

From Garage to Dining Room

by Meg Clarke, AIA

In the Washington, D.C., area, there are a lot of older houses with attached one-story garages facing the street. They're often nicely proportioned and well made, but most are small by today's standards. I recently had an opportunity to design a rear addition on such a house dating from the 1930s. Because the existing garage was attractively nestled into the main structure, it made sense to incorporate it into the new design. Besides leaving the structure's pleasant Tudor-style facade intact, converting the garage to living space also saved money. As I often explain to my remodeling clients, the cheapest space is the space you already have.

Better Circulation

The original downstairs floor plan was very tight. On entering the front door, you were confronted with the hall closet that formed one wall of a narrow foyer. To get to the kitchen from the front door, it was necessary to walk through both the 12x18 living room and an intervening playroom. At 900 square feet or so, the original downstairs was small to begin with, and the awkwardly cut-up spaces and tight sight lines made it seem even smaller.

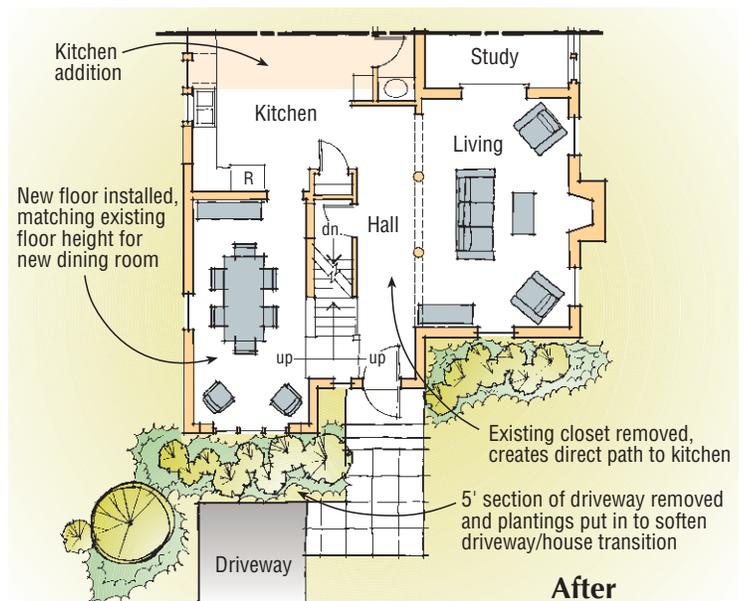
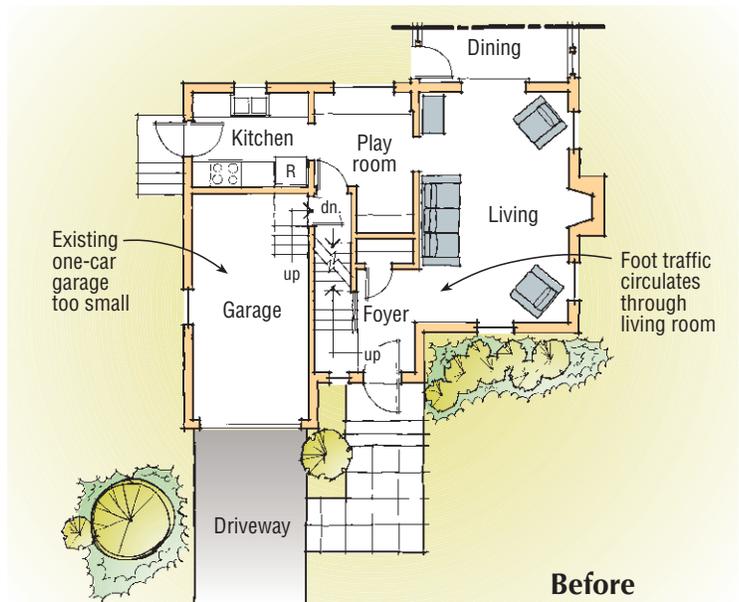
To create a more natural circulation pattern, we tore out the closet that formed the entry foyer to open a direct path to the remodeled kitchen. That involved removing a bearing wall, which was replaced with load-bearing columns. The tops of the columns support a soffit which helps define where the living room ends and the hallway begins.

At the same time, we created a new opening between the entryway and the former garage, which was converted to a dining room. The result was a new circulation pattern around the stairs, rather than a series of dead ends. Although the altered living room has almost the same footprint in terms of furniture layout, it feels much more open. You can sit on the couch and look beyond the columns to the entry space and hall, which gives the illusion of more space.

A New Dining Room

While the existing 9½x18-foot garage was a tight fit even for an economy car, it was large enough to accommodate a typical 3x6-foot dining table with ample clearance, and even a sideboard and some extra chairs.

Garage Conversion



Floor Plans. In the original cramped layout, (before, top), the living room was pressed into service as a hallway, and restricted sight lines made the space seem even smaller than it was. Converting the undersized one-car garage to living space and opening a hallway to the remodeled kitchen (after, bottom) results in a more natural circulation around the stairway and a roomier feel.

The original slab floor was four steep steps down from the kitchen, but fortunately, the ceiling was high enough to allow us to frame a new floor flush with the rest of the first floor, creating a crawlspace that's accessible from the basement. To help integrate the new space with the rest of the house, we laid a new hardwood floor, which flows through the opening into the kitchen, and carefully matched the existing trim.

Many small houses have stair conflicts, and we encountered a minor one here: Because the platform at the bottom of the stairs includes a riser, it's necessary to step up and then down when passing from the entry hall to the dining room. The owners have not found this to be a problem, however.

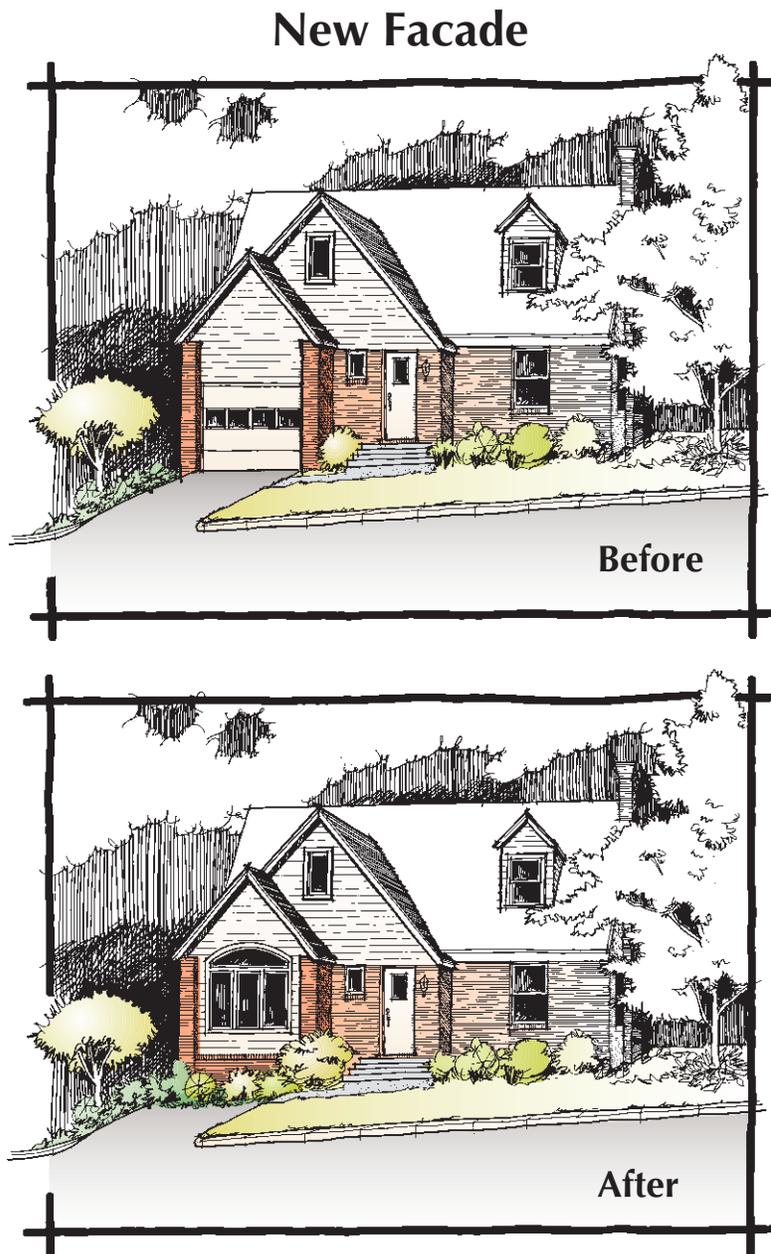
Fixing the Facade

It was relatively easy to conceal the humble origins of the new living space, because the single-car garage was nicely proportioned to begin with. Two-car garages, on the other hand, tend to have a low, squat appearance that's difficult to disguise without providing some added vertical emphasis.

The gentle curve of the arch-top casements contrasts nicely with the steeply pitched gable end, where it was a more appropriate choice than the overused palladian window. A key consideration here was placing the head of a new window at a height that visually balances that of the existing windows. Another set of arched casements, in a new rear dormer, helps tie the new and old together.

We were fortunate to be able to salvage enough matching brick from the back side of the house to supply the brick veneer beneath the new window. Filling this area with siding or poorly matched brick would have been far less successful. Although we did not finger the section of new veneer into the existing brick on either side of the original opening, the new brick was recessed slightly so the original pilasters read all the way to grade level.

To soften the transition between the



Front Elevations. The nicely proportioned garage on this 1930's Tudor-style house (directional) was barely useable for modern vehicles, but well-suited for conversion to living space. Well-matched brick veneer beneath the new window, and a modified and landscaped driveway leave little sign of the new dining room's humble origins.

house and the original driveway, we tore out a 5-foot section of asphalt under the new dining room window and put in some foundation plantings. Since the house is set 20 feet back from the street, that leaves the owner with enough room to park (they have additional parking for a second car on the street), while separating the house

from the driveway. That finishing touch is often overlooked, or omitted for budgetary reasons, but it's well worth doing. A section of driveway that reaches all the way to the house practically screams "I'm a garage." 

Meg Clarke, AIA, is an architect in the Washington, D.C., area.