the house will sell for a fancy price, it's a "safe" style, and it appears better constructed than the average.

But looking at it from the perspective of an architect, I see a lost opportunity. To show why, I developed an alternative design for the site (see Figure 1).

## No Cookie Cutter Solutions

It's hard to make generalities about hillside lots. Even on a flat lot, there are many variables to contend with in designing a residence, including the zoning envelope, views, groundwater, and access. Hillside lots introduce a new variable, the slope.

How steep is the slope? Which direction does it run? What is its relation to the sun? Also, slopes don't just happen, and one cause for them (at least in these parts) is rock. How much rock do you have to cut? Let's see how the slope could have influenced the design of this new house.

## Orientation and Grade

In our example, the lot is uphill from the street and faces south. There is also a cross slope, which the designer of the house took advantage of by setting the front door at the high level and cutting abruptly down to the garage. The huge stone porch resulted from this decision.

My approach is to cut the grade down to street level and add a stone retaining wall. Clearly, the budget allows some ledge removal, as the present house was built into the rock.

The first-floor entry on the built house sends the visitor up a full flight of outdoor stairs to the front door. This is a poor idea in the Boston climate, and I'm sure that in bad weather visitors will be invited in through the garage.

So my main reason for cutting down the grade was to put the entrance at the first level. This incidentally creates a flat front yard for a garden next to the entry. Granted, it might be a rock garden, but these can be very beautiful. As a trade-off, I'd expect no more expense than the elaborate stair the developer actually built.

## A Useful Front Porch

My next move was to break up the monumental front elevation by narrowing the house 4 feet and adding a porch. There is very little room on the site for the large existing house, which probably was built to the setback lines. In order to develop my design, I assumed there was an additional 4 feet within the rear setback, or that a variance to the rear setback could be secured (admittedly not an easy task).

By pushing the house back 4 feet and making it 4 feet narrower, I squeezed in an 8-foot-wide deck across the entire front, partly covering the garage. Visually, the porch provides a strong

## Alternative Design



**Figure 1.** The author's alternative design narrows the existing building footprint and adds a south-facing deck at the first-floor level. A more practical entrance is created by cutting the grade down to street level and adding a stone retaining wall.

base for the house. It divides its great height in two, and brings its scale more in line with the surrounding homes.

Most important, the south-facing deck provides a sunny outdoor space, crucial in northern climates. I like the idea that social gatherings on the front deck will not be hidden away in the backyard, but will enliven the street (which is not a busy one, and could use some activity). Yet because it is up a story, the deck can be quite private.

### A Roof with Character and Scale

My design invokes the broad Craftsman-style roofs that embellish some of the larger homes in the neighborhood. The spreading eaves help keep the walls low, and gesture to the smaller houses on either side. While the ridge in my design is at least as high as the one in the photo, the broad roof fits in better with the neighborhood.

### Basement Entry

To avoid blocking the southern light, I put the stairway at the back (Figure 2). This uses up some of the basement for an access hall, but makes the remainder of the basement much more useful because the rooms open off the main path of travel. The front basement room could become a fine office, studio, or even a “granny flat.” With the stair at the back, it is natural to array the services — baths, kitchen, and utility areas — across the back as well.

### The Main Level

I suspect the built house has a small den or other such space on the main level, which my plan lacks. If such a space is desired, one of the main rooms could be subdivided. In general, the plan can be customized to suit a particular buyer. I have shown only its basic organization, without assigning uses to the two living spaces.

### The Second Floor

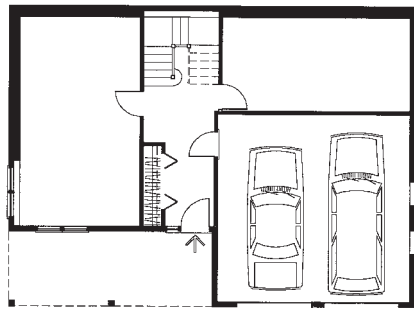
On the second floor, the built house probably has four bedrooms. This would be possible in my plan by making the rooms smaller, but I chose to include an open general space at the top of the stairs, useful as a work space or upstairs living room. To keep from creating an illegal

three-story house, zoning regulations limit the attic to one-half the area of the second floor, which can be used for storage or an extra room. ■

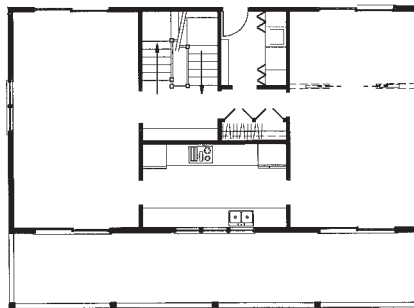
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## Floor Plan

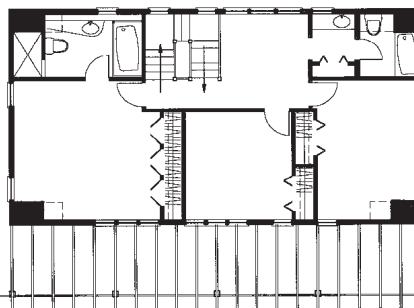
### Basement



### First Floor



### Second Floor



**Figure 2.** Basement-level entry (top) is more practical in severe winter climates. The staircase is situated on the back, or north, side to give living spaces access to sunlight on the south. On the first floor (middle), the kitchen and living spaces all open onto the deck, which can be used in all but the worst weather. The space at the top of stairs on the second floor (bottom) can be used as a small office, library, or upstairs living room.