

The Upside-Down House

BY MICHAEL ROEHR

A few years ago, we took a sabbatical. Along with our two kids, my wife, Elisa Bernick, and I rented a house in San Miguel de Allende in the highlands of central Mexico. We cheerfully immersed ourselves in the culture and language of this historic, light-filled city. Back in St. Paul, Minn., a year and a half later, we looked at our beloved but decidedly frumpy two-bedroom bungalow (photo below) with new eyes.

The kids were getting old enough to want separate bedrooms, and the house needed another one. At the same time, we wanted to gain a kitchen large enough to accommodate our penchant for cooking and entertaining. But our sojourn in Mexico also made us realize how much we wanted to live in the same kind of open-to-the-sky, breezy space that we enjoyed in San Miguel.

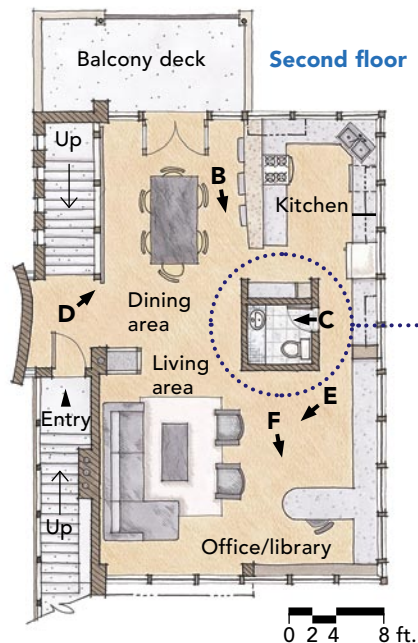
Move upstairs, into the light

The original impetus for moving the living spaces upstairs was to save money. Most upstairs additions house bedrooms; but I figured that if what we were looking for was an open, spacious place where our family could live and work and play together, it made no sense to build an upstairs addition full of bedrooms, only to have to gut and remodel the existing first floor and still not achieve the space we wanted. Why not just build a large, open space upstairs, and then create the third bedroom with a surgical insertion of a few walls into the old structure? The only real drawback would be having to stay in better shape by using the stairs more often.

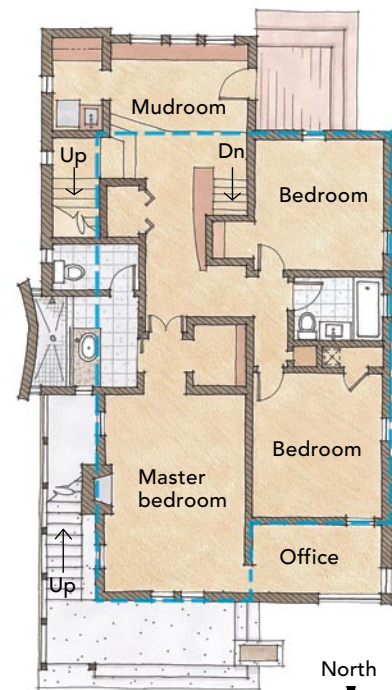
On top of the existing house, we built a straightforward box with a high ceiling, dura-



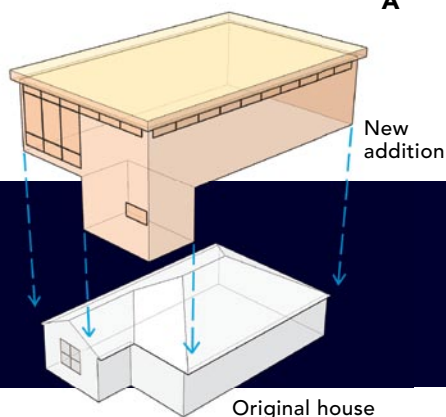
Moving the main living spaces into a second-story addition reenergized a house for a family of four



Photos taken at lettered positions.



First floor



Original house



The power of the powder room. A centrally located half-bath enclosure helps to define the boundaries of the individual spaces that pinwheel around it. On the kitchen side, a computer station is notched into the powder room's south wall. Inside the half-bath, blue and white mosaics splash color across the sink wall. Photos taken at B and C on floor plan.

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SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2½

Size: original, 1000 sq. ft.;
with addition, 2250 sq. ft.

Cost: \$100 per sq. ft.
(includes entire house and
considerable sweat equity)

Completed: 2008

Location: St. Paul, Minn.

Architect: Michael Roehr

Builder: Michael Beebe
Construction

The ground floor of the original house remains largely intact, with a couple of noteworthy changes. The living and dining rooms have been folded into a new master-bedroom suite, and a new bath, stairwell, and mudroom now compose the southeast corner. The upstairs spaces occupy all four corners of a large, open room. As the house evolves, the open plan will allow for easy reconfiguration of these spaces. Photos facing page taken at A on floor plan.

On the sunny side of the house. Kitchen, breakfast bar, and dining table occupy the southern third of the addition. A band of clerestory windows catches shafts of light that rotate throughout the house all day long. French doors lead to a small deck with a built-in gas grill. Photo right taken at D on floor plan.

A loft in the treetops. Daytime in the living room is akin to being in a well-appointed tree house. For nighttime privacy, tall drapes are at the ready. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



Affordable office/library. Inexpensive MDF floors and off-the-shelf bookcases from Ikea come together in the northwest corner of the big space. Photo taken at F on floor plan.

ble exterior finishes (sidebar facing page), and plenty of windows. Instead of similarly sized windows spaced equally around the perimeter of the house, the windows are sized and located according to whether they provide light, ventilation, views, or all three.

One of the house's signature details is the uninterrupted band of clerestory windows around three sides of the structure. They are tucked up tight below an overhang that blocks the summer sun.

We appreciate the sounds and smells of the fleeting Minnesota summer, and we dislike being hermetically sealed inside a chilly, expensive-to-operate air-conditioned box. To keep the house comfortable in the summer, many of the clerestory windows are operable.

Opening them allows us to create a convective chimney effect that cools the house. The bedrooms, tucked below the upstairs living quarters, stay naturally cool and comfortable, especially during sleeping hours. When it gets too warm upstairs, we open the high windows. As the hot air exits, it is replaced by cooler air from the lower level. If we need a cross-ventilation boost, two industrial-strength ceiling fans do the job.

How the powder room helps to orchestrate the spaces

Essentially one large, open room, the new second story is designed to accommodate all the action of family life. The kitchen, pantry, office, and general storage areas are

placed along one wall so that the living and dining areas remain free of clutter. The only enclosure is a centrally located half-bath, which provides wall space for a piano, artwork, and storage, and enough spatial definition to allow different activities to coexist comfortably (photos facing page). Because sightlines are gently obscured, one family member can work at the computer and another can read undisturbed on the couch.

The north wall of the house overlooks the front yard and includes a 12-ft.-high window wall that brings indirect light deep into the house (photo p. 44). At the south end, French doors open onto a second-floor deck (photo right).

There are virtually no windows in the northwest corner, which contains the family office/library with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. This corner bears the brunt of prevailing winter winds, and during construction, we took special care to protect and maintain the nearby windbreak of mature coniferous trees.

Take it outside

Our reenergized house is connected to the outdoors, and so are we. We love our neighborhood, and we like the idea of a front porch where we can hang with the neighbors and watch the kids. The original house lacked a proper porch, but we were able to correct that with a new entry (photo p. 44). It includes a deck big enough for a couple of chairs, and steps that double as bleacher seats.

The backyard connection is a deck off the dining area. It's not big, but its sunny location and proximity to the kitchen make it an ideal place to eat breakfast on a summer morning or to grill a meal any time of year under the roof overhang. □

Michael Roehr is a partner at RoehrSchmitt Architects in Minneapolis (www.roehrschmitt.com). Elisa Bernick is the author of *The Family Sabbatical Handbook*. Photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.

A trio of durable siding options



Red cedar

We used clear red-cedar 1x material for the "corn-crib" latticework surrounding the entry stair, and tongue-and-groove red-cedar siding for the walls adjacent to the dining deck. We applied a clear sealer with just a hint of tint for UV-protection. Restaining every three or four years will be required to keep the cedar looking good, but a bit of upkeep is a worthwhile exchange for the enduring beauty of the material. Photo left taken at G on floor plan.

Stucco

We kept the stucco finish on the original walls and matched it on the back of the house at the mud-room entry.

Zinc shingles

Most of the addition is finished with zinc shingles. Zinc is an unfinished, naturally weathering material; like copper, zinc develops a patina that protects it from corrosion. It looks great and lasts virtually forever. The flat-lock system shown here is installed easily with a few basic sheet-metal hand tools.