

# Brooklyn Carriage House

Turning a 19th-century garage into 21st-century living space

BY BRENDAN COBURN AND JOSEPH SMITH



**Open space in Brooklyn.** Cobblestones pave the private courtyard fronting this former carriage house. Photo left taken at A on floor plan. In the upstairs loft, a Juliet balcony overlooks the courtyard. Adjustable nozzles direct conditioned air from the ducts. Photo above taken at B on floor plan.





**I**t was a Saturday afternoon when we first met with the owners and saw the site of what would become one of our favorite projects: the renovation of a two-story brick building, an 1870s carriage house (and for a short time the home of a local company that made and bottled soda) into a single-family residence. The carriage house is one of two structures on a narrow lot in Brooklyn's Prospect Heights, a mixed residential and light-industrial neighborhood (photo facing page).

The building standing in the front, which was once used as a heavy-truck garage and is still redolent of diesel fuel and gear oil, remains as it was. Separated from the carriage house by a cobblestone courtyard,

the front building screens the smaller carriage house from the noise and bustle of the street.

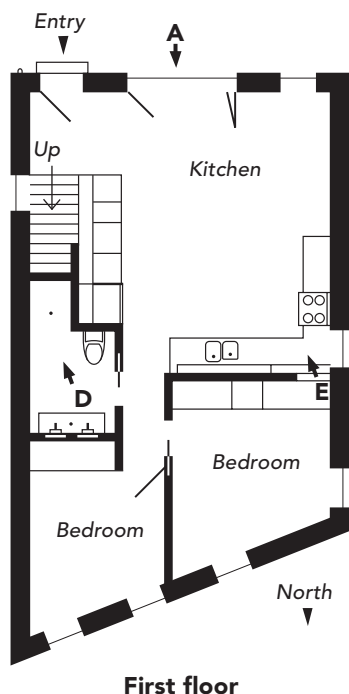
The unusual situation of having two structures on a single lot was one factor that attracted our clients to the property. In addition to the private courtyard, they liked the entry sequence from the street along a narrow alley that opens into the courtyard, gradually revealing the carriage house.

### **Recalling an industrial past**

Other than the shell, little remained of the original building, so we began with a clean palette (photos p. 90). Our clients wanted a spare

## OPEN SPACE MAKES A SMALL PLACE FEEL BIG

Small bedrooms allow for a spacious eat-in kitchen and a wide-open second-floor loft that serves as a living room.



### SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 2

**Bathrooms:** 2

**Size:** 1750 sq. ft.

**Cost:** N/A

**Completed:** 2001

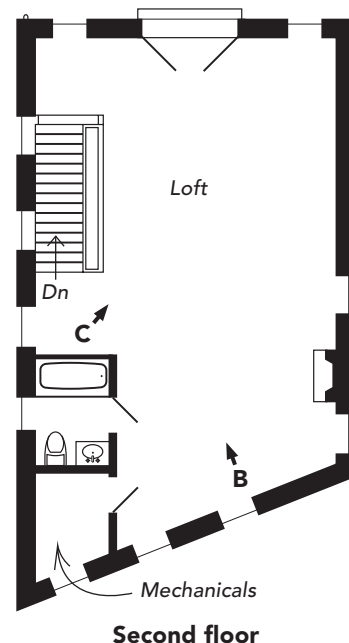
**Location:** Brooklyn, NY

**Architect:** Brendan Coburn,  
Joseph Smith

**Builder:** Pilaster, Inc.

0 2 4 8 ft.

Photos taken at lettered positions.



BEFORE: FIRST / SECOND FLOOR



interior that recalled the industrial feeling of the neighborhood. Our initial conversations determined that the first floor would have two bedrooms, a bathroom and a large eat-in kitchen (top photo, p. 92), and the second floor would be an open loft (photo p. 89). To maximize the kitchen/dining area, we decided to make the bedrooms small, almost diminutive. Even the first-floor bathroom makes good use of space, fitting below the stairs to the loft (photos facing page).

The kitchen/dining room was to be the major family space, and its physical and visual connection to the courtyard was critical. To enhance this connection, a large triple door (S) (sources p. 93) opens to the courtyard. Reminiscent of barn doors, they harken back to the building's origins. These doors are meant to be opened mainly in fine weather, so a separate day-to-day entry door also serves this room (floor plans above).

One budgetary compromise was the kitchen countertops. The expense of stone, concrete or solid surface just didn't make sense to our

clients, so they decided to use plastic laminate. To add some zing to an otherwise ordinary material, the counters were made with their standard particleboard substrate edged with exposed Baltic-birch plywood (photo bottom right, p. 92). The cabinets are prefinished maple plywood.

For such a large kitchen, the counter space in the room is actually fairly minimal. We made up for this counter-space disparity in part by incorporating a custom dining table that includes a small section of countertop that is removable (S). An undercounter washer/dryer unit is hidden in the base cabinets of the east wall of the kitchen (photo bottom left, p. 92).

### Working the old into the new

Because the existing structure had no cellar, we decided that the best way to finish the floors and to heat the space would be with a radiant slab. The existing slab was broken up and hauled away, and re-





**Industrial-grade railings** harken back to the building's commercial past. Shelves on the way down separate the stairwell from the kitchen without interrupting the view. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

**Tucked under the stairs**, the shower in the first-floor bath fills space that might otherwise be wasted. Photo taken at D on floor plan.



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**Warm, inviting and utilitarian.** Southern sun warms the acid-stained concrete floor of the kitchen. Photo above taken at E on floor plan. The laundry (photo right) is housed in the cabinets to the left of the table. Plastic laminate edged with Baltic-birch plywood is an inexpensive path to countertops with a striking look (photo far right).







## GREAT IDEA: REMOVABLE WORK TOP

From the start, it was clear that a large table would be the social center of the kitchen. Unfortunately, the kitchen's L-shaped countertop is oriented so that anyone preparing a meal would face away from people at the table. The fix for this prob-

lem is a removable counter-height worktop. Its base slides into the slot in the table's center, and C-shaped brackets on each side of the base secure the worktop to the edge of the custom-built table.

—B. C. and J. S.

placed by a new acid-stained concrete slab over a vapor barrier and rigid-foam insulation.

In addition to the radiant slab, the house has a forced-air HVAC system to heat the second floor in winter and to cool the entire structure in summer. The ductwork and the adjustable air nozzles **S** are zoned to provide supplemental heat to the first floor on cold days (photo right, p. 88).

Initially, my clients wanted to expose more of the building's brick walls, but the requirements of the New York state energy code and the reality of the potential energy bills discouraged exposing more brick. Three-quarters of the walls are furred out to accommodate insulation, and brick is exposed only on one wall of each major room.

On the second floor, we created as large a loft as possible by pushing the building's mechanical room and a small bathroom toward the rear. What was formerly the hayloft opening on the courtyard side of the house was outfitted with two large doors and what we call a Juliet balcony (photo p. 88). Finally, the rafters were left exposed and stained a weathered gray. We met the energy-code requirement of R-30 in the roof by putting 8 in. of rigid insulation between the roof sheathing the new roofing membrane.

This project was fun and a good example of what can be done with an old masonry building in an urban neighborhood. With any luck, its energy upgrades and residential reconfiguration will serve the carriage house well into its next two centuries. □

Brendan Coburn is an architect in Brooklyn, NY. Joseph Smith is a designer for Coburn Architecture. Photos by Andy Engel, except where noted.

## Sources

- Upstate Door Co. (800-570-8283; [www.upstatedoor.com](http://www.upstatedoor.com)) trifold doors
- City Joinery (718-596-6502; [www.cityjoinery.com](http://www.cityjoinery.com)) countertop section
- Seiho (800-248-0030; [www.seiho.com](http://www.seiho.com)) ductwork and air nozzles

