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# Updating a Shotgun Flat

by Tom Marquardt

A Chicago designer finds ingenious ways to squeeze more elbow room from a cramped footprint

When I bought an early 20th century commercial three-flat in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood (1), the goal was to put our architectural design studio on the ground floor, rent out the second-floor apartment, and live on

the third floor. Such live/work arrangements have been attracting quite a bit of interest in urban areas like ours, so I was excited to have the chance to adapt this building to modern standards.

The main challenge was the narrow footprint. The 900-square-foot third-floor flat is 51 feet long and just 19.5 feet wide, with the rooms stacked front to back. It was divided lengthwise by a bearing wall into 8-foot and 11.5-foot proportions (2). On the wider side were the living and dining areas, a bathroom next to a narrow passageway, and the kitchen; the narrow side contained a den, the



building stairwell, a pantry, two closets, and two bedrooms no bigger than suburban walk-in closets — 8 feet by 11 feet and 8 feet by 7.5 feet (3).

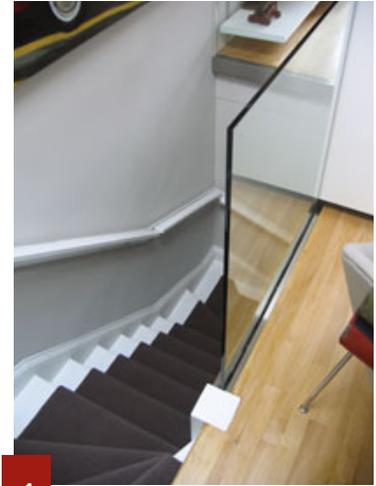
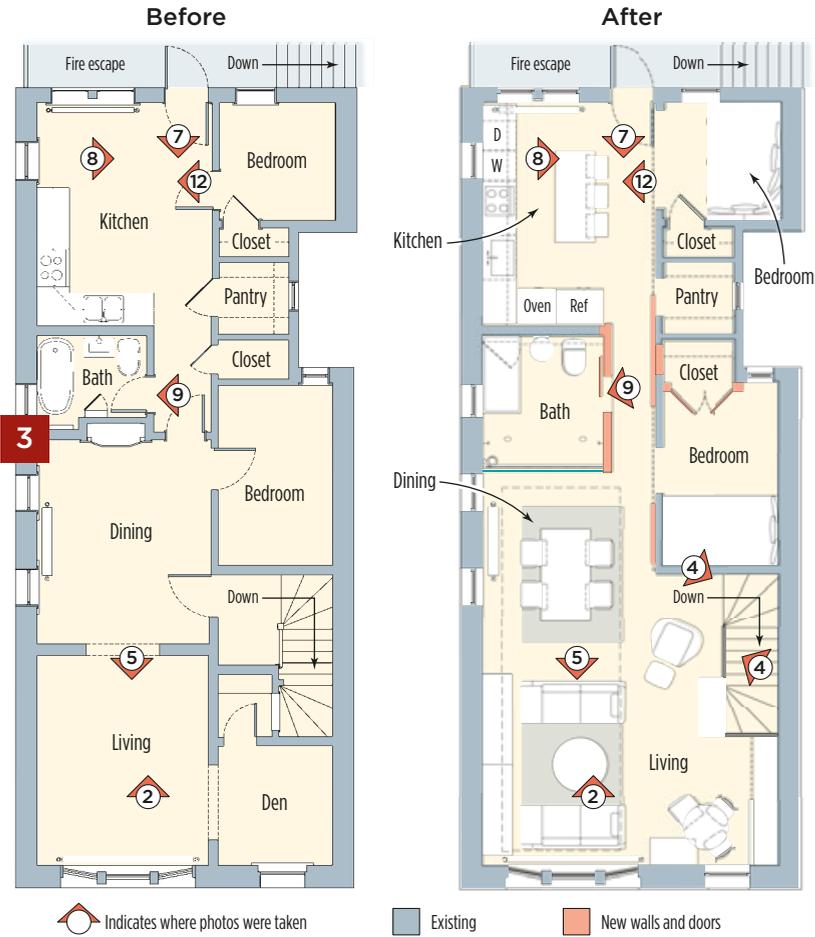
Our goal was to increase light, create a feeling of openness, and add storage. We accomplished this by opening up walls and using mirrors, larger windows where possible, and light paint colors. (Most of the apartment is painted Sherwin-Williams 1017, Garbo Silver, which seems to shift between a very light grey and beige, depending on light levels.)

## Front to Back

To open up the front of the apartment, we removed the archways separating the dining, living, and den areas. We also tore out the wall between the living area and the stairwell and moved an original six-panel oak entry door and transom down to the second-floor landing. This brought in lots of light from the existing stairwell skylight (4) and made the entire front of the apartment into one big space (5).

With the plaster, lathe, and insulation removed, we discovered that the ceiling joists across the front space were hard-

# Third-Floor Apartment



wood 2x4s, so removing the front section of the bearing wall would require a new support scheme. Since we wanted to avoid the expense of installing new joists, our builders, Mike and Dan Degan of Thorne Contracting, came up with a good solution. Between the 2x4s and the roof joists was a narrow access space, and here they

put an LVL beam, from which they hung the ceiling joists (6). To install the beam, they cut it to length, lifted it up between the joists and turned it perpendicular, and secured it to 4x4 posts framed into the walls at either end. The entire process took about half a day.

The back of the apartment posed more

of a challenge. Much of our business is for commercial clients — showrooms, retail spaces, offices, and restaurants — and some of the lessons learned on those projects came in handy here. For instance, there was no practical way to enlarge either of the small bedrooms, which were bounded by two exterior walls, the stair-





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well, and the narrow hallway. We compensated by opening these two rooms up to the adjacent spaces. Rather than standard residential doorways, we created 9-foot-high openings (out of a 10-foot ceiling height), with widths of 7 feet 6 inches for the rear bedroom, 2 feet 7 inches for the pantry, and 4 feet for the front bedroom.

We also added two sliding MDF doors on a 30-foot length of galvanized barn-door hardware, so that each space can be closed off for privacy or opened up for elbow room (7). For instance, the rear bedroom next to the kitchen has just enough space for a bed and a tiny closet, but by opening the wall we made it part of the kitchen (8). This offers not just a sense of spaciousness but an actual area for guests to sit in. A flat-screen TV on the bedroom wall is perfectly placed for the cook to watch it.

As for storage, the beds are both built-in platforms with independent full-depth storage boxes that roll out from underneath on casters. The former hall closet has been



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made part of the front bedroom. A tall opening to the pantry makes the entire floor-to-ceiling storage area more accessible.

### The Bath

Although making the bedrooms bigger wasn't possible, enlarging the bath was. We took one foot from the hallway and expanded the bath 3 feet toward the front of the apartment. The bath's front wall is now textured translucent glass, which spreads natural light during the day and, when the bathroom lights are turned on, provides accent lighting to the living area at night (9).

The bathroom floor was supposed to be flush with the hallway, but we couldn't get all the plumbing into the joist space, so we raised the floor 7 inches (10), building in a gentle slope to direct water runoff to a linear trough drain along the glass wall. This simplified the tile installation and transformed the bath into an open wet space with no shower stall (11).



### The Kitchen

People always seem to end up in the kitchen, so even though this one was very small, it needed to be a comfortable place for guests to hang out and convenient for the cook. Since expanding it wasn't an option, we decided to design it for multiple uses (12). The washer and dryer are beneath the wall counter, the island provides a place to fold clothes, and — as mentioned above — the guest bedroom can double as a seating area.

To control costs, we approached the kitchen much as we would a commercial job. For instance, the island is a stainless steel prep table, with enough room to seat four people while two others cook. And our fabricator created 15 feet of stainless



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steel counter with an integrated back-splash and sink.

I like stainless steel because it has some give and can take heat; I don't have to worry about damaging the surface with a hot pan, or chipping a cup that I put down too hard. Because people expect residential kitchen surfaces to have a solid feel, we wrapped each of the stainless tops around a wood core to dull any loud, hollow sounds during use.

Also from the commercial side, we used a floating ceiling plane, suspended on wires with kickers to keep it from moving. Inexpensive brackets and standard wire shelving make dishes easy for the cook to access. The wall cabinets are a KI office panel system (ki.com) with built-in lighting; they're inexpensive compared with conventional kitchen cabinets and have an easy-access opening — though a friend says they remind him of the overhead bins on an airliner. The drawers beneath the long counter are actually Herman Miller Meridian (hermanmiller.com) commercial file cabinets. We placed a plant box in the window sill to block the view of the roof next door while still letting in the daylight.

Nothing is built in. The island is free-standing, and the shelves and cabinets are clipped in place. This makes it easy to pull things out and replace them, whether

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to reconfigure the kitchen for a rental or to stage it for a sale.

What are the lessons from this project? One is that while people want big bedrooms, you can compensate with a bigger bath, a more inviting public area, and built-in storage — and by thinking more broadly about product options.

The larger lesson is that you can live well in a small space. Why build 3,000 square feet when you can build half that and live or work just as comfortably? Designing within a limited footprint takes imagination, but if you're flexible in your approach it's amazing what becomes possible.

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