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Seeing double: A shared courtyard unites a pair of infill houses

By Ruth Mullen

It was her love of the ancient, hidden courtyards of Beijing that planted the seed.

She returned home after living and working in China for a year (1996-97) with a renewed passion for architecture and an appreciation for the casual social interaction that can arise from good design.

“You go down these long alleys called *hutongs* and there’s a simple doorway that opens onto a hidden paradise of greenery.”

So when a two-bedroom bungalow next door to her went up for sale eight years ago, Margaret Davis pounced on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity tucked behind the blue stucco home. Smack-dab in the middle of trendy Beaumont and behind the little house was 8,600 square feet of land — two interior landlocked lots that were just crying out for some creative infill.

Davis bought the bungalow for \$285,000 and then sold her house next door. During the brief time she owned both houses, she established an easement between the two, providing access to the land behind them.

There she would build a live/work space for herself and a second house to sell. The two homes would look out onto a shared courtyard, similar to what she’d seen in China.

Modern design

This then-thirtysomething tango aficionada with no development experience had the vision -- and the chutzpah -- to successfully pull off the project. She also credits her architect, Francis Dardis; builder, David Rush; and landscape architect, Pat Lando, with the charming -- some might say astonishing -- result.

“I really like little bungalows, but I was sick of fixing stuff,” says Davis, who has long been a fan of Modern architecture.

Her team of professionals embraced the chance to do something different.

“It was really thrilling to be a part of it,” says Dardis, of FBD Architecture. “I was on a leash for sure, but it was a pretty long one.”

In fact, their only major constraint was a budget of \$580,000 for the two houses, which required them to be creative -- and frugal.

Davis’ home was tailored to her hobbies and her professional bookbinding business, with living space upstairs. Facing it across the courtyard would be the four-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath spec house.

Between them, Lando was to create a low-maintenance, drought-tolerant landscape that would provide a shared greenspace; that “paradise of greenery,” so to speak.

“That whole garden area was really a blank slate,” says Lando. “We didn’t want to put up any fences because we didn’t want to see the property lines.”

They opted for a grove of fast-growing aspens to bring down the scale of the two houses, as well as a large shared bioswale to absorb storm-water runoff. Mass plantings of ornamental grasses and concrete benches and stools offered privacy between houses as well as communal gathering spaces.

Some neighbors complained about such Modern structures plunked down in the heart of an established, pre-1940s neighborhood, but Davis says most detractors settled down after the courtyard landscape went in.

She sold the 1,900-square-foot spec house to a young couple in 2005 for \$408,000 within a week of putting it on the market.

A year later, the wife's parents bought the little blue bungalow for \$285,000.

Built-in community

Today, the three households have the built-in, multi-generational community that Davis so admired about the ancient courtyard dwellings of China. "We eat dinner at each other's houses; we watch each other's children," she says. "But we also have the option of being very private, too."

For her own home, Davis worked closely with Dardis and Rush to design a 2,200-square-foot, one-bedroom residence. That meant putting her dance studio and bookbinding workshop on the ground floor, with two pairs of roll-up garage-style doors that open onto garden spaces.

Underneath the bamboo floor on the main level she requested the rubber bumpers used in commercial gym floors. "It's like floating when you're dancing," she says.

And once the garage doors are rolled up, the walls disappear, and Davis can easily triple the dance space with overflow onto two outdoor patios.

She rejected high-end finishes such as slab-stone countertops, flashy appliances and fancy cedar siding. Instead, she chose sturdy but inexpensive materials, such as laminate counters, wheatboard floors and HardiePanel fiber-cement siding.

When you're working on a tight budget, she says, these kinds of options make all the difference. They also left money for her sleek bamboo cabinets and Modern light fixtures. "Margaret has good taste," says Rush. "And we know how to find inexpensive materials and make them look good."

The living space and master bedroom are on the second floor -- a large open area flooded with light and wrapped with a balcony for lounging, dining and cooking.

The aspen grove in the central courtyard, now leafy and mature, provides ample privacy between the two houses, as well as a fluttering screen of blue-tinged foliage that dips and bends in the breeze.

Davis was about three-fourths done with her dream house when she met her husband, Brian; they married in 2006. Now the couple have a 3-month-old son, Roy, and life couldn't be better.

Except, of course, that her oh-so-precise floor plan, which came together over a year of weekly meetings with her architect, is now for naught.

Today, her office has become the nursery, the bamboo dance floor doubles as a playscape, and "we're looking at buying a lot of baby gates," she says ruefully. Still, she loves every inch of the place. "Now that I'm spending a lot more time at home, I appreciate every detail," she says. "You know how architecture can ease your life? I feel like that has happened."

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