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In a narrow rowhouse, she finds plenty of room for a big life

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by **Sally A. Downey**, For The Inquirer

Many retirees opt for horizontal living - in ranchers, or in condos with elevators.



In a narrow rowhouse, she finds plenty of room for a big life
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Alice Hall went vertical.

A year and a half ago, Hall, 73, a widow, moved to a narrow rowhouse in Center City. Her trinity, so called for the one room on each floor - a "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" layout - has a steep, winding staircase and a skeleton in a closet.

The brick building was part of a row of rental properties built in 1862 with basement kitchens and including, until the 1900s, outhouses.

Tenants included milliners, carpenters, and other tradespeople, Hall says. The block has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1978.

Hall and her three siblings grew up in Center City and in Chestnut Hill. She is a graduate of Springside School and Skidmore College.

As an adult, she lived in Gulph Mills and in North Jersey, working in development and running volunteer programs for nonprofits.

After the youngest of her three daughters was grown, she returned to Center City because, she says, "I can walk a block in any direction and find a place to have a beverage or a meal."

Hall likes her neighbors and has a tip for Philadelphia newcomers: "Keep dog treats in your pocket. You meet the most interesting people via their dogs."

The house needed extensive renovations, which took longer than expected. Still, Hall has high praise for her contractor, John Hanson, of Hanson Fine Building & Preservation.

He, in turn, praises Hall for doing much of the work, including stripping paint from wood trim, 11 doors, and hardware. When Hanson ripped up an oak floor in the living room, Hall pulled out "3,000-plus" nails and staples to reveal the original pine underneath.

The 15-foot-wide, 1,000-square-foot house was a challenge to remodel. A stacked washer and dryer are in a second-floor closet. All the mechanicals are hidden away in the space above the top floor or on the roof.

A new kitchen in the basement features a 24-inch-wide refrigerator, a dishwasher with a storage drawer below, open shelving with vertical slots for dishes, and walnut countertops. ("I love wood," Hall says.)

The location of the old bake oven is now a pantry closet, with a plastic skeleton hanging from a hook for fun.

Hanson's crew found room behind the toilet in the new powder room for a storage bin. Tile floors there and in the kitchen, as well as in refurbished bathrooms on the second and third floors, are heated.

The staircase is so narrow that a thick rope takes the place of a wooden or metal railing. Though the lithe Hall navigates the stairs with ease, a dumbwaiter installed years ago removes the need to balance drink trays.

A red sofa and chairs brighten the dove gray-and-white living room. A narrow coffee table from a shop in Maine doubles as a bench. A window seat hides storage below. Light streams from restored rear windows. New six-over-six front windows are historically correct.

The print of Boathouse Row over the wooden fireplace mantel was a gift to Hall from her husband, Craig, who died in 1994. A photo from their 1965 wedding sits on a corner shelf. On the wall by a window are silhouettes of two of Hall's four grandchildren.

The house is furnished with family pieces and thrift-store items. With space constraints she says, "If I bring in something, I get rid of something."

In the third-floor guest room hangs a poster that Hall found in Barcelona for *La Dolce Vita* - the Fellini film was the first movie she and Craig saw together.

With a subsidy from the Philadelphia Water Department's stormwater-management program Rain Check, Hall had her tiny garden excavated, then layered with gravel and river rock. On a recent visit, a couch, two chairs and a table hid under a snow-covered tarpaulin there.

Inside, Hall can host eight to 12 people for drinks and light fare - with a few more possible in nice weather because of the garden.

And on her friendly street, she says, "There are pickup gatherings and potluck.

"Chairs, tables, music, magically appear. Wonderful!"

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