

# Total makeover

Jeanne Andrews' home, originally used by a doctor for receiving patients, was a warren of small, outdated rooms before her designer remade it.

SEPTEMBER 8, 2006 PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL PHILADELPHIA LIFE PAGE 12



## Breathing Room

A Chestnut Hill homeowner brings a space-constricted Victorian into the 21st century.

BY SEAN SCULLY, PHOTOS BY MIKE MERGEN

Philadelphia is awash in stately Victorian houses — sprawling showpieces of stone and wood that are often in high demand in both established and redeveloping neighborhoods.

There is, however, one big problem with them. The Victorians who built these houses had very different ideas

about how to live than today's home buyers.

"Although these houses tend to be very sizable, most certainly don't have a lot of large living spaces," says interior designer Michael Shannon, a 24-year veteran of the Philadelphia market. "Victorians were very private people. Their houses tended to be the sum of many small rooms."

Small dining rooms. Small parlors. Small bathrooms. Small bedrooms and dressing rooms. All with narrow hallways connecting them.

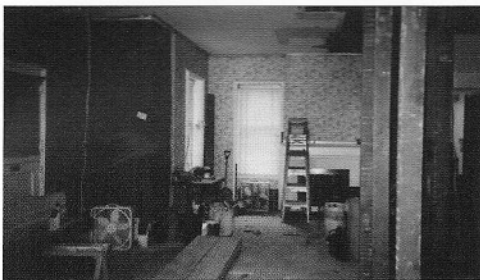
Those small, private spaces simply don't meet the desires of modern buy-

ers, Shannon says. Today's Americans increasingly demand big, airy spaces — open kitchens; living and dining rooms that flow into one another; rooms where families and friends can gather in large groups.

This was precisely the problem confronting Jeanne Andrews when she contacted Michael Shannon Designs in 2003, after owning the house for 12 years.

"We [didn't] have a lot of living or entertaining space," she recalls, "but a lot of chopped up little rooms."

An architect friend suggested that the problem wasn't a lack of space, but how it was used. She realized that changes to



MICHAEL SHANNON DESIGNS

Andrews' home at the start of renovation.

just a few walls could open up an entire wing of the house, transforming three rooms and two hallways from a warren of wasted Victorian space to an airy and modern living area.

Andrews came to Shannon with her request: Make the changes while preserving the general feel of her 1890 Victorian.

Today, she's happy with her decision. "It accomplished exactly what we wanted," she says, standing in the new den and informal dining room. "It gave us more living room and more entertaining space, but we did it while maintaining the integrity of the home."

The house, a typical Chestnut Hill



Designer Michael Shannon eliminated walls and relocated the rear staircase.

fieldstone gem located just a block off Germantown Pike, was built by a doctor. He designed the rear quarter of the house as a private office, with a side entrance, entry-hall, waiting room, examining room and private bathroom. At some point

in the last century, an owner modified the floor plan somewhat, adding an extra narrow hallway going back to a new mudroom in the rear and turning the examining room into a vast and incongruous bathroom, complete with a fireplace.

The result, Andrews said, was a huge amount of dark and useless space. The only really usable areas were the bathroom — which was nice and all, but absurdly large — and the old waiting room, which her daughter Katherine, then 7, had commandeered as a playroom.

"It was really a mess," Andrews confides. "It was time [for it] to go."

Shannon envisioned a fully open space, but he had a few challenges.

Jutting into the room on one side was an old servants' staircase to the second floor. Andrews didn't want to close it up and moving it would have been nearly impossible.

So he made it a virtue.



Complementary colors in tiles and rugs flow throughout the house. Cabinetmaker Arthur Works matched cabinets with the wainscoting.



He removed the hallway between the staircase and the adjacent kitchen, giving that space to the kitchen, and built a slight latticework to run up the side of the staircase on the new living room side. The latticework helps define the staircase, yet doesn't disrupt the visual flow in the open room.

He took a similar approach with the side entrance. He removed the entry hallway, but put latticework to the side of the door, preserving the Victorian idea of a discrete entry space without disrupting the openness of the room.

To preserve the character of the existing house, he matched the original hardwood flooring in the grand entry hallway with such care that a casual observer might not even notice the transition between the entryway floor and the new room, which passes through an open doorway.

For the woodwork, he turned to cabinetmaker Jim Arthur of Arthur Works in Conshohocken. Arthur custom-milled paneling to match the chestnut wainscoting in the main part of the house. It is possible to distinguish the old and new paneling, but it takes some effort, even where the two join.

The furniture and fixtures in the new room, and the built-in cabinetry that hides a TV and storage spaces, is all in the arts-and-crafts style, also known as mission style, which was popular during the late Victorian period when the house was built. The effect is a modern room that looks perfectly at home in its century-old environment.

"One of the things that's extremely important to me is that our work be respectful of the house," Shannon says. "The end product wants to feel like it's always been there."

That effect was important to Andrews as well.

"You wouldn't walk into this room and say, 'Whoa, you just had this room done,'" she says with pride.

The overall cost wasn't insignificant, though hardly prohibitive, either, considering the size and historic nature of the house — between \$200,000 and \$300,000. That includes everything: The construction, the fittings, the furniture, the new cabinets, and new television and electronics.

It's worth it, says Andrews. She and her now ex-husband bought the house in 1991 and spent years removing the results

of some shoddy previous renovations. That convinced her that it was worth doing the project carefully and fully.

"We didn't want to live that way either," she says about the prospect of doing less than a thorough job on the new room.

Although the renovation only affected a fraction of the huge house, it has changed the entire way Andrews and her daughter use their home.

The formal dining room and living room used to be where the family gathered. Now the rooms are hardly touched, because the new space is so inviting and livable.

And Katherine, now 10, got a new playroom on the third floor, where Andrews has installed some game tables.

"She didn't lose a playroom — she gained a little loft," Andrews says.

Both Andrews and Shannon, who keeps pictures of the project in his portfolio, rate the renovation a success.

Andrews says she is most pleased that the project maintained the original character of the house. It is something she will be proud to pass to a future owner.

"I do feel a sort of stewardship," she says, looking around the vast space. ■