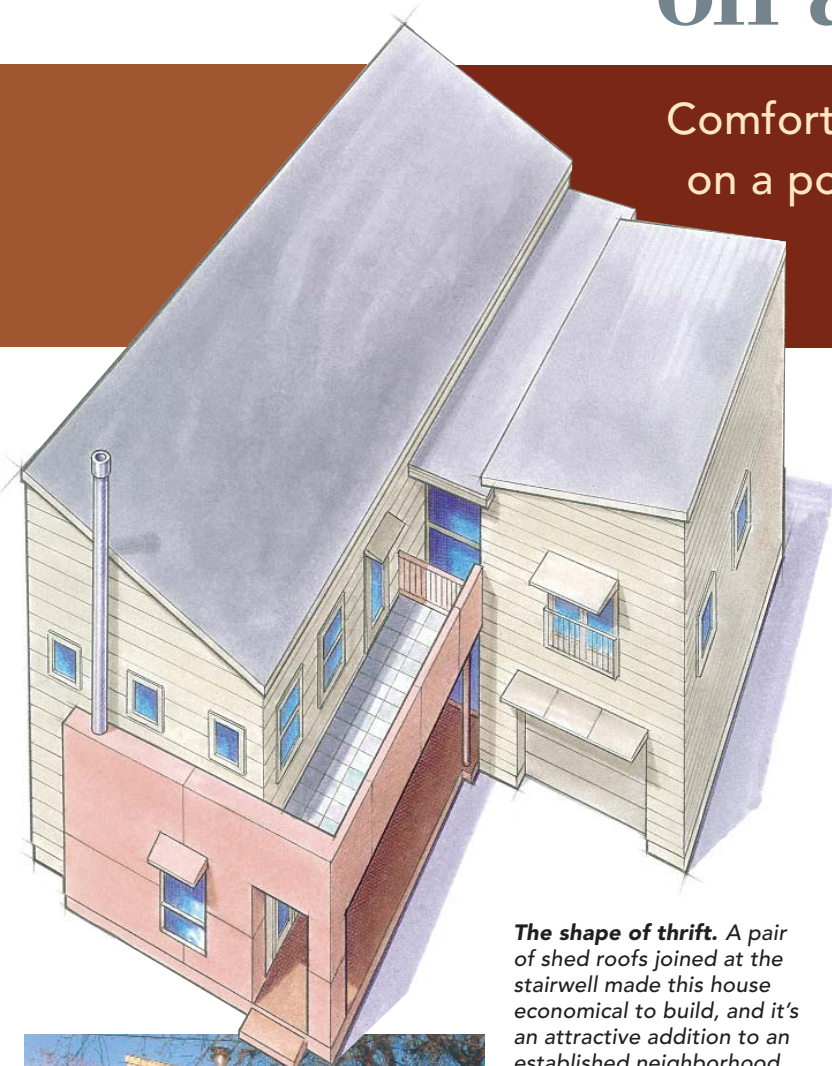


Champagne House on a Beer Budget

Comfortable quarters for a family of five on a postage-stamp lot in Houston, but for only \$70 per square foot

BY CARLOS ULLOA



The shape of thrift. A pair of shed roofs joined at the stairwell made this house economical to build, and it's an attractive addition to an established neighborhood.



Plenty of people have big families and small bank accounts, yet still yearn for a house that suits their needs. My wife and I were in just that situation when a lot became available in a Houston neighborhood that we liked. The 54-ft. by 75-ft. lot was a bit smaller than the typical 50-ft. by 100-ft. lots in the area, but its corner location made it feel more expansive. Best of all, it was affordable. As an architect, my challenge was to design a house for our family of five that blended with the neighborhood's old bungalows and new town homes while staying within a modest budget.

A penny-pinching floor plan

We started with an economical layout of two different-size rectangular masses (floor plan, p. 72). The relationship of the rectangles creates a courtyard facing the street (drawing, photo left), adding a friendly connection to the sidewalk. While cars enter the garage from an alley on its east side, an overhead door on the garage's west side opens into the courtyard, expanding the space during parties.

Simple shed roofs over both house sections provide design continuity, and they are economical to build. The roof planes slope in a butterfly pattern toward the center, where runoff collects and drains.

The house sections are joined by a stairwell. Its open-riser steel staircase and ground-to-roof glazing on both sides make the space virtually transparent (center photo, p. 71). The tinted commercial glass creates a minimalistic look at about half of what the cost would have been if I had used the same windows as in the rest of the house.

Looking good without breaking the bank

Outside, I tried to draw on colors and materials that mimic the look of the adjacent town homes and the



This open plan produces long, uninterrupted views that make the 2500-sq.-ft. house seem larger than it really is.



Frugal factors. Simple steel stringers create an affordable stairway (top photo, taken at B on floor plan), while partitions can be cost-effective alternatives to full walls (bottom photo, taken at C on floor plan).



nearby houses. The fiber-cement siding that I used on about 80% of the exterior of the house proved to be a money saver (James Hardie; 800-542-7343; www.jameshardie.com). Material and installation costs for cement siding are less than metal, brick, or stucco. I also used fiber-cement fascia and trim material for their affordability, low maintenance, and longevity. A rectangular bump-out finished in brick-red stucco defines the entry at the front of the house, containing the porch and supporting the upstairs balcony.

I chose to use mill-finish aluminum exterior windows from Danvid (800-683-8140; www.atriumcompanies.com) for their clean, commercial look and their affordability. I saved money again by installing operable windows only where they were absolutely needed, such as in the bedrooms.

Open interior costs less

Ceiling trusses allow the living room, dining room, and kitchen to share the same area (photo facing page). This open floor plan produces long, uninterrupted views that make the 2500-sq.-ft. house seem larger than it actually is. Trusses are left exposed over the kitchen and living room to define the spaces and to save on the cost of drywall and paint. The painted drywall ceiling over the dining room hides the plumbing and ductwork. The different ceiling treatments,

Fewer walls, lower costs. Beams and floor trusses left exposed to save money allow for a wide-open interior, while different ceiling treatments hide mechanical systems and help to define spaces. Photo taken at A on floor plan.



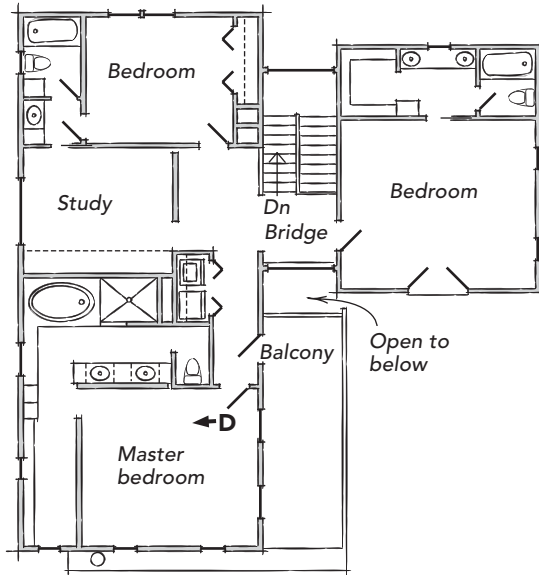
An affordable layout

Rectangular shapes helped to keep down costs. The main section of the house joins the smaller one via a connecting space that houses the stairway. The garage is accessed from the rear by way of an alley, allowing for a fenced-in courtyard in front.

SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 4
- Bathrooms:** 4
- Size:** 2500 sq. ft.
- Cost:** \$70 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 2002
- Location:** Houston, Texas
- Architect:** Carlos Ulloa
- Builder:** Metropolitan Design Group

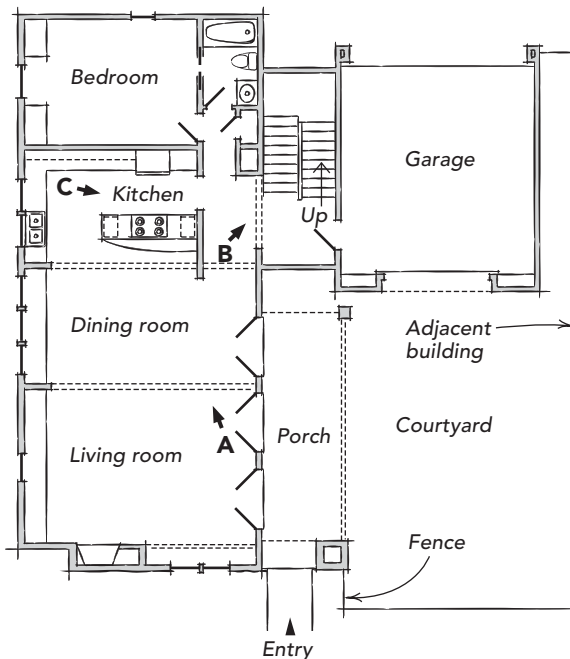
Second floor



Photos taken at lettered positions.

First floor

North



Master bedroom without doors. Instead of floor-to-ceiling walls, inexpensive freestanding partitions separate the bed from a large closet and the master bath. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

along with freestanding partitions, also define the separate areas (bottom photo, p. 71). I tried to use the same open plan in the rest of the house as well. For example, the master-bedroom suite (photo above) has only one door. Instead of the usual floor-to-ceiling walls, partitions define and separate a generous closet and the master bath.

Unassuming materials used well

The stained-concrete floors on the ground level were a tremendous savings (Kemiko; 903-587-3708; www.kemiko.com; color: cola). Stained concrete is attractive and durable, and it requires no additional floor finish, such as wood or carpet. Staining the entire slab before the house was built also gave me a more finished-looking garage and porch at no additional cost.



MONEY-SAVING INTERIOR DETAILS

Interior finish details can be budget busters, but a little shopping around, especially on the Web, can yield beautiful yet affordable alternatives. Here are a few used in this house.

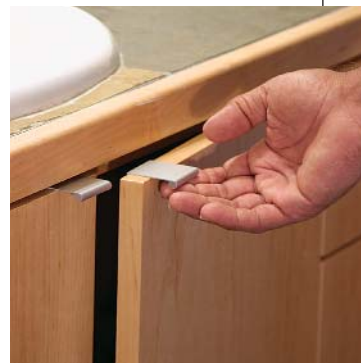


Commercial lights come as either pendants or wall sconces and cost \$105 each (www.hilitemanufacturing.com; 866-372-5483).



Mercury Lever passage sets (Emtek; www.emtek.com; \$56) fit this house's style.

Sleek cabinet pulls used on cabinets throughout the house cost less than \$1 when bought in bulk (www.epcohardware.com; 888-414-3726).



We made choices that deliver maximum elegance for a minimum price.

I made all the trim on site from naturally finished ½-in. parana pine, an inexpensive and readily available material. A simple square-edge bead wraps the casings for an elegant but economical accent. All the cabinets in the house were made from ¾-in. paint-grade maple plywood with a natural finish. I used stain-grade plywood with taped edges only for the doors and exposed panels. The design of the cabinets was modular, maximizing the standard 4-ft. by 8-ft. plywood size for efficient use of materials.

Slate counters with a wood edge top off the cabinets in all the bathrooms. Slate costs less and looks better than a solid-surface countertop. In the kitchen, I splurged for a solid slab of granite countertop on the island. The rest of the countertops in the kitchen and

along the walls of the living and dining rooms are granite tile edged with wood. At \$10 per sq. ft. installed for the tile vs. \$40 per sq. ft. for solid granite, the tile saved us a bunch.

To save more money inside the house, the steel stair stringers were fabricated inexpensively off site. The stairs then were assembled and detailed on site. I welded the railings and steel balusters in place and gave them a simple primed finish.

I also chose a variety of interior appointments that deliver maximum elegance for a minimum price (photos above, right). □

Carlos Ulloa is a member of Metropolitan Design Group Inc. (www.mdgilofts.com), an architectural firm in Houston, Texas. Photos by Roe A. Osborn.



At \$67, these **Moen Villeta faucets** are elegance at a bargain-basement price (www.faucetdirect.com; 800-864-2555).