

THIS PHOTO: The dining nook provides easy access to the deck and its steps down to the backyard. The only access to the yard before the renovation was through the basement. BELOW: From outside, this rowhouse built in 1874 still fits perfectly in its historic neighborhood.



breathing room

With less clutter and less color, this Virginia mom discovers she has much more home.

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ABOVE: The new hearth surround in the front parlor is nearly flush with the wall for a clean line. To the far left, the line of sight continues to the back of the house. OPPOSITE: To avoid clutter, homeowner Deb Smulyan decorated with a small yet striking assortment of objects, including (clockwise from top left) a skull, hearth-mounted fireplace tools, a figure from an antiques store, and a Vitruvian flower vase.

Her historic townhouse was perfect—for a while. “I originally moved in as a single working woman,” homeowner Deb Smulyan says. “I was looking for a low-maintenance lifestyle, not a lot of yardwork. I wanted to walk to stores, have a sense of community, and make a good investment.” Deb got everything she wished for. Her garden was small. She navigated Old Town Alexandria, Virginia, on foot. Real estate soared. But when Deb adopted her daughter, everything was suddenly not enough.

“I didn’t have a bedroom for my daughter, or anywhere on the main floor for her to play safely within my line of sight,” Deb says. Unwilling to move, Deb chose to renovate. Once she made the decision, she thought it would be better to live elsewhere during the renovation process and rented an apartment.

This was a watershed moment: “My aesthetic came to me when I put 90 percent of our stuff in storage and didn’t miss a thing,” she says. “I felt functional and organized, not cluttered. I wanted to strip down.”

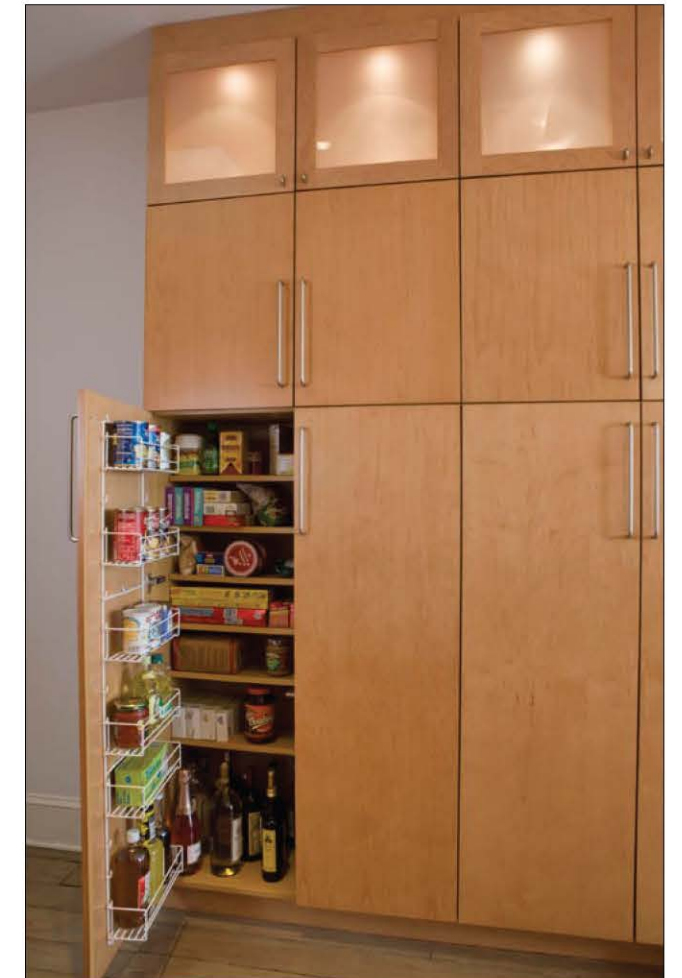
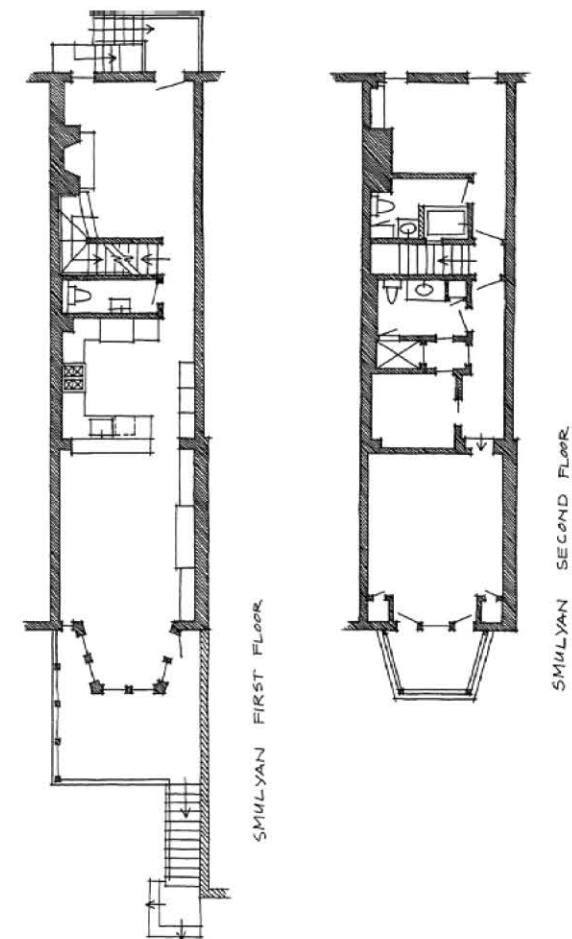
Deb adopted a design philosophy of clean continuity and simple lines. Working with her architect and contractor,

she first dispensed with visually distracting architectural elements. For example, in the front parlor, she took out the crown molding, fireplace mantel, and built-in bookshelf. Second, she painted the communal living spaces white and unified the new and old wood floors with a light pickled finish. Last, she added efficient custom storage, such as the pantry by the kitchen.





BELOW: "My pantry is tall, not deep," Deb says. "I want to know if I have olive oil, not miss three bottles that aren't visible."
OPPOSITE: "If you don't have visual breaks, the space looks bigger," Deb says of her seamless kitchen. She chose wood for warmth and stainless steel for durability.



The family room, once a dining room filled with furniture, became a sparsely furnished multipurpose area. "I had a dinner party once a year," Deb says. "I have my child 365 days a year!"

When toys go in a white cabinet that blends seamlessly into the wall, the space transforms from playroom to adult gathering area. At one end of the family room, a new dining nook, designed into a bay of windows, opens to a deck, while also functioning as a sunny work space. A breakfast bar at the other end of the family room abuts the kitchen, where Deb cooks while watching her daughter play.

"The old kitchen was fine," Deb says, "but I wanted it to be a part of the new coherent whole." The former space had white cabinets, some glass-paned, that stopped short of the ceiling. "There were lots of jarring endings," Deb says. "I wanted a sense of things connecting."

Warm maple cabinetry now panels the kitchen from top to bottom. Linear stainless-steel pulls accent the wood, complemented also by smooth stainless-steel appliances

LETTING IN THE LIGHT

When an upper-level addition covered the original family room skylight, homeowner Deb Smulyan became concerned. "The longer the rowhouse, the less natural light can travel in from the front and back walls," she says. "The net effect is the house is dark in the middle." Here's how she solved the problem:

- In the family room at the back of the main level, she added a bay of windows, a glass door, and a sidelight.
- The new master bedroom has one wall composed almost entirely of French doors.
- The second bedroom, for Deb's daughter, has two large street-facing windows, both fitted with safety locks.
- A light well runs through the center of the house. Natural light falls through cut-out arches into the kitchen, upstairs hall, and master bathroom.
- The skylight above the stairwell remains unaltered.



ABOVE LEFT: Purchased online, the bed has storage shelves and drawers in its base. ABOVE RIGHT: In the hall leading to the new master bedroom, the paned window in the arch leading to the light well is a child-safety feature that will eventually come out. OPPOSITE: In the new master bedroom, the architect addressed storage with built-in linen closets, while natural light flows in through French doors.

and backsplashes. “I now have almost wall-to-wall storage throughout the space,” Deb says, “yet the configuration stayed the same.”

Upstairs, the layout changed completely. A floor that consisted of a single bedroom, closet, and bathroom had to accommodate more. But there simply was not enough square footage. The architect extended the upper story over the family room to create the master bedroom and reconfigured the rest of the space.

Deb got a master bathroom and walk-in closet, while her daughter has her own bedroom and bathroom. In the middle of the lengthened home, a light well diffuses natural light to both floors. “I gave up the space because I don’t like a house that’s always artificially lit,” Deb says.

To decorate her renovated home, Deb enlisted design consultant Tamara Saltonstall. “I was looking for ways to bridge gaps, marry the past with the present, adapt organic elements into a contemporary look,” Deb says. Saltonstall helped Deb fine-tune the design ideas she had acquired during construction. The success of the partnership is evident, from the Georgia O’Keeffe-inspired skull above the front parlor hearth to the barely-there drum light over the table in the dining nook.

“When we reopened for business as a family, the house had such a wonderful fresh feeling,” Deb says. “It was not so much a fresh start, but more that I could breathe.” ■

For more information, see Resources on page 118.



voice of experience

Consider the View

If you’re looking to add on, be sure to include sight lines among the criteria for selecting the position of your addition. In this case, the Board of Architectural Review in Alexandria, Virginia, has very strict rules, so homeowner Deb Smulyan didn’t have many options. But her new master bedroom, with its French doors and small deck, is ideally situated to capture morning sun and stunning views of neighboring homes and the Potomac River.

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