

Designing for Privacy and Views

In a dense neighborhood,
a small, modern home
embraces a secluded
outdoor space

BY GREG WIEDEMANN





My firm's client, Joan, owned a small 70-year-old cottage in Bethesda, Md., that was slowly deteriorating. Although the suburban lot was narrow, toward the back it had great views to the northwest of the parkland that runs along the Potomac River. The view to the northeast, however, was not as pastoral. Joan's neighbor had built the tallest house in the area, and Joan literally felt overshadowed.

At first, our discussions centered on the idea of remodeling the existing house, but the more we talked, the clearer it became that it would be easier just to start over. The new house would take advantage of the parkland views and would use a two-story bedroom wing as a privacy screen for a secluded backyard (photo left).

Joan's requirements for the house were modest: In addition to the requisite living spaces, she requested two bedrooms and a ground-floor office that could be converted to a bedroom in the future. The kitchen and the dining and living rooms could be combined in a single space. The only extravagances would be an in-ground pool, an outdoor shower, and a one-car garage. By Washington D.C., standards, the 2100-sq.-ft. design was small.

Selective views determine the shape of the house

The T-shaped plan combines a two-story bedroom wing with a one-story great room that contains the kitchen and living room. An entry hall stitches the two wings together and provides a connection from the entry to the rear terrace.

Screened by trees, shrubs, and the bedroom wing, the backyard and the pool terrace are private. The office and all the main living spaces open directly onto the terrace, providing a sense of seclusion and expansive views, despite the small lot size. The second-floor master bedroom and its balcony overlook the pool as well.

Strategic windows promote privacy

The living room's glass wall opens to views of the pool and backyard. On the opposite wall, the lack of large kitchen



Facing the street with a poker face. Fewer windows on the front (above) maintain the owner's privacy. In back, however, the house opens to a leafy yard with a pool and views beyond (left). Photos taken at A and B on floor plan.

windows creates privacy from the street. Although shielded by the kitchen, the living/dining room is daylighted by the encircling band of clerestory windows. Awning windows placed on the east side admit natural light, but are high enough on the wall to block the views of the neighbor next door. Corner windows and projecting bays on the second floor are oriented toward the backyard and the more distant views downhill.

The plan combines home and office with a flexible future

Our goal was to design the home office to be converted into a bedroom when climbing stairs became a challenge for the homeowner. The office is at the end of the front entry hall and opens directly onto the rear bluestone terrace. The office bathroom and all of the doorways on the first floor are wheelchair-accessible.

The T-shaped plan can be expanded readily. A second floor could be added over the living area and have a direct connection to the existing second-floor corridor and main stair. It would be a relatively easy way to create an additional bedroom and bathroom while preserving the outdoor spaces and most of the clerestory windows.

Making the most of materials

We wanted to use materials in the house that made some connection to the site, at least in terms of color and texture. We mixed brick, clear-finished mahogany siding, and lead-coated copper on the exterior. Facing the street, the terraced stairs and the lower part of the exterior are covered with dark manganese brick, creating a base that is unified in color and texture.

The clear finish on the Canberra mahogany tongue-and-groove siding brings out its warm color, which fits nicely with the surrounding foliage. Lead-coated copper squares soldered together on the projecting bays and the rear second-floor terrace provide a different geometric scale to the house and an additional color and texture to the exterior.

On the interior, we picked bluestone for the entry-hall floor. It's the same stone we used for the front walk and back terrace and makes a continuous pathway from front to back. The remainder of the first floor is covered in stained white oak, while the second floor is clear maple. □

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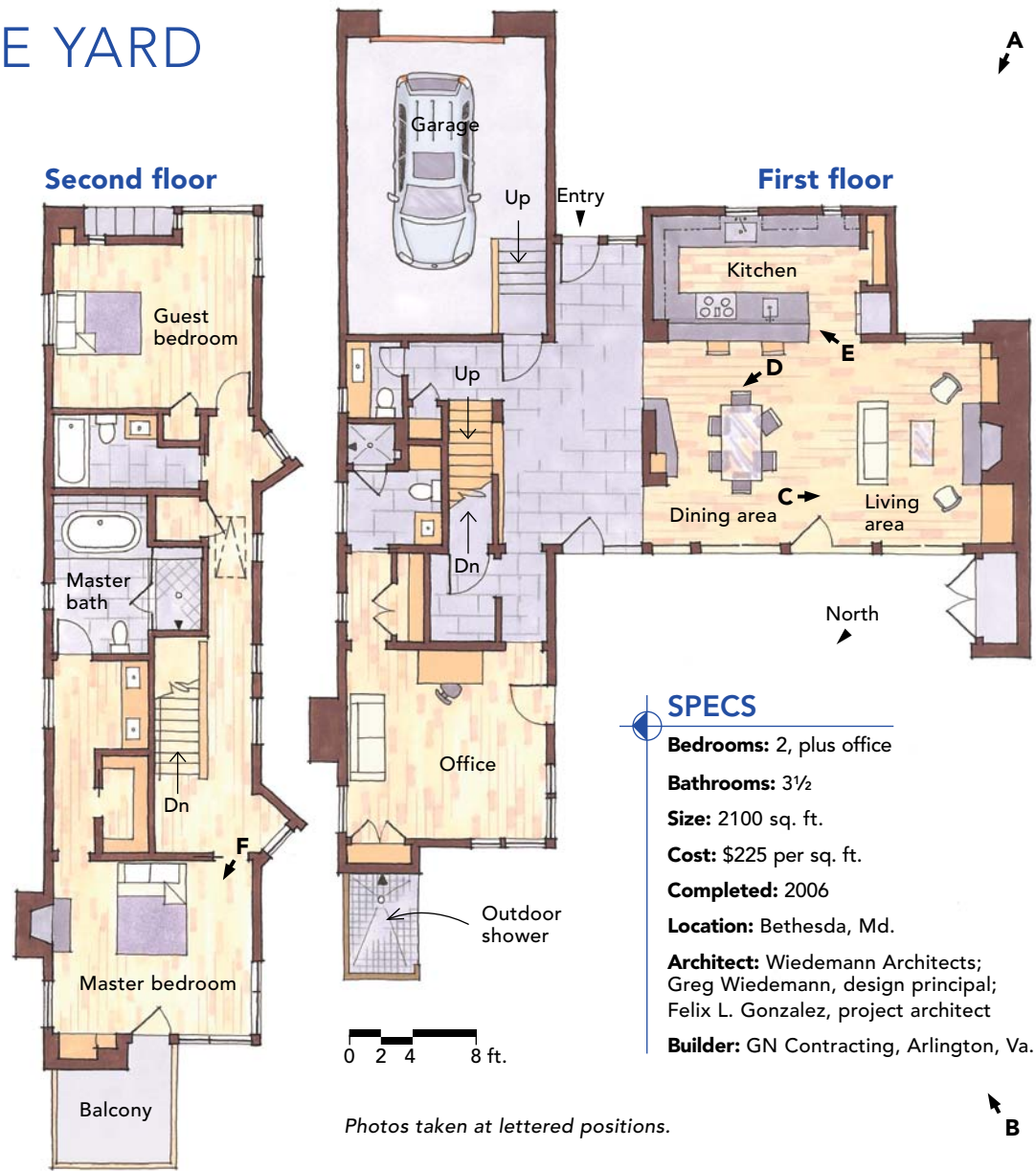
A T-SHAPED PLAN

Built on a narrow lot with neighboring houses on both sides within a stone's throw, the house is oriented across the lot's width to create a secluded backyard. The floor plan is a T-configuration built of a main structure joined at right angles by the entry hall. The first-floor office can be converted easily into a bedroom suite. In the bedroom wing, the master bedroom and office suite occupy the rear of the house, where the views and privacy are best.



Geometry at work. In a house that's all about volume and space, the fireplace and bookcases showcase the designer's work in black granite and maple. Photo taken at C on floor plan. Dividing the entry hall and dining area, a freestanding unit (inset photo, above) maintains the open quality of the living area. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

SHELTERS THE YARD



Open to the inside. Located on the street side of the house, the galley kitchen's windows are small for privacy's sake. A breakfast counter separates the kitchen from the dining area but maintains the sense of open space. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



Respite with a view. The master bedroom takes advantage of its position at the rear of the house with a big window and an open balcony that overlook the pool. A gas fireplace adds to the comfort level. Photo taken at F on floor plan.