



A Town House Opens up in Philadelphia

Larger windows and a new third floor transform an inner-city row house

by Tony Atkin

After buying his new house, Tom Pederson came to us with two simple requests: He wanted more space and more natural light. Not a terribly tall order, on the face of it, until you consider that the house was a tiny (11 ft. wide, 30 ft. long) two-story row house in central Philadelphia (photo facing page). Our challenge was to create flexible, open living space, to improve circulation in plan and section, and to capture plenty of natural light within the existing building. Because the house is located in a historic district, we needed to accomplish all this without substantially altering the street facade. Our approach was to open the interior space and then to break out of the existing envelope by adding a third floor (photo top right) and a small addition on the back.

The problems of limited space and light—Built in 1752, the existing house was wedged into a small, narrow street—the garbage truck's wheels rub the curb on both sides of the street. The dark, cramped interior of the existing house was chopped up by partition walls, which made a small footprint feel still smaller. The available daylight was severely limited as well. In front, houses on the opposite side of the street are only 12 ft. away; to the rear, the backs of buildings on the next block are 18 ft. away. The house's windows admitted only a minimum amount of light. The living room and the dining room/kitchen were on the first floor, with two small bedrooms and a bathroom on the second level. Typical of row houses, the kitchen—at the back of the house—was dark and gloomy.

Designing compact additions that capture more natural light—The ability to add to the existing house was restricted both by cost considerations and by Philadelphia zoning ordinances, so we planned to make the most of every square foot. We also envisioned both additions as collectors of much-needed natural light, in addition to providing more usable space. After researching the zoning requirements, we determined the maximum buildable area and height requirements for the site and designed a new third-floor bedroom suite with a terrace (photos right) and an 8-ft. by 9-ft. three-story wing on the back side.

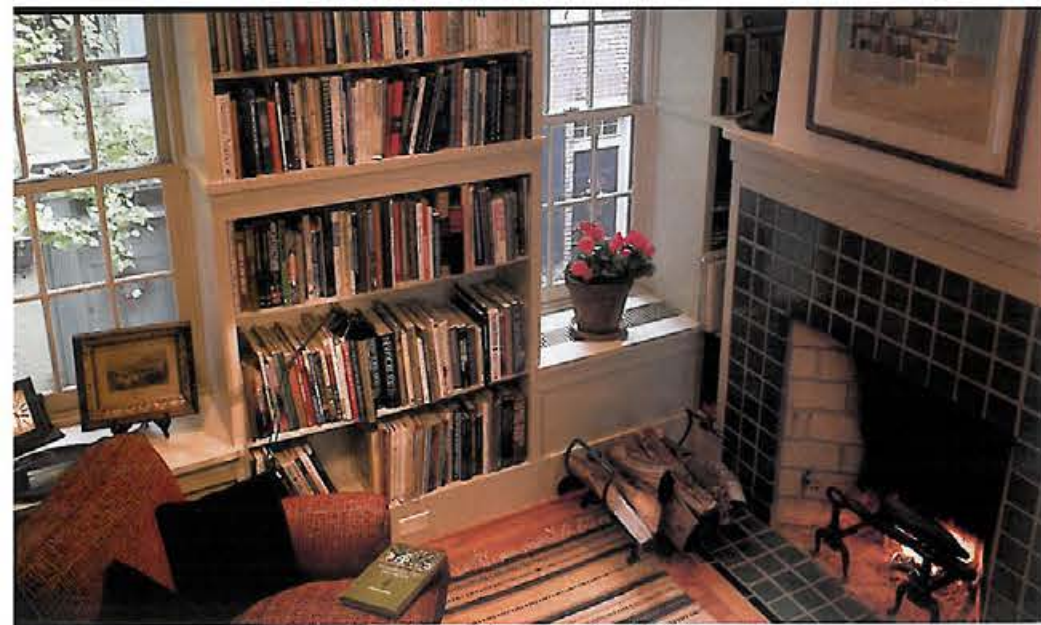
On the third floor, we maximized the glass in the north and south walls because no openings were permitted by code in the other two, which are firewalls separating the row house from those on each side. We installed oversize wood double-hung windows that flood the bedroom



A third-floor addition gives the house extra room, light and a skyline view. The author designed this third-story addition to step back from street sight lines in compliance with historic-district code and to give the owner a small deck. Photo taken at B on floor plan.



Large third-floor windows help to light the lower floors. An open stairwell channels sunlight from the top floor to the rest of the house. Sliding doors hidden behind the closet at left provide privacy for the bedroom. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



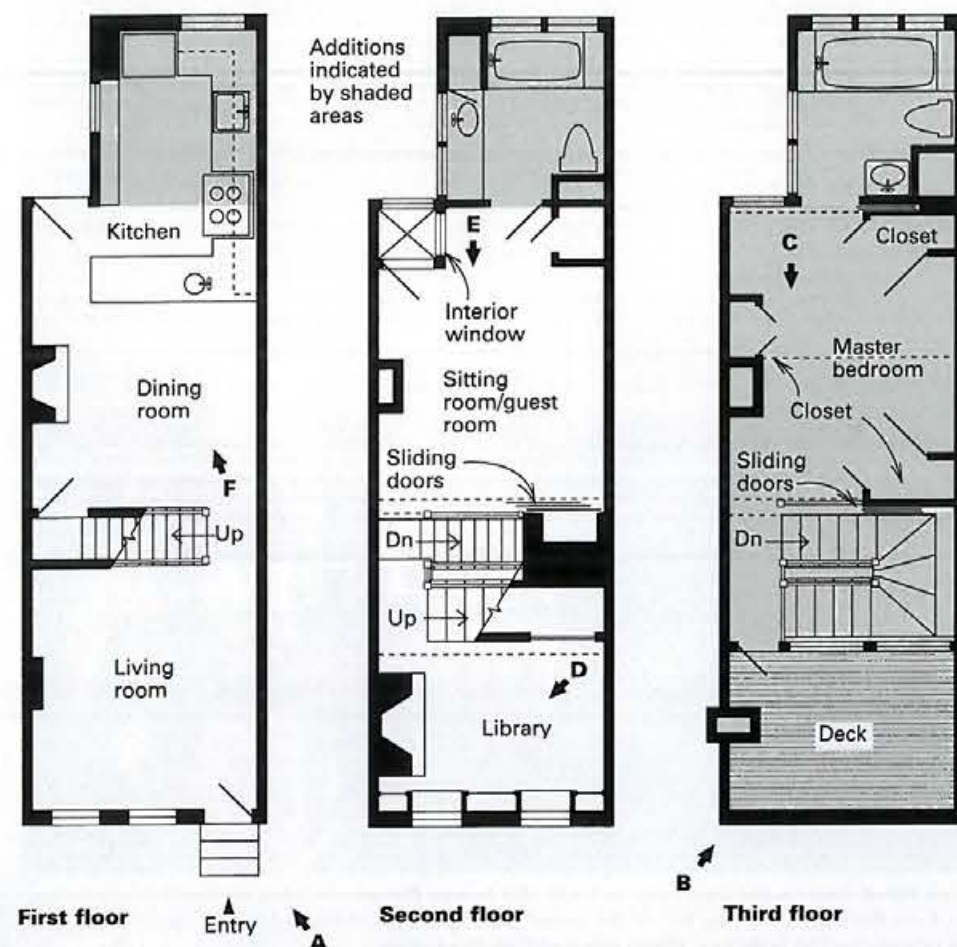
Rumford fireplace adds warmth to a cozy library. The architects chose to use a Rumford-inspired fireplace in the library because the fireplace's shallow profile takes up little space and throws lots of heat. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

0 2 4 8 ft.

North

Modest additions and an open stair improve the circulation of a row house.

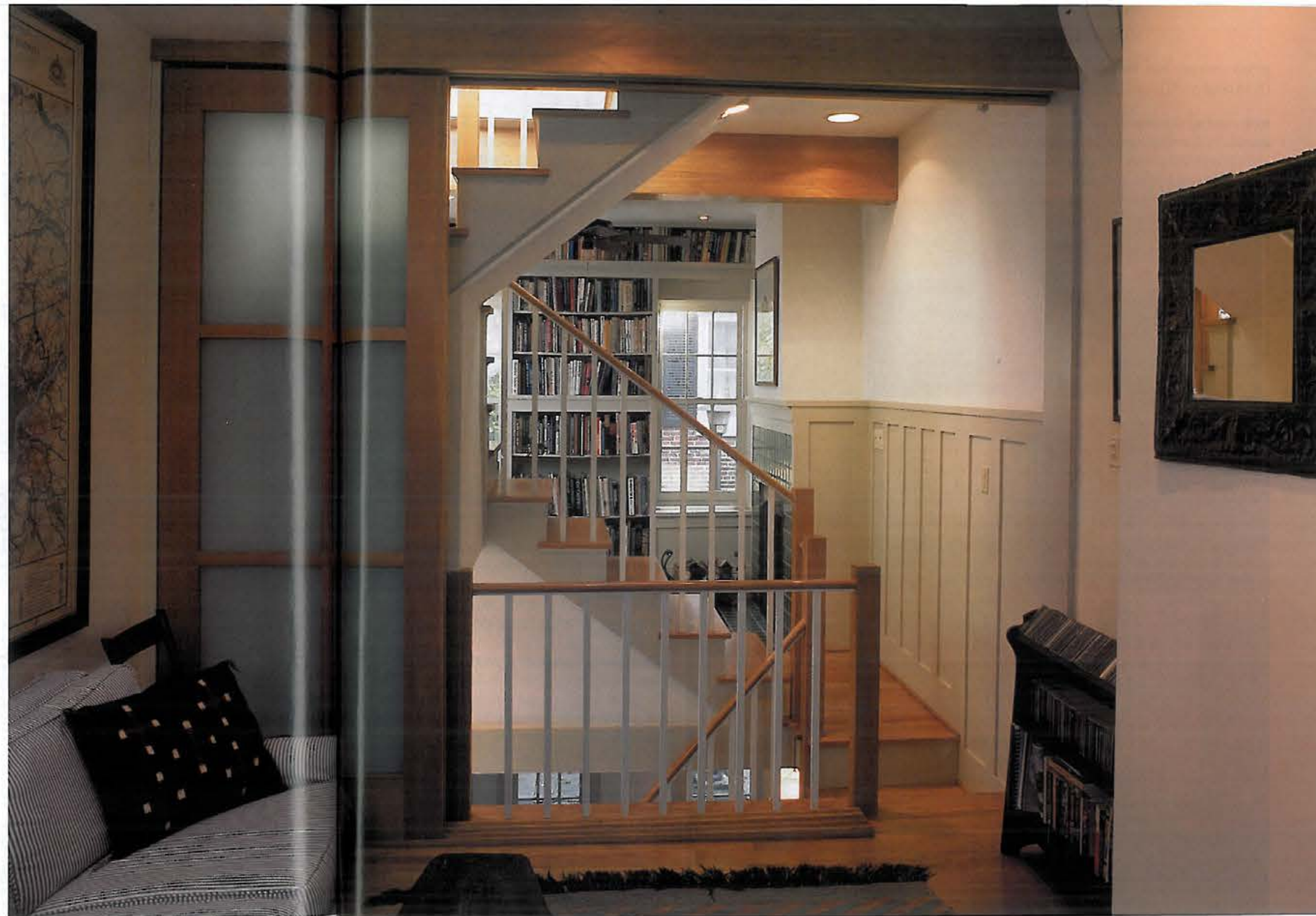
To maximize the amount of space, the architects eliminated unnecessary partitions and added an unobtrusive third-floor addition that conformed to historic-district codes. Windows in a small addition at the rear of the house bring much-needed light to the interior.



First floor

Second floor

Third floor



Sliding doors of sandblasted glass and fir serve as optional privacy screens. Traffic from the open stairway and library beyond can be blocked off from the second-floor sitting room, which can double as a guest room. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 1
- Bathrooms:** 2
- Heating system:** Gas-fired hot air
- Size:** 1,555 sq. ft., including basement
- Cost:** \$152 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 1995
- Location:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Photos taken at lettered positions.

suite with natural light and offer views in both directions. We used stock sizes of Marvin Magnum-grade windows (Marvin Windows and Doors, Warroad, MN 56763; 800-346-5128) in the front because their style was approved by the Philadelphia Historic Commission. We opened the ceiling to the gable roof and separated the roof from the north and south walls with clerestory windows at the eaves. We also designed an operable transom window to maxi-

mize light and to enhance air circulation. The light entering on this level also enables the stair to act as a lightwell, bringing natural light to the center of the house.

To bring much-needed light to the kitchen and dining area, we designed the smaller addition at the back of the house. The addition steps back at the northwest corner, creating a notched-out corner that is mostly glass, with six Kolbe & Kolbe double-hung wood windows joined to-

gether vertically from the first floor to the third (floor plans, p. 80).

Reinventing the character of the existing space—To start with, we decided that the living and kitchen/dining rooms should remain on the first floor. A new library, a bathroom and a sitting room that could double as a guest room would occupy the second level, leaving the master suite secluded on the third floor.

As we developed the building plan, we attempted to suggest rather than to define the living spaces. We removed all existing interior partitions—one of the few advantages of a space that's only 11 ft. wide—and limited our use of new partitions as much as possible. The first floor is free of partition walls and open front to back; the kitchen is separated from the dining area by a 36-in. high cabinet with a marble countertop (photo below). Because the kitchen is

open to the living and dining areas, we worked with materials and colors that were warm and durable, yet handsome enough to complement the formal spaces. The cabinetry is natural cherry; the countertops are Tennessee pink marble.

On the second and third levels, we enclosed each bathroom with walls topped with operable transom windows. These oversize windows allow exterior light and air into the house while permitting privacy in the bathroom.

The existing stair from the first floor to the second floor had been built against a partition wall and created a visual barrier between the front and rear of the house. We removed the wall and rebuilt the stair in the same location, extending it up to the new third floor. By leaving the stair open on all levels, we created easy circulation flow vertically and horizontally, and invited views from one level to another. On each floor, the stair provides a visual delineation between spaces without actually separating them from one another.

Sliding shoji-like doors of Douglas fir with sandblasted glass can separate the library from the sitting room and can give privacy to the second floor (photo p. 81). On the third floor, sliding wood screens with operable shutters work similarly to close the bedroom suite from the stair. Both sets of sliding doors used tandem roller hardware by Häfele (3901 Cheyenne Drive, Archdale, NC 27263; 800-423-3531).

Rumford fireplace is a good choice for a small library—Creative use of existing space

included space-saving elements such as bookcases and storage cabinets built into the stair, two-sided corner closets in the bedroom and the incorporation of a Rumford fireplace in the library (photo p. 80). Rumford fireplaces, based on a 200-year old design originated in England by Count Rumford, are characterized by a relatively tall, shallow, straight-backed firebox with a small, rounded chimney breast. Rumfords are energy-efficient space savers and burn cleaner than traditional fireplaces, making them an ideal design for urban residential situations. After investigating Rumford-design techniques, we came up with our own version, incorporating liner components manufactured by Superior Clay Products (P. O. Box 352, Uhrichsville, OH 44683; 614-922-4122). The fireplace, detailed with painted-wood mantel and handmade tile, lends character and warmth to the room without sacrificing valuable space. □

Tony Atkin is a partner in the firm Atkin, Olshin, Lawson-Bell & Associates in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The project architects were John Andrews and David Bae. The builder was Hanson General Contracting of Philadelphia. Photos by Charles Bickford.



Small 9-ft. by 8-ft. addition at the rear of the house creates a brighter kitchen space. A three-story notch above the rear door contains windows that illuminate the cherry cabinets and marble countertops of the new kitchen. Photo taken at F on floor plan.