

← Back to Original Article

SOLUTIONS

## Life on the flip side

*Turning the backyard into the entrance? What an inspired idea.*

February 16, 2006 | Morris Newman | Special to The Times

ELIZABETH TOOLE awoke in the middle of the night four years ago and told her husband: "The house should be turned around." Toole, a psychoanalyst, did not mean she wanted literally to rotate the Pasadena house that she shares with her husband Mark Hassan, also a psychoanalyst, and their two daughters. Instead, she wanted the backdoor to become the front door. In so doing, she set in motion a process that reversed the layout of the house.

The front entryway became a new laundry room, with washer, dryer and water heater. The living room became a master bedroom and walk-in closet. The kitchen became a family room.

Much of the backyard became a new front porch, living room, dining room and kitchen.

Only the children's bedrooms remained unchanged.

"We stood the floor plan on its head," said Dale Furman, the architect who designed the house. (Self-employed at the time of the design, he is now principal in the Irvine office of MulvannyG2 Architecture.) Even the address was changed.

Located on a steep, half-acre site at the end of a cul-de-sac, the house sits on a "pass-through" lot, facing streets both front and back.

This configuration made it possible to reorient the house without facing an alley or someone else's backyard.

The story of how the couple arrived at the unusual decision is an example of the lengths people are sometimes willing to go to create, or re-create, the spaces where they feel truly at home -- even if those decisions dictate a radical remodel.

Toole and Hassan have been notably restless in their pursuit of the perfect house. Twenty-five years ago, the couple combed Southern California from San Diego to Santa Barbara in search of a rolling green landscape that seemed most familiar to Toole, a Florida native.

After choosing Pasadena, the couple moved frequently, even by the nomadic standards of Southern California. They lived in no fewer than five homes of various sizes in the city, none of which suited them ideally.

In 2001, the couple settled on a modest, 1,900-square-foot traditional three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath house with some ranch styling near Johnston Lake in the San Rafael area. While undistinguished, the 1940s house and its half-acre lot had potential as a remodel.

Although initially unimpressed with the house, Hassan said he quickly changed his mind when he realized the house was the same age as his boyhood home in Westchester "that my parents sold and that I never wanted to leave."

"It smelled like 1949," he said of the new house. "Emotionally, I was very comfortable with it." Hassan was also delighted with the idea of living near Johnston Lake, a private pond with bass, white ducks and Canada geese.

"I want to pass by the lake every morning, and pass by it every evening," he said.

Toole's original wishes seemed simple: She wanted a gracious front porch and a big kitchen with lots of light. Those rooms would echo some spaces of the traditional Southern house in Florida where Toole spent her childhood.

Fulfilling these simple wishes, however, turned out to be a long process. The first architect consulted by the couple was affronted by Toole's request for a front porch, an architectural detail he apparently disliked. It did not seem to matter that Pasadena is full of ranch and Craftsman houses with porches.

The following Monday, the couple received the architect's retainer check in the mail. "He fired us," said Hassan.

Shortly after, they met with Furman, who proposed an addition at the side of the house.

After Toole's sudden midnight intuition to turn the house around, however, Hassan asked the new architect to consider the new approach, not without some trepidation. The design for a side addition had already been through plan check with the city.

"I was afraid he might be mad at us for making him change his design," said Hassan.

To his surprise, Furman was open to the suggestion. And the more the architect studied reversing the direction of the floor plan, the more he liked it.

Rather than being limited to an addition, "we were able to rethink and reorganize the entire house," Furman said. "It kind of breathed life into the whole project."

The homeowners gained several advantages by reorienting the house to the south. They now face a quiet residential street, rather than the constant traffic passing the former front.

With the new orientation, the family could sit on the porch and feel the breeze that flows up the hill from the lakefront, keeping the neighborhood 5 to 10 degrees cooler than the rest of Pasadena, according to Hassan.

Best of all, at least for the architect, the generous backyard gave him space to create a new wing of living room, dining room and kitchen, all fronted by a Southern-style porch.

"We were able to add what is essentially a new wing to the house, and give the house some old-fashioned formality," Furman said.

The small living room, which the architect calls a "parlor," lines up with the dining room. The latter's high ceiling and plentiful natural light make the room seem larger than it is.

The kitchen, arguably the most welcoming room, is a long space that includes a breakfast table. Above the sink is a bank of windows pushing out toward the front yard.

"There's so much outdoors visible," said Toole. "You feel like you are in a garden."

The new front is also a big improvement on the former front, according to the couple. The new facade is marked by a porch with white-painted wooden posts and handrails. Eight feet wide -- more typical of a Southern house than the narrow porches of the Craftsman style -- the broad porch is large enough for the family to dine outside.

The addition overall is detailed simply, if tastefully. "We spent our money on space, not on design paraphernalia," Hassan said. A considerable amount was spent on the foundation and engineering the new driveway.

For his part, Furman is pleased that his client was strong-minded enough to turn the house around. Drawing on the ideas of the architect and theorist Robert Venturi, Furman said, "In a little house, make a big gesture."