

A Study in Compromise

by Gordon Tully

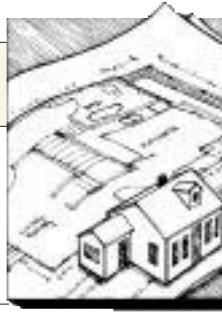
This 1,700-square-foot 1856 house in Vermont is nicely sited along the north side of a narrow town lot. Unfortunately, the garage, in the back of the house, cuts the living and eating spaces off from the backyard, and the downstairs floor plan is a mess.

To cure these flaws, the owner wants to move the garage to the rear and to the south — opening the rear of the house to a patio, light, and air — and rework the floor plan.

Moving the garage is straightforward enough. The floor plan is trickier. As it is, you enter directly into the living room and have to walk through it and the dining room to reach the

family room and kitchen at the rear, where the action is (see "Before," below). The owner wants to turn the living room and dining room into a more private two-room study/library without compromising their use to a future owner as living room and dining room.

It is obvious how to do this: Break through the disorganized little room behind the stair and rearrange the half bath to make a passage between the front door and the family room/kitchen. A much-needed closet can be inserted between the bath and the basement stair. A new bay with French doors at the house's rear opens the back of the house nicely to the yard.



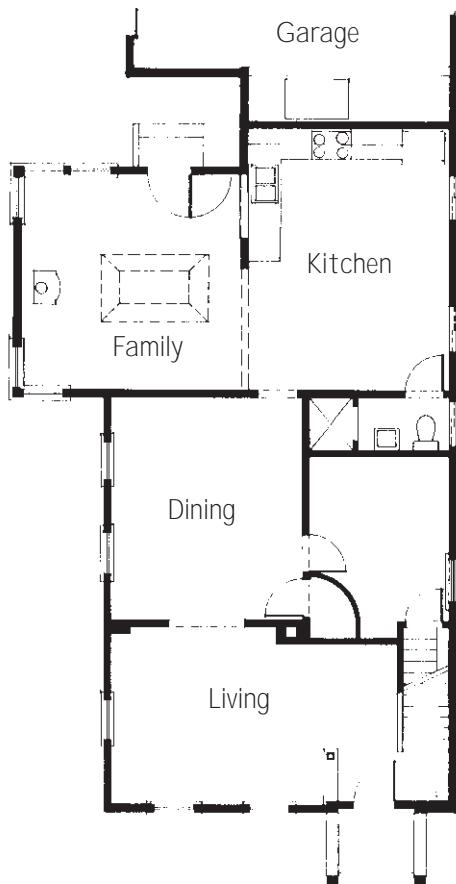
Not So Fast

Unfortunately, this brilliant idea creates a very difficult, potentially awful space. Who would force visitors to sneak down a long, narrow corridor to get into the main living space?

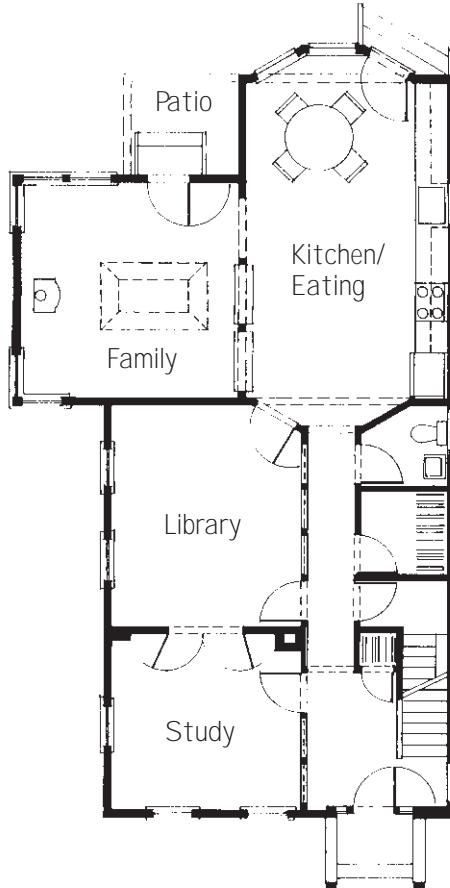
Well, Frank Lloyd Wright for one — he simply *loved* long, narrow corridors. Of course, he could make them into memorable spaces with his plentiful advantages: complete control over their configuration and detailing, a substantial budget, and consummate genius. We who do budget renovations possess none of these luxuries. Yet we can learn a thing or two from his designs.

Wright taught us that horizontal trim bands help long corridors: They zip your eye to the end, around, and back again, and keep the space from seeming endless. So, taking advantage of the almost 8-foot ceiling, I inserted a continuous band of transom windows over the 6-foot 6-inch doors, with contrasting trim above and below. Indirect lighting will help "open" things if the budget allows, but downlights will do fine as well. Thus

Before



After



An awkward plan (Before view) created chaos on the first floor of this otherwise attractive and orderly 1856 Cape. Putting a hall along the north side (After) gave the house a more graceful entryway, much-needed storage, and a more sensible connection to the remodeled kitchen. It also made the old dining and living rooms suitable for any number of uses.

enhanced, the corridor can be made quite narrow, leaving a spacious half bath and closet. The view from the corridor into the dining space and out through a new bay window into the backyard is quite pleasant and opens up the house nicely.

So far, so good. But now the kitchen must be stretched along the north wall, a less-than-ideal arrangement.

Will the Kitchen Work?

To improve the kitchen, there are two choices. One is to widen the kitchen in its present location to allow counters along both its north and east walls. This would require closing off the end of our new corridor and bending it left to direct traffic into the family room — a solution that would probably work, but seems too fussy and “directive” for such a small house. It also destroys the sight lines from the entry and hallway through to the back of the house.

A better solution is to leave the corridor straight and swap the kitchen/eating area with the family room. This gives the kitchen more daylight and leaves the backyard view

for the family room. Visitors then pop out of the corridor directly into the family room. This would be expensive, however, since the present family room sits over a very tight crawlspace, making it hard to plumb as a kitchen. For now, the owner prefers to keep the kitchen where it is.

Open Things Up?

At this point, most good designers (probably including Wright) would remove the wall between the corridor and the rear study/library. This would let the circulation path slip sideways into the rear study and thence to the family room, thus allowing the kitchen counters to take an ell shape. But losing privacy in the rear study/library does not suit the needs of the present owner.

Which returns us to the straight corridor and a slightly compromised kitchen. To make the best of this, I made the “entrance” to the kitchen reflect the shape of a new bay at the house’s rear (“After” view, page 16). This creates a nice transition and gives the kitchen/eating area a distinctive, positive form. It also creates a real con-

nection between the kitchen and the library, should the library again become a dining room. And this plan will still make sense should a future owner, or this one in a more prosperous incarnation, decide to switch the kitchen and family room. ■

Gordon Tully is an architect with Steven Winter Associates and teaches in the summer program at the Harvard School of Design. We will miss him.

Author's Parting Note

This column is my swan song. After more than ten years writing Building With Style, it is time to pass the baton to someone closer to the front lines. In my new job at Steven Winter Associates, my work and interests have turned toward production, and I simply have run out of relevant things to say to custom builders and designers. In parting, let me summarize ten years of exhortation in a paraphrase of some common political wisdom: It's the context, stupid!

— G.T.