

PHILADELPHIA, PA

before
&
after

PRODUCED BY LINDA WHITMARSH PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM CRANE WRITTEN BY JUDY WEST

spareroom

Undaunted by the slim footprint of her historic home, a designer makes the most of a tight squeeze



Designer Robin Detweiler Altepfel, for the simple charm of an 1880s home, then modernized it without adding on. A clear line of sight makes the once-dark living areas on the first floor, inset above, feel larger.

before & after



As soon as Robin Detweiler Allen set eyes on the simple stone farmhouse in a leafy neighborhood of Philadelphia, she knew she wanted to live there. An architectural and interior designer, Robin fell in love with the deep windowsills and pretty old radiators, as well as the promise of a more relaxed lifestyle. After 15 hectic years in

Manhattan, she was ready to slacken her pace and return with her husband, David Allen, and their two young children to the streets where she grew up.

Though the three-story 1880s house was structurally sound, Robin knew the

inside needed revamping for her modern family. She found its 2,361 square feet cramped and dark, with even less closet space than she'd had in New York City. The first floor spoke eloquently of a different era, with a

Inset top The old kitchen was jammed into a tiny space at the back of the home.

Above Robin moved it to the middle of the house, where a modern farmhouse kitchen now fills what was once the dining room. It's a pleasure to cook in a space brightened with white beadboard, light-colored wood, and streamlined open shelving.



Left and above The dining room became a spacious kitchen in the middle of the house. **Below** The old kitchen at the back of the house, inset left, gave way to Robin's new office. A deck leads into the kitchen.

spacious dining room taking up prime real estate at the center of the house and a tiny kitchen wedged at the back. The living room was long and thin, and divided into two seating areas, neither of which felt particularly comfortable.

from the beginning, Robin's vision for the house was clear, but she brainstormed with Jeff Krieger, who acted as architect of record, to sort out the details. "We toyed with the idea of a two-story addition out back," says Krieger, "but the lot is very small, so we left the footprint intact and restructured the rear wing of the house to remain within the existing envelope."

Because Robin and David like to cook, bringing the kitchen to center

Robin stained her floors dark as ebony. "I'm crazy about dark floors," she says. "They're like jewelry to me"



before



after



Left To liven up the master bedroom, Robin added sheer drapes, bold shapes, and a mix of neutral and saturated colors. **Above** The old bedroom had good windows but no pizzazz.

Thinking about going modern in an old home? Here are some pointers from designer-owner Robin Detweiler Allen:

- **Listen to your house** "The architecture dictates what you can do with an interior," Robin says, "and since this house had very simple lines, I knew modern furniture could work well here, if I just cleaned up the space."
- **Be bold** Tangy apple green walls make a modern statement in Robin's living room, while shots of vivid red—a rich russet kilim here, a scarlet designer cushion there—perk up the modern neutral furnishings.
- **Lighten up** Using lighter window treatments can take years off your house. Robin has translucent solar shades in the living room, unlined wool panels in the master bedroom.

Push the envelope: Why not restructure your space? If you don't need a dining room, lose it. If the bathroom's in the wrong place, move it

stage was a top priority. They achieved that by making the former dining room her new kitchen and putting the dining room table in the living room. "In New York, I was used to rooms that were more multifunctional," says Robin, "so it made sense to do this."

For her new kitchen, Robin came up with a fresh, contemporary look that she calls farmhouse modern. Extrawide white beadboard, laid horizontally, lends a nautical air to the space inspired, says Robin, by trips to

the Maine coast. Local cabinetmaker Jim Arthur extended the effect to custom cabinets, which meet the ceiling with simple, elegant molding.

between the kitchen windows, Robin decided to install no-fuss open shelving, which she says reminds her of the family's house in Maine and keeps favorite bowls within reach. Her pragmatic side opted for pale gray

quartz composite countertops. "It's less expensive than granite, and it has the look of concrete, with extra durability," she says. French doors that open out to a new wooden deck and a garden bring light flooding in, and



Robin gave her aging house a new lease on life, but there is still antique appeal in the wavy glass windows, the occasional creaking floorboard

a 1950s blond rosewood bar and stools keep things streamlined and simple.

To comfortably accommodate the dining room table in the living room, Robin built an arched passage to the kitchen a few feet to the left of the original rectangular opening, allowing the spaces to flow into one another more gracefully. This

move also yielded a wider expanse of wall to anchor the dining room table and chairs. The old kitchen now functions as Robin's office, though she happily gave up part of the space for a walk-in pantry, where she says she stores "so much junk it's embarrassing."

Robin refreshed the living-dining room walls with tangy apple green paint. The lounge area, now smaller

Inset top The third floor of the house had been finished, but the drab den was hardly worth the climb. **Above** With Robin's expert touch, Hawaiian-print pillows and robin's-egg blue paint inside the built-in bookcases cheered up the room, turning it into a favorite spot for relaxing and watching television.



Left The master bathroom and a dressing room were carved out of the former guest bedroom. An old closet and bathroom were sacrificed to make way for a sunny child's bedroom.

Above The doorways to the master bedroom and child's room were moved a few feet to align them, creating axial views and infusing a dark corridor with light. See Resource Guide for details.

and better defined, sports a neutral sofa and armchairs jazzed up with bold Jonathan Adler pillows. A Bessarabian kilim, a mid-century modern liquor cabinet, and a late-1800s Chinese wardrobe complete the eclectic decor. Oak floors, stained dark as ebony, weave the rooms together. "In a small house," says Robin, "you don't want to chop up the spaces; you want some uniformity to pull it all together."

Upstairs, Robin confronted a "pitch-black" hallway, with the master bedroom at one end, the bathroom at the other, and she attacked the problem with characteristic can-do logic. "She had a lot of very good, very clear ideas

"If you can see through the house, your eyes just keep going and it seems bigger," says Robin, who realigned doorways on two floors to get this effect

about how she wanted these spaces to connect," says Krieger. Since Robin and David would share this floor with their children, the bathroom would have to be close to both bedrooms. With so little storage space, Robin knew that a dressing room for her and David was also a necessity. By turning the bathroom and a closet into a child's room, then dividing the middle bedroom into a bathroom and dressing room, Robin got her master bedroom suite. Her son got a cozy, sun-filled

bedroom with windows overlooking the picket-fenced backyard.

Robin gave the dark, inhospitable upstairs hallway the Cinderella treatment, realigning the two bedroom doorways a few feet so they directly face each other. This created a clear line of sight and sunlight from one end of the corridor to the other. "It's really a light issue up here," says Robin, "but it's also a view issue and a space issue. It just makes the whole house feel more open." 