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HOUSE PROUD

## Designing a House to Save a Tree

By [FRED A. BERNSTEIN](#)

IF Margarita McGrath and Scott Oliver had simply cut down the tree, they would have had room to build a large house — large, at least by New York standards. But they couldn't do it.

For one thing, the maple tree in front of their house in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn had lived far longer than either Ms. McGrath, 41, or Mr. Oliver, 47. For decades, it had dominated the front of the tiny row house on Adelphi Street that they decided to buy in 2001. They are both architects, and at the time, they were considering a major renovation, both to enlarge the house and to show off their design skills. But after 9/11, unsure how much work there would be for architects, they began a more modest renovation.

Other houses on the street were built right up to the sidewalk, and there was no law stopping Ms. McGrath and Mr. Oliver from bringing the front of their house forward. But while the tree diminished the potential size of the house, it also gave the couple a private vest-pocket park. That didn't strike them as something that should be casually destroyed. "We always knew in our gut that it wasn't the house, but the tree and the space in front that made it special," Ms. McGrath said.

The tree also offered some very practical benefits. Its position at the southeast corner of the site meant that the house was shaded in summer, at least until the middle of the afternoon. In winter, with the leaves down, sunlight poured through south- and east-facing windows.

So, rather than take the path chosen by so many developers and homeowners in their neighborhood, they decided not to build as high and as deep as legally allowed. While some buildings are being enlarged to capitalize on views of Manhattan, they chose instead to capture views of a tree growing in Brooklyn.

When Ms. McGrath and Mr. Oliver closed on the house in the beginning of 2002, the tree was barely visible from inside. To let in the light and provide views of the trees, they replaced small double-hung windows with the aluminum-framed casement windows more typical of commercial buildings. Inside, they stripped the house to its bones. On the outside, they peeled away layers of wood siding, asphalt and vinyl, and put on a new cladding of concrete panels. They carved out a duplex for themselves that is just 600 square feet. (They also reserved 400 square feet for a rental in the back.) At that size, architecture becomes a kind of furniture design, as if Ms. McGrath and Mr. Oliver were creating a cabinet to live in.

Their first floor contains a foyer, closets and a bed that feels as if it is right under the tree. Upstairs are the

living and dining rooms and a bright kitchen and bathroom set against the back wall of the house. There is also a "mezzanine" guest room — really a platform suspended over the kitchen cabinets and bathroom ceiling. (The security bars across the back wall of the kitchen double as a ladder to the guest bed.)

In the back they built a deck, fitted with a table that cantilevers out over the small yard separating the house from the rear of a bodega. The architects worked to make the diminutive rooms feel open. Much of the bedroom ceiling is a metal grate that forms part of the living room floor; similarly, the ceiling of the bathroom is a glass panel that allows light to flow through the "guest room."

The architects call their creation a "vertical loft," which seems an accurate description of a space in which connections between rooms are overhead and underfoot. The cut-out ceilings also mean that they can see the tree from almost every point in the house. "Since we weren't maximizing building area, we maximized what we get from the tree," Mr. Oliver said.

As much archaeologists as architects, they took the house apart slowly, retaining as much of the original structure as they could. After demolition revealed a wall of handmade bricks, probably pre-Civil War, they decided to leave it exposed. "It gave the place an identity," Ms. McGrath said. And when they found that one of the roof beams was cracked, they had an excuse to build a new roof — high enough to let them insert clerestory windows that track the sun as it moves along the south side of the building.

Until then, the second-floor ceiling was less than seven feet high. "It was like 'Being John Malkovich,' " Ms. McGrath said, referring to the film in which significant events took place in half a story.

Ms. McGrath and Mr. Oliver met while both were graduate students at the [University of California](#), Los Angeles. After marrying in 1996, they moved to Korea, where they worked in architecture offices and taught. The souvenirs of their trip include several multipurpose wooden platforms that they use in their living room.

Few other pieces in the house were bought readymade. More often, the couple began with available components, then improvised, the way a jazz musician might riff on a familiar tune. The three metal shelving units in the dining area were purchased at Tri-Boro Shelving in Williamsburg. But the couple added sheets of birch plywood from Metropolitan Lumber cantilevered out from the metal shelves to add both surface area and architectural complexity. To turn one of the units into a pantry closet, they added a sliding door of Masonite from Home Depot, covered in chalkboard paint (by Benjamin Moore). The tracks for the slider are from Häfele, the German manufacturer of high-end hardware, and the aluminum trim that hides the tracks is from Hatco in Jamaica, Queens. The units have feet from McMaster-Carr in New Jersey and bookends custom-made by B&B Sheet Metal of Long Island City.

That adds up to eight sources for one piece of furniture. The mix-and-match approach saved money, but also meant that the renovation, like a complex jigsaw puzzle, took more than two years to complete. The project cost the couple about \$135 a square foot, probably half what a typical homeowner would end up paying for similar work. They saved a lot of money by doing some of the labor themselves, transporting

the materials, and allowing some subcontractors to use materials they had on hand.

Their house was recently included in an exhibition on contemporary architecture in Fort Greene curated by Annie Coggan, a Brooklyn architect. "They've showed that modernism can involve just as much fine craftsmanship as the restoration of a historic brownstone," Ms. Coggan said. And, she added, they have shown "a brave model of restraint" in a neighborhood where people are trying to build every inch allowable.

Ms. McGrath and Mr. Oliver call their architecture firm Noroof, in part because it exists largely on their laptop computers. They both have other jobs, Mr. Oliver as a senior designer at Gruzen Samton, a large Manhattan architecture firm, and Ms. McGrath teaching architecture at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, where she found the black locust boards used as flooring throughout much of the Brooklyn house.

Roofless or not, the couple has a canopy of leaves to shelter them in Brooklyn. Protecting the noble maple is a high priority for Mr. Oliver and Ms. McGrath, who were pleased one day to come home and find that the city had given it a "shot" to protect it from Asian beetles. That made sense to them. "It's really everybody's tree," Ms. McGrath said.

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