

A Tale of Two Houses

by Jamie Fisher

Designing a house involves hundreds of decisions, many of them choices between two alternatives that both have merit. You often wonder, “Did I make the right choice?” But you usually never know, because you can’t build both and compare A with B.

The houses illustrated at right offer an unusual opportunity to do such a comparison. Except for a few subtle differences, the two side-by-side houses are identical mirror images of each other.

Both houses are on small urban lots. Both face west and feature generous porches along their front elevations. House A is on a corner and House B is next door, 25 feet away. The front street is flat, but the sites are relatively steep, dropping a full story along their length (the corner house has a garage tucked underneath the back of the house). Neither house has any front yard — the sidewalk is just 4 feet away. And they both share a quirky feature: You have to walk through the powder room to get to the basement.

It’s the differences, however, that shed light on the consequences of a few critical site and design decisions.

Living & Dining Rooms

A dominant feature of both houses is the (relatively) large adjoining living and dining rooms. These rooms are square in plan. At one time, the rooms were perhaps separated by double pocket doors, which in any case have long since been removed, leaving a 5-foot opening in the case of House B and a much larger 12-foot opening in House A.

In House B, the living room is the heart of the house, the place to which activity naturally gravitates, while the dining room is used minimally. In House A, the situation is reversed, with

the living room receiving little use and the dining room being the social center of the house — so much so that a seating area has been added alongside the large dining room window. The difference in use can be explained by site factors and architectural responses to those factors.

House A’s living/dining room is south-facing, while House B’s looks north. What the plan can’t show is that the north-facing windows in House B are a full 5 feet high, while in House A the windows are small and high. This difference shows a lot of design sophistication on the part of the fellow who built the two houses back in 1920. Full-height windows in A would have exposed the living room too much to the street corner, while the high windows afford an appropriate layering from the street, as does the porch on the west.

Unfortunately, it means that neither of the two window exposures in this room afford a direct eye-level view to the outside. This is a big reason for this living room’s relative lack of use. When you’re in that room, you can’t help but be drawn to the huge south-facing dining room window, with its commanding view of the street (now almost a full story down). The two easy chairs invite you to take a rest and watch the cyclists huff and puff up the hill.

In House B’s living room, however, the north-facing windows are the house’s primary connection to the outside. These windows look across the neighbors’ front yard and up the long and interesting oblique view up the street. On those rare occasions in Seattle when the sun is actually shining, the north-facing windows look out at things that are bathed in sunlight. (By contrast, a

south-facing window in a neighborhood with tight lots often looks out on north-facing surfaces that are shaded, damp, and covered with moss.)

The Kitchen

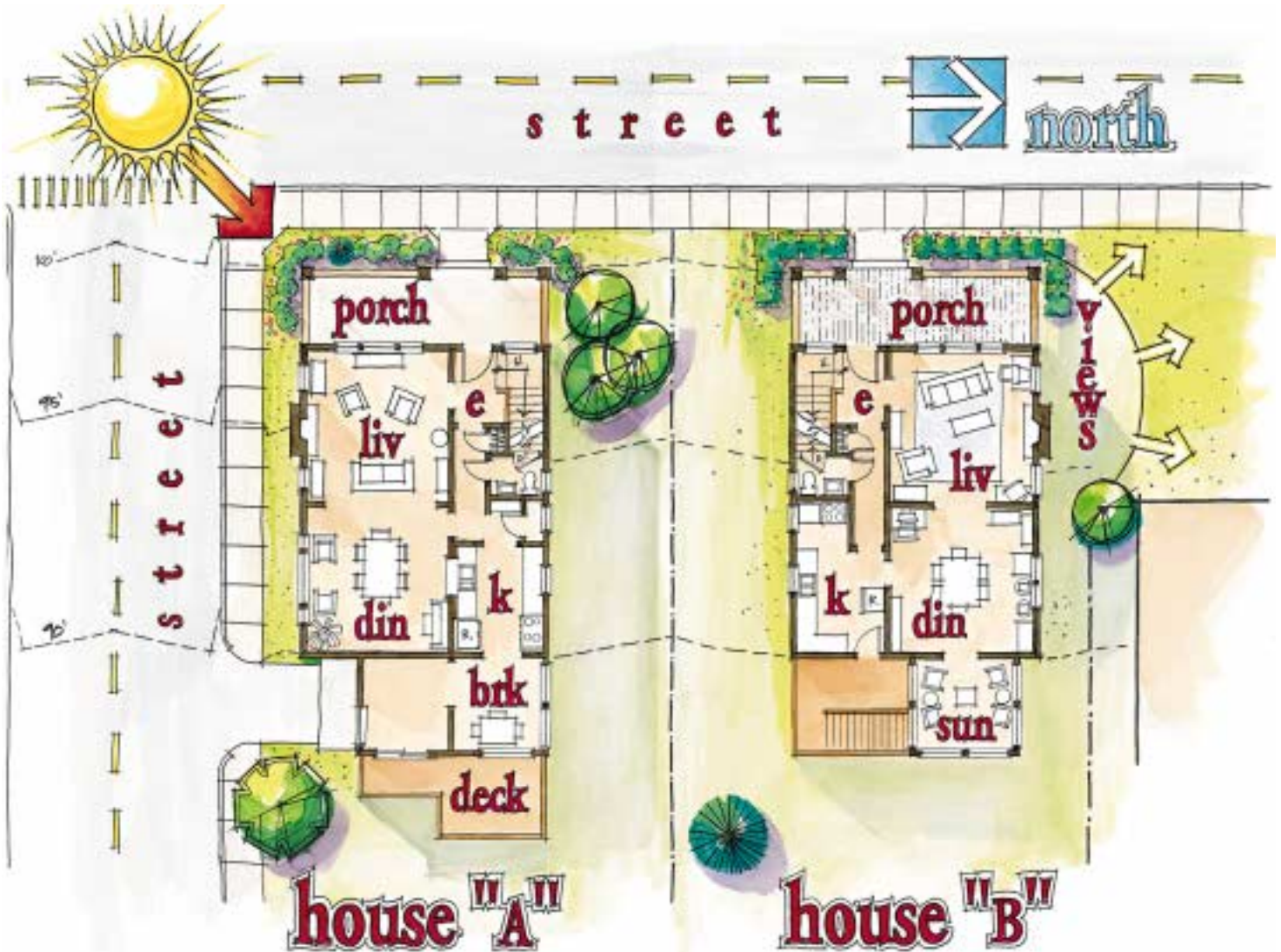
The kitchen in House A has been renovated at least twice. The kitchen in House B appears to be more or less original, with somewhat updated finishes and the addition of a refrigerator, an appliance that didn’t exist at the time the house was originally built.

When House A was renovated, the kitchen sink was flipped to the other side of the room, and the door to the dining room was shifted to the hallway, thus allowing a clean galley arrangement. The new layout serves the dual purpose of orienting anyone at the sink toward the social activity of the house (and the picture window beyond), and getting rid of the irritating situation where anyone at the sink in House A would stare across the common yard at anyone using the sink in House B. The renovation also got rid of the obnoxious sight line from the front door to the side of the refrigerator. The renovation clearly improved the functionality and comfort of the kitchen.

The Back Porch

In both houses, the original back porch has been at least partially enclosed. In House B, the enclosure is only partial, resulting in a sunroom at the end of the living room/dining room axis. Because the dining room window is small and faces another house only 10 feet away, this sunroom provides an important additional focus for the dining room. And because the sunroom has only one door, it is not a thoroughfare, and thus gives several furnishing

Variations on a Theme



Though almost mirror images of one another in plan, these houses have a few key differences — in orientation, window size, and circulation patterns — that create differences in how the rooms are used.

options despite its small size. It is used as a small sitting room and, except for in winter when the extensive glazing makes it too cold, it is one of the most pleasant places in the house.

In House A, the old porch is entirely enclosed. The result is a breakfast room, which is a real plus, and a small adjoining room of about the same size whose utility is questionable. The south-facing window is largely screened and shaded by the projecting dining room; and the sliding glass door out to the deck makes the room a thoroughfare, making it virtually impossible to furnish. It has suffered the fate of

most rooms of its kind — it's a place where the junk collects.

Take-Home Lessons

What can we learn from these two houses?

- People, like plants, are drawn to light. They also like to observe and dislike being observed. This means that people will naturally occupy positions that command a vista, both through the rooms of a house and outside into the landscape, while they will feel uncomfortable under the gaze of others.
- Little rooms work best as cul-de-sacs,

and large rooms work best if circulation provides cul-de-sacs within them.

- Accordingly, regulating not just the placement of furniture but the flow of traffic and sight lines is always a critical consideration in any design decision — and can make the difference between a space that is enjoyably used, like the view-giving living and dining rooms or the pleasant sunroom, or that is the sight for seldom-used furniture or accumulating bric-a-brac.



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