



Enlightening the Row House

By Carol Venolia

Scott Sanders had rented the same Washington, D.C., townhouse for seven years, so when he finally bought it he knew just what to do first: Enliven the tiny backyard and renovate the dingy kitchen. But those improvements made such an impact, Scott couldn't stop there. One project led to another, and soon a complete renovation was under way.

Scott's home is a two-story, 1,100-square-foot, 100-year-old row house in Washington's diverse and historic Adams-Morgan district. With two long, windowless common walls and no room to expand, Scott, a communications consultant, knew he would need help to make it more livable. He called in Rick Harlan Schneider of Inscape Studio who worked with the site's sunlight, breezes, walls and wildlife to create a light, open, outdoors-oriented home.

Phase one: [The kitchen and patio](#)

Scott and Schneider first met with plans to discuss two separate projects: the patio and the kitchen. But, Schneider says, "We quickly realized that, because these two spaces were only separated by a wall, we should think of them as a whole. How do you flow from the kitchen to the patio, open up the kitchen and make a patio that feels like an extension of the house?"

Schneider started by opening up the south-facing kitchen wall with double French doors and operable windows. Then he raised the patio so Scott could walk straight from his kitchen into the new outdoor room. Inside, Schneider reconfigured the small kitchen to gain more storage, a workspace and an eating area, then modernized it with a cleaner look. Outside called for more dramatic measures.

"Scott wanted a garden space," Schneider says, "but there really wasn't enough area to plant things horizontally. So we came up with what we call his 'vertical gardens.'" A cedar fence brimming with potted plants and planter boxes surrounds Scott's new stone patio, improving the view from the kitchen and capturing rainwater at the same time. A patio fireplace with a custom grill functions as a cookstove in summer and a heat source in cooler seasons. A strip of pea gravel carries water runoff back into the ground.

Scott's only problem with his new space is easily remedied: His south-facing patio captures heat, a boon in cool weather but a challenge in hot D.C. summers. Scott plans to install a

canvas canopy system, which will allow him to block the summer sun from directly hitting the house.

"I really like being on the patio now," Scott says. "It's easier to take food in and out, so I eat out there much more. I'm more serious about gardening now, too, because it's so much more pleasant. Even the dogs spend more time outside; they like to lie on the long wooden steps in the sun."

Phase two: Living and dining

All that great light and storage in the kitchen made Scott yearn for more. Within a year, he'd called Schneider back in, and the two turned their attention to the living area. They took out the wall that separated the living and dining rooms, replacing it with hanging cabinets for Scott's pottery collection. The cabinets' open fronts and backs allow light through.

"The two major changes were the back wall and the wall between the living and dining rooms," Schneider says. "In both cases, we transformed walls that separated spaces and made them much more flexible so that spaces could join and flow. The idea was to make the walls do more—to have them serve multiple functions. Scott loves to entertain, too, so once we opened up those two walls, it was suddenly a lot easier for him to invite people over."

Phase three: Comfort

Scott had replaced his old furnace with a new, energy-efficient model before he began remodeling, but Schneider suggested having the ductwork and registers cleaned, repaired and, in some cases, replaced to improve energy efficiency and indoor air quality.

In the kitchen, where the bulk of the renovation was done, Schneider upgraded wall insulation levels to R-19. The roof insulation was good, but the roofing needed an upgrade, so Schneider suggested a light-colored membrane to cut back on solar heat gain; that step alone can reduce energy bills.

With an eye toward aesthetic comfort, color consultant Zoe Kyriacos helped Scott pick colors and patterns, using low-VOC (VOCs are volatile organic compounds that outgas) paints to maintain indoor air quality. "That was an incredibly smart investment," he says. "Zoe has a good eye, and she gave me the confidence to do things I'd only vaguely thought of. Between Rick and Zoe, this place looks significantly better than it would have if I'd done it myself. It really made a difference, having people who pay attention to the details."

Scott is delighted with the results. "It feels like a different house now, more like my house—and with a lot more storage space," he says. "The main difference is the link between indoors and out, which changed dramatically when we opened up the back of the house. It feels much lighter and more open."

Adapted from *Natural Remodeling for the Not-So-Green House: Bringing Your Home into Harmony with Nature*, by Carol Venolia and Kelly Lerner (Lark Books, 2006)

A Conversation with the Homeowner

Would you do anything differently?

Scott Sanders: I would put in skylights above the stairway to bring in more light. Rick and I talked about it, but I was worried about leaking. When I get a new roof, I'll add skylights.

If I had it all to do again, I would take out the old wood trim to reduce visual clutter—no six-panel doors, just flat doors. No trim around doors. It's nice to just have clean space.

And I love the glass tile in the upstairs bathroom, but I would have been happy with something less expensive; it's going to be hard to repair if it ever has to be changed.

I would also add UV protection to my windows. I didn't do it, and my kitchen cabinets have really changed color. If you're bringing in more light—which I highly recommend—I would also recommend filtering it.

How has your life changed since remodeling your home?

Scott: I spend more of my day outside.

Do you have advice for someone contemplating a green remodel?

Scott: Pay a lot of attention to both natural and installed lighting. It makes a huge difference. And pay attention to making the lighting strategies cohere throughout the house.

In choosing finish materials, pay attention to what's going to stand the test of time.

Work with professionals. I've learned the value of bringing in people who are knowledgeable in their fields.

What do you love most about your remodeled home?

Scott: The clean lines, and more light. A friend came in and said, "Your house is like a spa!"

What is your favorite space?

Scott: The back garden, especially in summer. When it's warm, I eat breakfast outside every morning.

The Good Stuff

- Low-E Pella windows and French doors
- Benjamin Moore EcoSpec low-VOC paint
- Forbo Marmoleum natural linoleum in kitchen and powder room
- Breakfast nook counter made of Vetrazzo recycled glass in cementitious matrix
- Energy Star appliances
- Energy-efficient fluorescent tubes in kitchen ceiling and halogen under cabinets
- Toto low-flush toilets in upstairs bathroom and powder room
- Living/dining room cabinets of formaldehyde-free MDF (medium-density fiberboard)
- Interface FLOR carpet squares made from recycled materials
- Lux Stone patio floor regionally sourced quarried stone from Virginia
- Patio fence posts nontoxic ACQ- and pressure-treated
- Patio fence made of sustainably harvested cedar
- Planter boxes and pea gravel to return rain to the groundwater on site

Architect: Rick Harlan Schneider, Inscape Studio, (202) 416-0333; www.InscapeStudio.com

Interior Designer: Scott Sanders

Color Consultant: Zoe Kyriacos, Colors by Zoe, (301) 270-0167; www.ColorsByZoe.com

Builder: Noah Blumberg, Ark Contracting, (301) 654-6642; www.ArkContracting.com

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Metalsmith Lauren Danley crafted a fireplace that functions as a cookstove and provides heat to extend the patio's usefulness into cooler seasons.

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