

# An Arts and Crafts Remodel

A Victorian duplex is gutted and rebuilt  
for a single family

by Julie Thomas

When the DePaul area became a center of radical political dissent in the 1960s, this house was the Chicago headquarters of the Black Panthers, complete with secret FBI neighbors across the street. As political activity subsided during the 1970s, the neighborhood slid into a period of urban decay, and the house declined along with it.

But the neighborhood's interesting architectural fabric and genteel hipness finally brought urban gentrification, and today the eclectic and prosperous DePaul area of Chicago—namesake of nearby DePaul University—attracts a diverse group of residents.

As scientists—a research scientist and a physician—our clients' exacting natures led them through a systematic survey of options before they hired us to renovate their Victorian in this area on Chicago's near north side.

The couple rented the first-floor apartment of the two-story duplex, or two-flat, in 1978. Five years later, they purchased the house, although for another nine years they continued to live as one of two tenants. During those last two years, they wrestled with the notion of transforming the house into a single-family home.

Because many of their friends had tackled similar large renovations and had scared them with construction horror stories, they first decided to avoid the frustrations and buy a different house. After two years of searching, though, it was clear that no existing house would fit the bill. They called us in early 1992 with a firm commitment to the project and the desire to get going.

**The lot is narrow, and the interior dark and cramped**—Time had been harsh to the house, inside and out, so there was little worth saving except the stair, and even that eventually got the ax. The house had an original, decorated Victorian facade and poorly constructed front and rear porches, which would have to be replaced. The basement had seen little change since the house was built, and its extremely low ceiling made it seem particularly confining. And there was one problem that couldn't be fixed: Houses similar in proportion and size bound the narrow lot closely on two sides, leaving little or no view and permitting no significant daylight exposure on those sides.

The original structure was typical of the building style. The floor plan of the house was a two-

thirds/one-third arrangement (drawings p. 58). To understand this division, imagine splitting the house lengthwise into two-thirds/one-third slices. As it was, the main living spaces—the living room, dining room and kitchen—all lined up one in front of the other down the two-thirds length of the house. The entry hall, stairway, tiny bedrooms and baths marched front to rear in the one-third section beside these living spaces.

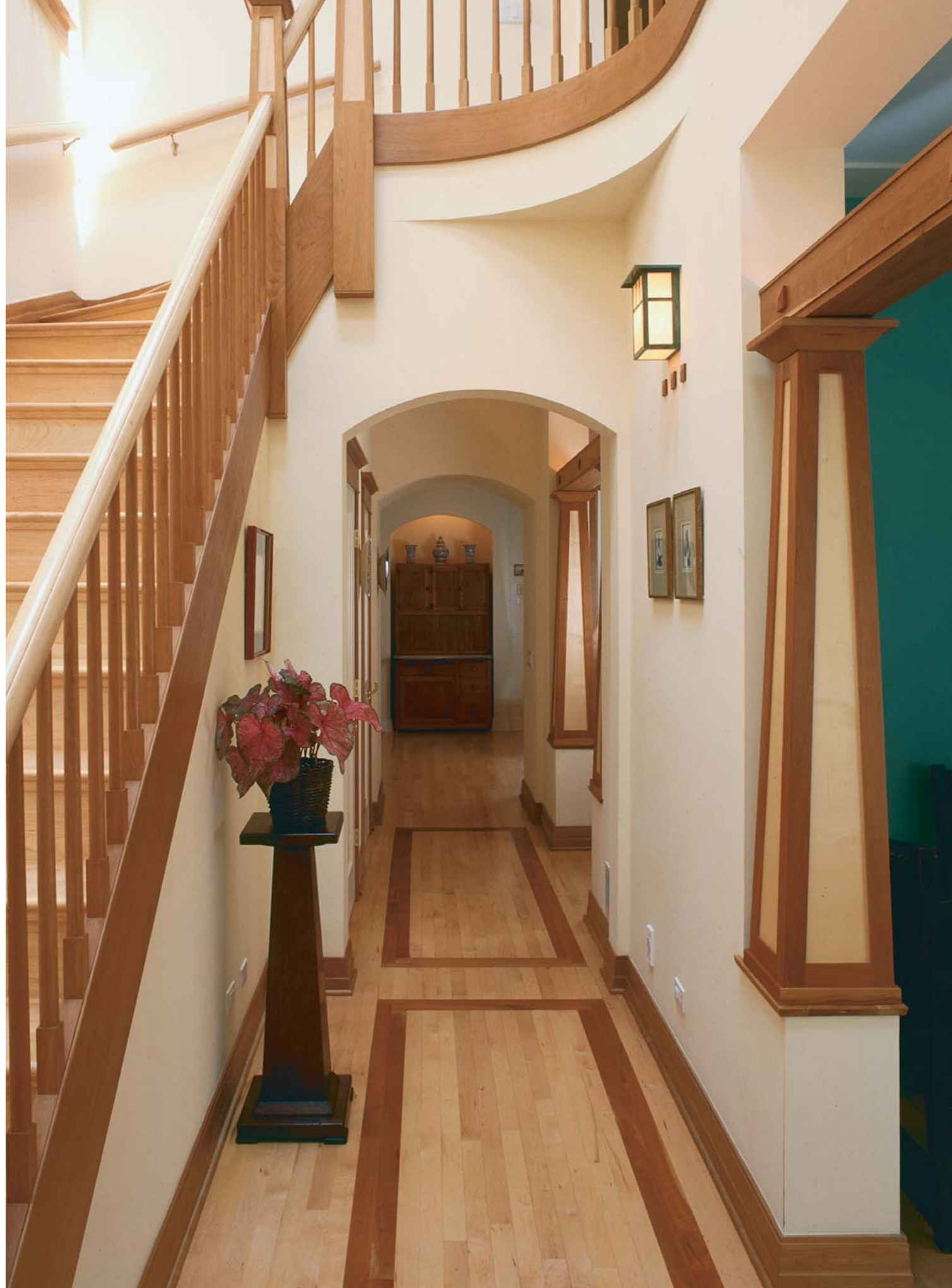
Early in the design process, we decided not to disrupt the structural order for two reasons.

Retaining a large degree of the original framing was cheaper than superimposing a new structural concept on the house. And we also realized that working with the house as is was an opportunity for creative thinking and problem solving. The new floor plan follows the same basic organization, but it allows a modern family to use the house in a modern way.

The benefit of spreading the rooms over two levels is that the once-minuscule bedrooms formerly relegated to the one-third section of the



**The entry porch subtly suggests what's to come.** Simple Craftsman-style details on the front porch work with the Victorian elements of the facade and suggest what's inside. The house also continues to fit in with the neighboring Victorian houses. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

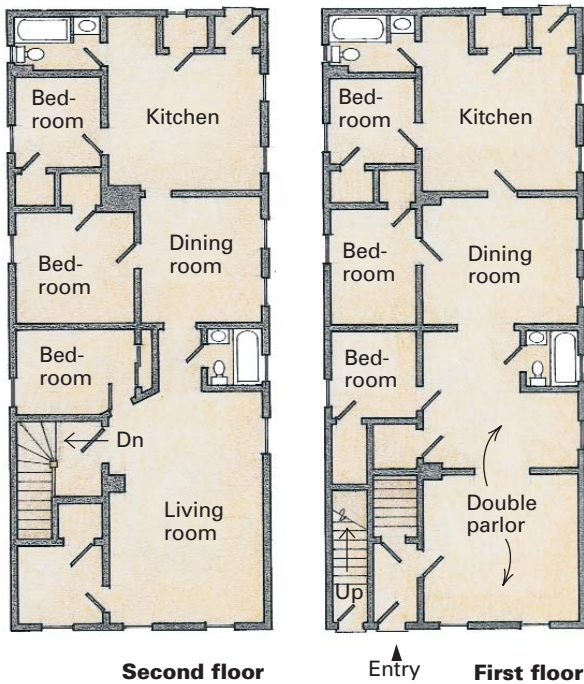


**Warm interior views substitute for the lack of exterior ones.** A series of arched doorways and maple-and-cherry portals frames the hallway, which funnels daylight from above into first-floor rooms. The maple floors are inlaid with cherry, a theme that's echoed in the columns leading into the rooms to the right. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

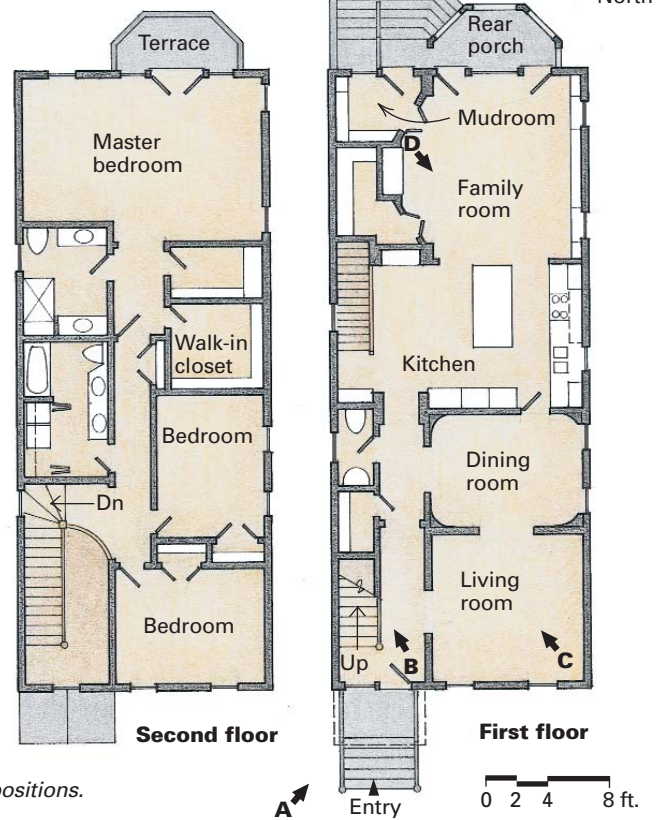
**Better use of limited space.** The original one-third/two-thirds floor plan was kept intact. However, the small bedrooms and the add-on

bathrooms in the original house were moved and enlarged as the Chicago-area duplex was converted into a single-family home.

**Original house**



**After renovation**



Photos taken at lettered positions.

house could occupy the two-thirds portion. In addition, important spaces such as the master bedroom could span the width of the house.

Many years before, our clients had begun an enviable collection of furnishings, lighting and art, a preference for the 19th-century Arts and Crafts style emerging as the common thread among these treasures. So with the given vessel a simple 1870s Victorian house, we set about to design an appropriate background for these objects within its confines.

**The interior space is carefully parceled out**—Although they were comfortable with the amount of space available in the house, our clients didn't want any square footage wasted or any sprawling suburban-scale spaces.

The frequently used living room was designed in moderate scale that gains some breathing room by being open to the adjacent stair hall (top photo, facing page). The dining room was treated as a dining alcove so that it would not consume valuable space that a busy family could enjoy more fully elsewhere in the house.

The kitchen is positioned in a location that has less than optimum views because it is seldom inhabited during the day. But the kitchen's location adjacent to the family room allows it to borrow light and views from the backyard on weekends and long summer evenings.

The family room houses several functions concurrently. First, it is fitted with a permanent place for two slide projectors and a remote-control pro-

jection screen hidden in a ceiling recess; second, a hidden storage room behind the family-room audio/visual niche stores additional electronics equipment. The house was wired for a remote audio system.

Below, the basement was excavated to a depth sufficient for the 6 ft. 6 in. owner to use it comfortably. Certain auxiliary spaces—a home office, guest suite, wine cellar and child's playroom—occupy the finished portions of the basement. The completed house now comprises about 3,700 sq. ft. over three levels.

**Bringing light into a dark house**—To maximize privacy, we turned to the interior for views. For example, a view from the front entry is framed by repeating arched doorways and bounded by a series of maple and cherry portals on one side (photo p. 57). This view ends in a final arched niche that contains an antique Hoosier cabinet. Similarly, the living room enjoys a view of the stair framed by one of the portals and its Arts and Crafts style columns.

Despite the lack of exterior exposure to daylight, a mixture of indirect and direct artificial light and daylight from key windows and skylights fills the house. Each portal is fitted with concealed, low-voltage up-lighting. Similarly, the corners of the natural linen and cherry walls in the small dining room pull away to reveal more concealed up-lighting. In the kitchen, some cabinets pull away from the ceiling, revealing a low-voltage lighted display ledge.

Wherever possible, however, daylight is allowed to flood major spaces, especially in the two-story stair hall, where large skylights and undraped windows face south.

**Ample sunlight is a plus during long Chicago winters**—The skylight penetration through the stair-hall ceiling is fitted with low-voltage up-lighting as well, which provides illumination at night. Softly glowing Arts and Crafts sconces are everywhere, balancing the indirect illumination with direct, subtle lighting. In the master bedroom, a generously sized pair of glass doors with transoms and flanking windows, topped by a soaring, maple-trimmed ceiling, leads onto the second-story terrace. The bed is set into the room's sleeping alcove.

The interior of the house is a composition of natural materials and vibrant colors. The detailing is characterized by a particular element that repeats throughout the house. This element, the tapered cherry column with maple inlay, appears in the portals framing the major rooms and in the newel posts of the stair. The column capital profile, which recalls the spare lines of Stickley designs, also is repeated in the door and window heads and in the cabinets. Also, a raised square of cherry frequently adorns the portals, decorates the kitchen island and punctuates the wall sconces. It is a vestige of the protruding through-tenon common in hand-crafted wood furniture.

The kitchen cabinets (bottom photo, facing page), which form a backdrop to the family



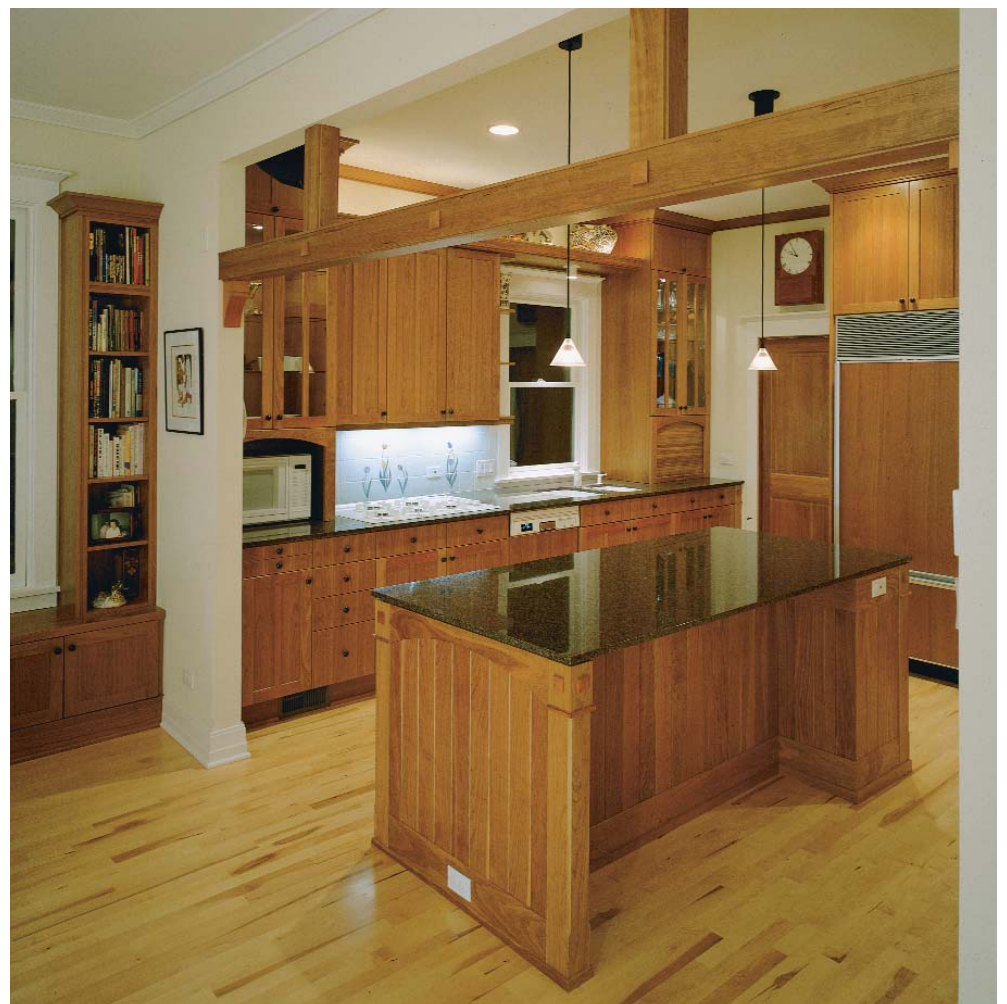
**Borrowed light enlivens a dark living room.** Although modest in size, the well-used living room gains some breathing room from the adjacent stair hall, which receives daylong indirect sunlight from windows and skylights. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

room, are treated almost as furniture. Each bank of cabinets is an autonomous composition. The island, in particular, with its granite countertop and tongue-and-groove boards, is independent of the remaining kitchen cabinets and sits in perfect symmetry within the view from the family room. Maple floors with cherry inlays, unstained cherry cabinets and cherry trim were chosen to complement the furnishings and artifacts, yet still maintain a livable family home.

**The facade is Victorian, but it suggests the Craftsman interior**—The owners chose the exterior color scheme after a great deal of research into the appropriate period colors. We designed a new front-entry porch (photo p. 56) that coexists with the original Victorian door and window cornices and the eave brackets. New and existing architectural elements that are part of the Victorian details of the neighborhood were developed or enhanced.

Even though the house was transformed into a single residence, the new front porch retains its original double front door so that the street facade is not disrupted. We chose simple, beveled glass lites in the doors instead of a multiple leaded-glass design because we didn't want any overly ornamented elements to upset the Craftsman-style balance inside. □

*Julie Thomas and her husband, Christopher, are architects in Evanston, Illinois. Photos by Steve Culpepper except where noted.*



**Subtle lighting brings out the warmth of cherry cabinets.** Custom-made cabinets, each piece different from the next, work together as individual pieces of furniture. Photo taken at D on floor plan.