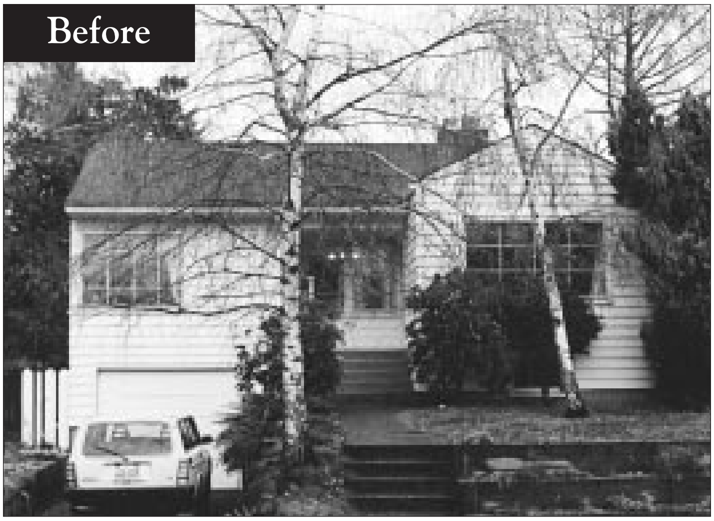
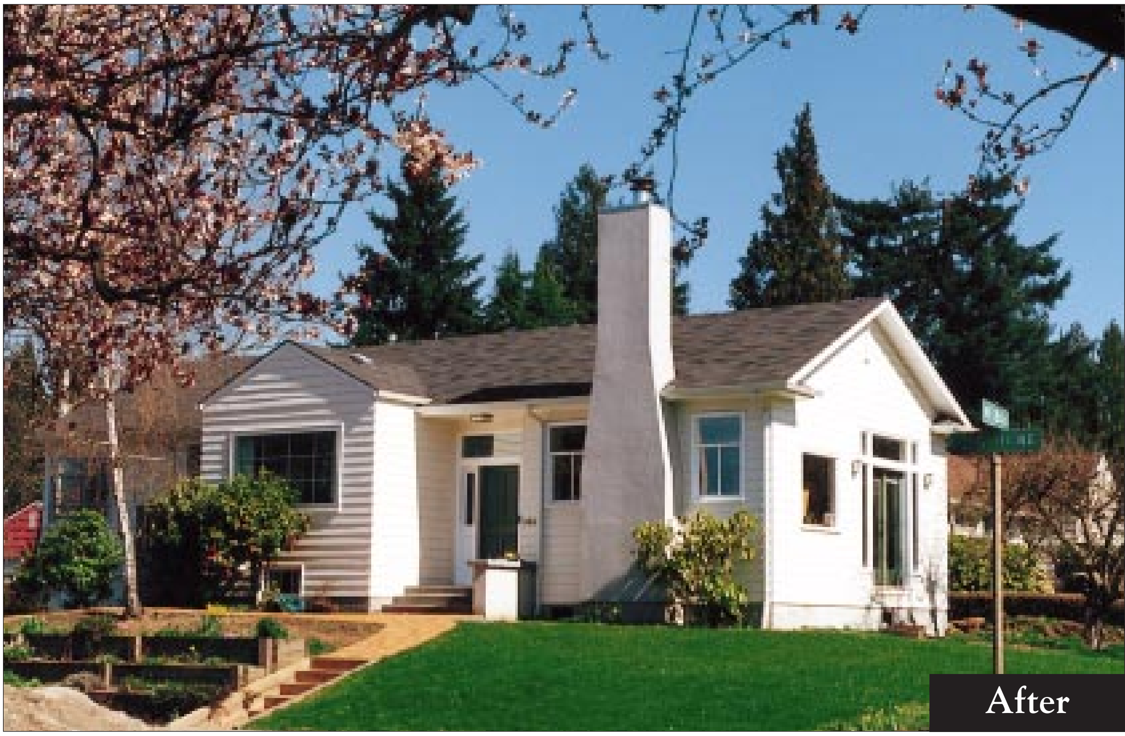


The Invisible Addition

by Jamie Fisher



Subtle exterior improvements mask a complete interior makeover of this post-War box

Whole neighborhoods of America were built in the years after World War II, thanks to the GI Bill and the Fannie Mae. These houses were a no-frills answer to the acute housing needs of the time. But now, 50 years later, a lot of these houses are bursting at the seams. Plus, they don't have much in the way of grace, charm, or flair, qualities that many older houses have in abundance. The house I'll describe here is typical of the genre: two bedrooms, one bath, 7-foot 8-inch ceilings, and a basement with a one-car garage.

The couple who own the house have two typical energetic boys. She is a professional painter and piano instructor who works at home. He is a museum curator and also founder of a start-up educational software company that he runs out of a home office. Their wish list was pretty typical:

- a third bedroom
- a second bathroom
- an eating area large enough to accommodate their family and a few guests
- a big, new, spacious kitchen
- a family room, storage, and office in the existing basement

As an architect, solving clients' space needs is only one aspect of the job. The new square footage is like clay in a sculptor's hands, the stuff you use to address and hopefully correct the problems of the house and site. The result should not only be a larger house, but an improved house: one whose parts work better as a whole.

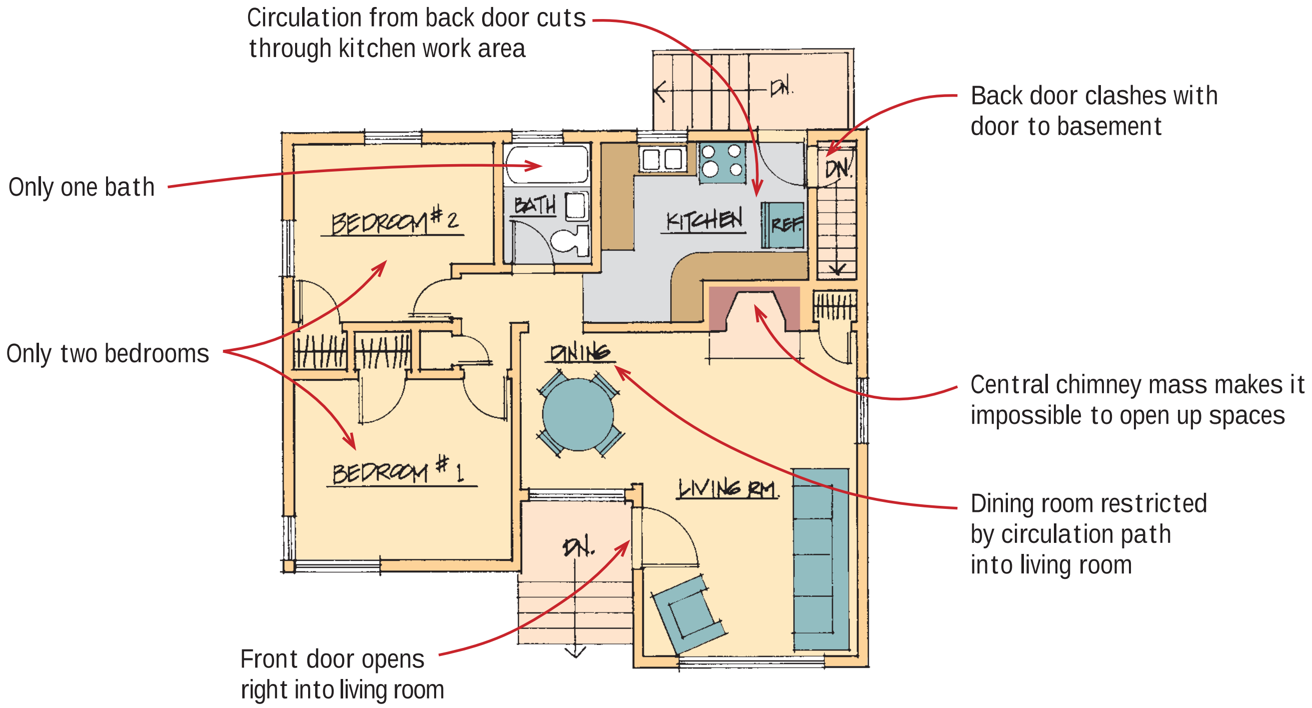
What's Wrong

Let's look at the existing house and identify problems that need fixing.

Start with the entry: This house doesn't have one. You walk right into the middle of the living room.

Next, check out the dining room: Not only is it way too small, but the primary circulation of the house cuts diagonally through it, making it functionally even smaller still.

Before


Circulation from back door cuts through kitchen work area

Back door clashes with door to basement

Only one bath

Only two bedrooms

Central chimney mass makes it impossible to open up spaces

Dining room restricted by circulation path into living room

Front door opens right into living room

The stairs are in the far corner of the house at the end of the kitchen. You have to pass through a nasty choke point to access the basement. This not only makes the kitchen less usable, but it also makes the basement seem very remote from the main floor. This is maybe okay when the only thing in the basement is the furnace, the garage, and the utility room, but it's a big problem if the basement is going to take on more social functions like family room, guest room, or home office.

Problems on the Outside

Now let's look at the outside: First, there are no eaves. While this is a defining characteristic of certain styles (called Cape Cod by the realtors), in this case it is simply cheap. Besides being a moisture problem here in rainy Seattle, the absence of overhangs is what makes the house look boxy.

Recognizing this, the original builders made an exception at the elevation containing the front door, where the roof has an 18-inch overhang. This overhang serves the purpose of keeping visitors dry, but it also serves to signal the entry and to dress up this important part of the house a little bit.

Another problem is the relationship of the house to its site. It is obvious that this floor plan was intended to go on a typical narrow lot, which is why it has only one small window facing the side yard. But, in fact, this house sits on a large corner lot with a huge south-facing yard, which it compeletely ignores. With the addition, we had the opportunity to make a "generic" house more responsive to its unique site.

First Decision: Up or Out?

A fundamental decision that has to be made early in the design process of any addition is whether it will be a vertical or horizontal expansion, or involve some of each.

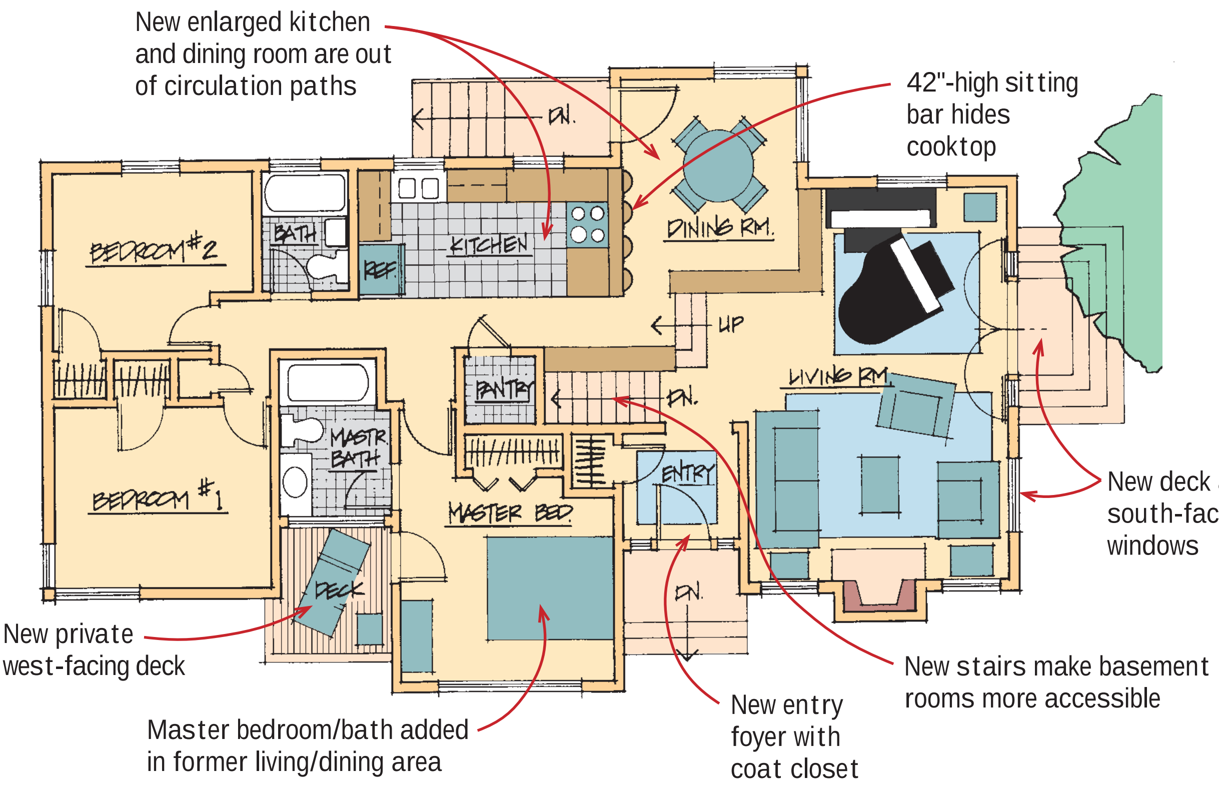
Sometimes this decision is made for you, as in the case of tight urban lots where you are bumping up against the setbacks or where a rigid height restriction precludes additional stories.

It is hard to say emphatically that one approach is always more or less expensive than the other, because many factors enter into the question. In an old house, ceiling framing is seldom if ever suitable as a floor structure and hence will need strengthening or replacement. But how much of the existing ceiling will survive, or should it also be replaced? A concrete basement wall can often handle an additional floor load, but interior loads need to be carried down through the house and often result in additional beams, posts, and footings in the basement or crawlspace. Then there is the question of lateral loads. Most of the older houses around here have shiplap sheathing instead of plywood, and even though they have survived a couple of significant earthquakes, it's always questionable to add additional load to them. And of course these old houses have no anchor bolts or hold-downs.

With horizontal expansion you have the foundation costs, which can be a big factor if access is a problem or if the lot is steep.

I have found that vertical expansion is about 35% more expensive than a horizontal expansion on a square-foot basis. But the decision to go up versus out usually turns on factors other than cost. Certain programs are better handled one way than the other; a new family room, for instance, makes little sense on a new second floor, while bedrooms make a lot of sense. The impact on the existing floor plan is also a decisive factor. Some plans accept a new

After



New enlarged kitchen and dining room are out of circulation paths

42"-high sitting bar hides cooktop

New deck and south-facing windows

New private west-facing deck

Master bedroom/bath added in former living/dining area

New entry foyer with coat closet

New stairs make basement rooms more accessible

stair gracefully; others do not. In the case of horizontal additions, you sometimes lose as many rooms to new circulation as you gain.

There are also logistical questions. A horizontal addition is often much less disruptive to an existing pattern of use, allowing owners to remain in residence during much of the construction. Vertical expansion almost always requires owners to move out and take all of their belongings with them.

Split-Level Solution

In the case of this house, second-story schemes were studied and rejected in favor of horizontal expansion into the large open yard to the south. A grand old apple tree was to be preserved and marked the extent of the southward expansion, still leaving plenty of yard.

But rather than build an addition containing a master suite, we settled on a scheme that put the new bedroom in the existing living room and put the living and dining rooms in the new addition.

This approach had several attractive advantages. First, all the bedrooms would remain together in one zone, on the quieter, shadier side of the house.

Because of the lay of the land, the addition could occur on its own level between the main floor and the basement, creating a living room with a high ceiling and a three-riser level change up to the dining/kitchen area that overlooks it. This large, tall, south-facing room has a split-level relationship to the floors of the existing house, thus serving as a connecting element to bring the formerly remote basement into the rest of the house.

Improved Circulation

The living room was large enough to allow us to carve out a separate entry foyer with a coat closet and enough floor space for a bench to take off boots.

The elimination of the existing stair gets rid of an awkward choke point and roundabout circulation on both floors and allows the kitchen to open up to the new addition and to the south light. The new stair is a hub that links all the social rooms of the house — kitchen, dining, living, entry, and family room.

The big masonry chimney mass was right in the path of progress and had to go. This is always an emotional stumbling block for owners: “It's the heart of the house! What a mess it will make! Think of what it will cost to replace it!” In this case, there was literally no way around this massive chimney. The handsome fir mantle was removed and stored safely for reinstallation on the replacement fireplace that graces the new living room.

An Invisible Addition

On the outside, the expansion strategy was what I call the invisible addition (see “Exterior Trim: Design Basics,” 7/95). The existing roof was simply extended over the addition, thus retaining the dominant form of the original house. But while the roof was “extruded,” the house was not: By offsetting the house relative to the roof, we got eaves where the original house had none. The projecting cross-gable wings (master bedroom on the front, dining room on the back) masks the transition between new and old, allowing for different eaves details, siding, and trim.

The owners are continually getting comments on the addition, usually variations on the same theme: The house looks like it has always been there, only better. For a designer of additions, that is the highest compliment. ■

Jamie Fisher is an architect in Seattle, Wash.