

Minnesota

Habitat

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SMALL WONDER

*How one Minneapolis couple made an 880-square-foot
"basket case" into an urban dream home.*

Hometime's Dynamic Duo

Hot Tips for Tight Quarters



The solid railing along the deck visually extends the side of the house and offers privacy.

SMALL WONDER

An eight-year renovation turned one Minneapolis couple's diminutive house into an urban dream home.

By Amy Gage

ROSEMARY MCMONIGAL AND JIM Korba aren't exactly crusaders for their cause, but they are committed—to the idea of living and working in a city neighborhood and doing their part to maintain its housing stock.

"We both grew up around the city," says Rosemary, whose architectural firm, Rosemary A. McMonigal Architects, is located just blocks from her and Jim's house in northeast Minneapolis. "We're not suburban people. We like living close in; we like the maturity of the trees."

For Rosemary and Jim, an all-around handyman by avocation, living close in means sacrificing the acre of land they might like to live on, along with the luxury of spare rooms, fresh air, and free space. What they gain is convenience—and the satisfaction of having rescued a standard-issue city house before neglect and decay rendered it unlivable.

Jim bought the place in 1979, three years before he and Rosemary were married. His \$500 down got him a corner lot with a fully grown maple tree and an 880-square-foot house whose layout made poor use of its already tight space. The two south-facing bedrooms grabbed all the best light and got the worst of the street noise; the large kitchen had little storage space; the few existing closets were tiny and dark; and the windowless backside made the small house seem even smaller. Repair work was also required. "The house was a basket case," says Jim.

A series of "phased projects" began when Rosemary stepped into the picture. She and Jim's father, a house designer, crafted a whole new interior, leaving only the bathroom in place. They moved the bedrooms to the north side of the house and put the living room in the southeast corner, alongside the street. The kitchen



Photographed by James Erickson

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The M-shaped bay windows in the living room of this 880-square-foot house offer longer views than would a traditional bay window with a flat front. "We were trying to widen the living room," says architect Rosemary McMonigal, who, along with her husband, Jim Korba, owns the house in northeast Minneapolis. "One way to do that is to bay out the windows like this, which gives the room a feeling of angles."



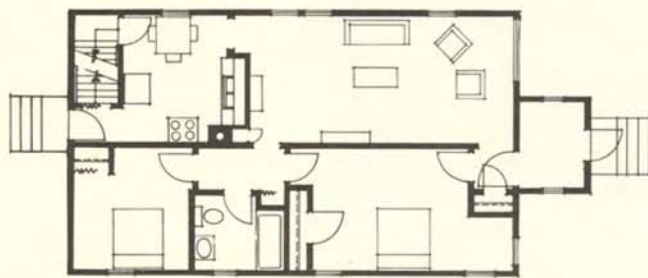
was modified to a long, narrow galley style with three times the original cabinet space. A dining area took up the sunny location where a bedroom had been. And a new three-season porch and outdoor deck gave the couple more space in which to live and entertain.

"Knowing how small the house was, we knew we had to have a plan to work from," Rosemary says. "Changing things around in a big house gives you a lot of flexibility, but in a little one you have to know where everything's going."

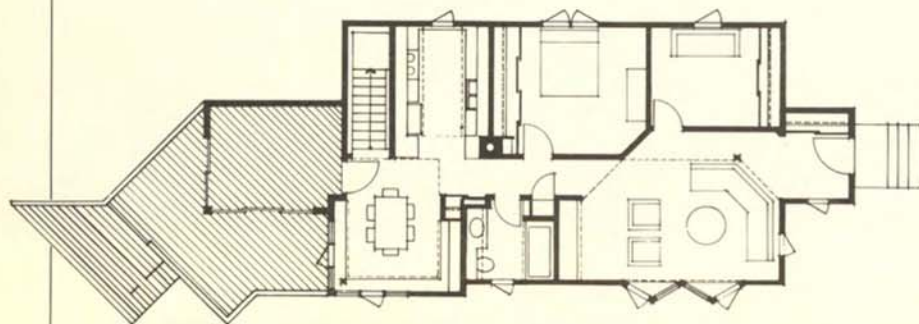
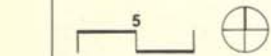
And yet the project wasn't so easy as changing around a few rooms. Once Rosemary and Jim got to work, they discovered some structural defects. The center of the house had sunk four inches over the years, making re-leveling the first priority. "If you set down a bowling ball," says Rosemary, "it would take off for the middle of the house. We had to correct that before we could go any further. Otherwise, you'd be building walls that were going to change."

Jim and a few hired hands spent months replacing support posts and beams in the basement, clearing out dusty concrete between the joists, realigning the roof. "We stabilized everything," he says. "That's something that most people wouldn't take the time to do."

"It's not the thing that you're going to have the money return on, either," Rosemary adds. "The things that appeal to you—like floors and cabinetry—are visual, not the things down in the basement."



Main Level Plan—Before



Main Level Plan—After

LOOKING AT THE HOUSE TODAY, with its clean lines, generous windows, and economical use of space, it's hard to imagine the disorder and mess that are part of any renovation. "I think we had the table saw in the living room for a couple of years, didn't we?" Rosemary asks Jim with a laugh. Friends and family learned to give them practical gifts. They got a toilet one Christmas; another time, a bathroom door.

Jim and Rosemary learned to be patient—sometimes redoing a project that they hadn't done right the first time, other times conceding defeat when their best-laid plans went awry. "We learned some things the hard way," says Jim. He refinished the maple floors in the living room twice before he would admit that they were too scarred to save. He also suffered his way through sheetrock taping, though he says he'd never do it again.



Corner windows in the four-person dining room help bring the outdoors inside. "Going to corner windows when you can makes a difference," says McMonigal. "They really enlarge the room."

Through it all they stuck to one golden rule: Get to the heart of the problem. "A lot of people like to redo the bathroom," Rosemary says. "To them that means buying a new sink or toilet and putting wall covering on the wall. But the plumbing might be leaking behind the toilet."

"Or the windows and doors don't work," says Jim. "Well, why don't they work? Because the house is sagging in the middle. You could go to the effort to fix that one window, but you've got to attack it from a different perspective."

"A lot of people buy a house, do a couple of cosmetic things, and think they've increased the value by tens of thousands of dollars. I wouldn't want to pay for something like that. I'd rather have a place where none of the defects have been hidden," he says.

Perhaps the biggest challenge was figuring out how to cram two busy lives into 880 square feet of space. That's where

Rosemary's professional expertise came in. "Being an architect, you're always trying to think of new ways to do things," she says. "But they're never new. You seldom reinvent the wheel."

Common sense and a few design tricks worked wonders in the box-shaped house. Strategically placed soffits around the living room offer a convenient place for recessed lighting and also make the room's ceiling seem higher than it is. Corner windows in the dining area open up that room to the outdoors. A five-by-seven-foot mirror runs the length and width of the wall above the sink in the tiny bathroom. A black lacquer finish on the living room cupboards gives the illusion of space and depth. "The other thing in a small house is not to change a lot of materials," Rosemary says. "So we've used the same tile in the foyer that's in the dining room. That's one of those things that helps the house flow together a little bit better. And when

we put wall covering up, rather than put one color in the entry, one in the living room, and one in the hallways, we just flowed the same neutral-colored wall covering throughout.

"Those are the nicest things—the design elements that you don't walk in and see right away. And yet, that's what makes the space feel comfortable."

FOR ALL OF THE TIME AND MONEY they have obviously sunk into their house, Jim and Rosemary get a bit argumentative when asked about return on investment. "I don't think houses are where you should go to make money," Rosemary says. "A house is to live in; it's a long-term investment."

"One of the things that disappoints us is to see housing going up that's not long term. Years ago when they built housing, it was meant to last 80 years. And now you see things getting built and in 15 years the

siding is buckling. We think the cheap way isn't the best way. We would rather see people not remodel than do it the wrong way."

"It costs more to remodel than it does to build new," says Jim. "That's true of any house in any neighborhood, I think."

In their case, it didn't hurt that Rosemary has contacts in the business—or that Jim was willing to do research and a lot of the work himself. When they did resort to hiring outside help, they knew how to make the contractors' jobs easier. "You have to follow through on things," says Jim. "You can't let it hang. When concrete was poured in the house and garage, there were something like 13 people on the job site. They didn't waste a minute, because we had everything ready for them. The building inspector was there to approve the job, and Rosemary and I were both good gofers."

The sum total of Jim and Rosemary's remodeling advice could fill several volumes. From rebuilding a roof to soundproofing their bedroom walls, from tearing out leaky plumbing in the bathroom to designing and adding a deck, from adding new windows throughout the house to sheetrocking and laying tile—they've done it all.

So what wisdom would they pass on to others? "Patience," Rosemary says. "What we did to stay married was divide up projects. And if you think it's going to take six weeks, it's probably going to take six more."

"Do your homework," says Jim. "Even planning the porch and deck, we had 10 or 12 designs before we settled on one. That simple-looking deck out there became quite an engineering feat, actually. That's 20-some feet that it extends out from this house."

Rosemary also stresses that landscaping should be considered part of the project. About a year before she and Jim finished work on the house, they hired a landscape architect for a few hours' worth of consultation. He walked the yard and gave them some pruning tips and ideas on planting. "It didn't cost an arm and a leg," she says, "but it was really good, quick advice."

Though Rosemary and Jim were flexible throughout the course of the eight-year project, they did work from a master plan. "The rooms were done one at a time while we were living in them," says Jim. "But there was a goal in sight, always. Things had to be done right, one way or another." ■