

Fitting the Garage on a Narrow Lot

by David Lorimer and Lynne Hayes

One of the major design challenges faced by builders and architects today, in development and infill projects alike, is the building lot that's too narrow to accept a house and garage side by side. The most common solution is a front-loaded garage design, in which the garage projects forward from the house, with a short driveway leading to the street.

That has some definite practical advantages. It does provide for easy

access by car, and it provides a large amount of interior square footage for the amount of exterior wall, reducing unit costs. But there are drawbacks as well. The garage-forward approach often leads to a monotonous wall of garage doors facing the street, with every house set back the same distance. Because the homes themselves effectively turn their backs to the street, it's difficult to create a comfortable neighborhood feel in such a development. Some municipali-

ties restrict the use of garage-forward designs for that reason (see "Snout Houses Restricted in Portland, Oregon," *Notebook*, 11/99).

From Lot Plan to Floor Plan

We recently had the opportunity to design four models for a development of inexpensive homes in southern California. One of these houses had to fit onto a 40x90-foot lot, with the garage at the rear of the lot. The chal-

First Floor & Site Plan

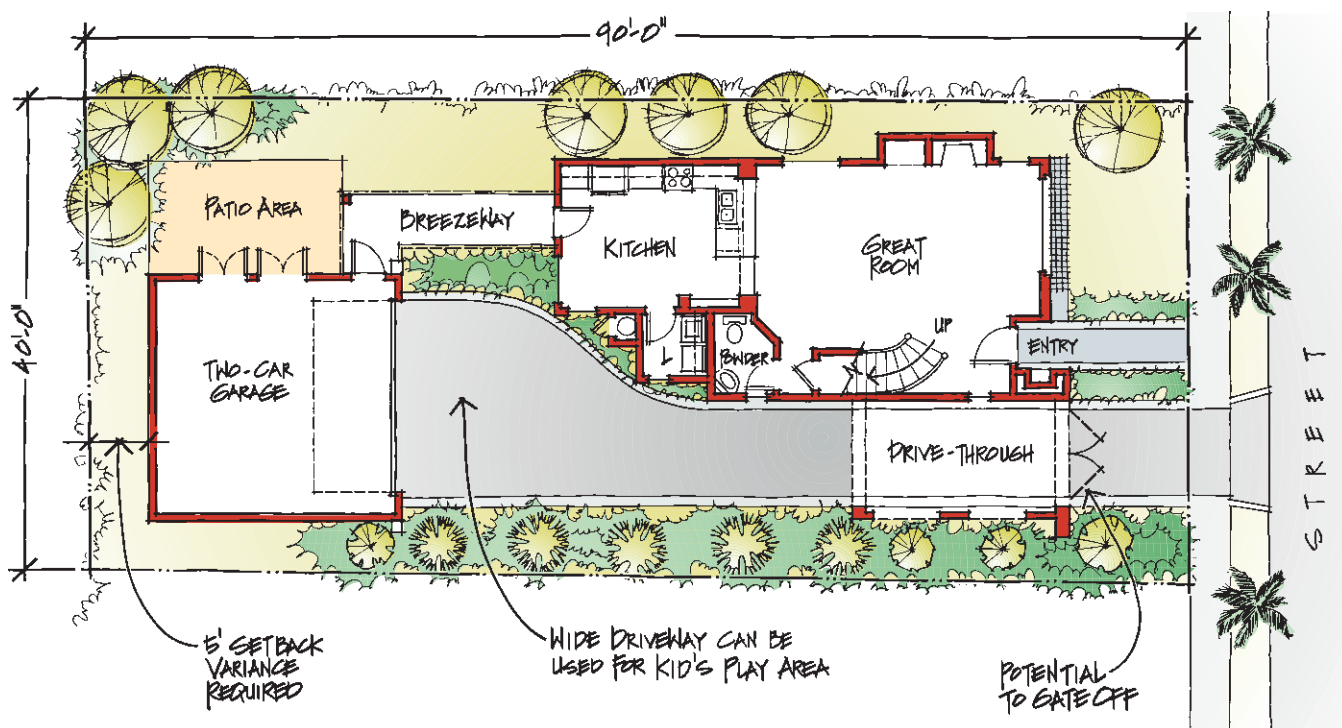


Figure 1. Putting the two-car garage at the rear of a narrow lot limits the available first-floor footprint, but makes efficient use of the entire lot by creating a protected outdoor plaza. The garage helps define the small back yard, which is easily reached from the kitchen.

Putting the Garage in Its Place

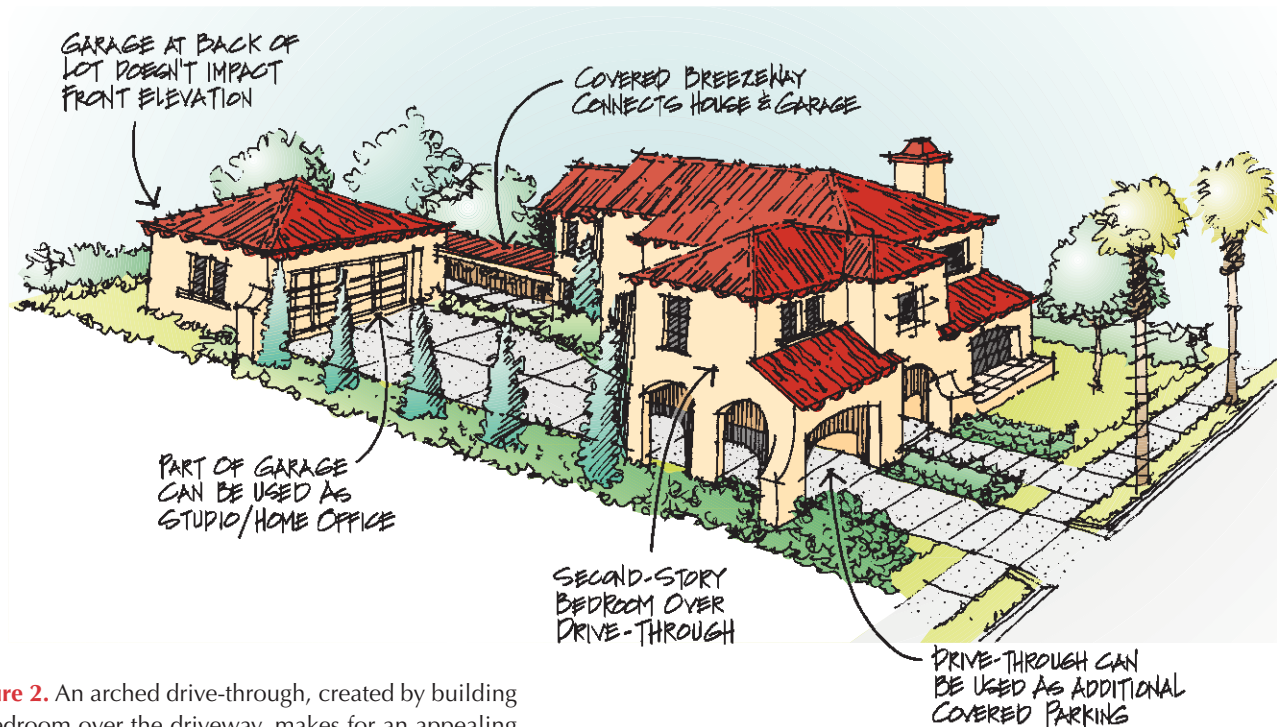


Figure 2. An arched drive-through, created by building a bedroom over the driveway, makes for an appealing front elevation with a traditional feel.

lenge was to provide the space needed for cars to move in and out comfortably.

We needed a 12-foot-wide drive to the 20x20 two-car garage at the back of the lot, with a 26-foot-deep backup area in front of the garage doors. That gave us the basic footprint for the house, which was large enough for a downstairs great room, kitchen, powder room, and utility room (see Figure 1, page 1). To enlarge the plan enough to provide space for a third bedroom upstairs, we built one bedroom out over the driveway, creating an arched drive-through to the garage in the rear. A covered breezeway connects the garage to the house (Figure 2).

Basketball and Breathing Space

That unconventional approach led to a number of important benefits. The driveway apron in front of the garage forms a protected plaza, which doubles as a play area that's easily seen from the kitchen. If desired, the area can be gated

off from the street. When the kids outgrow their tricycles, it's a perfect spot to play basketball.

The driveway also provides some "breathing space" between houses — something that's lacking when adjacent houses are built tight to the typical 5-foot setback on each side. The portecochere beneath the upstairs bedroom provides an extra covered parking space if needed, making it possible to convert one half of the garage into a studio.

Easier Permitting

The arched drive-through also looks great from the streetfront. Rather than presenting the blank stare of a closed garage door, it has an inviting appearance reminiscent of older neighborhoods, where garages were traditionally located in the rear. That design feature had another benefit as well: In order to make the plan work, we had to ask the planning and zoning department for a 5-foot rear setback, rather than the usual

15 feet. Because they liked the overall look of the design, they readily approved the setback variance.

In the end, of course, it's the homebuyer, not the planning and zoning department, who decides whether a design is a success. Although marketing people were skeptical at first, this model has been a big seller from the beginning. A more conventional design of the same size would have cost a few hundred dollars less — the paving costs for the longer driveway and the additional exterior wall surface have to come from somewhere — but buyers seem more than willing to pay the added cost for something a little out of the ordinary. Small and inexpensive doesn't have to mean uninteresting.



David Lorimer and Lynne Hayes are architects in San Diego, Calif.