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JEFFREY WYANT

BRIDGE TO THE PAST

BY BRIDGET MCQUATE
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ROWHOUSE ADDITION EMBRACES AN INDUSTRIAL RUIN IN THE BACKYARD



Above: New and old blend where an enclosed garden meets an addition to a Fairmount rowhouse. *Inset:* The back yard before construction.



A steel door/window unit opens into the addition.

When the young couple and their four children moved into the "Centennial house," a stately rowhouse built in 1876 in the city's Fairmount section, they were intrigued by the home's unique backyard feature: a "secret garden" fashioned within the ruins of an old cement factory.

The triangular-shaped, three-story factory dating back to the 1860s was closed down by 1938 and eventually became a dilapidated shell surrounded by three blocks of homes. The former owners of the Centennial house had invested in knocking down the factory's top two floors, transforming an eyesore into a focal point ... a gem of a garden inside the roofless wedge of brick walls still standing.

For the new owners, the issue became how to soften the appearance of the backyard ruins and, at the same time, make more space on their home's first floor for their four growing children. They called in Jeffrey Wyant, AIA, of Wyant Architecture to solve the problem.

SUPPORT FROM WITHIN

Wyant and the owners agreed the solution was to dismantle an inefficient existing sunroom and create an addition that would extend the house to more directly engage the garden space. Wyant recalls the challenge. "We had to shoehorn the new addition into a very tight space. We were working between the old factory wall and the house, with two old stone walls on each side — both at different angles."

Due to the exceptional circumstances of the site, the architect had to support the addition from within by a large structural beam. The exposed beam, supported by one interior pillar and one in the garden, is clad in Douglas fir and studded with antique screws salvaged from an old building. Wyant says, "Instead of impeding the design to support the structural necessities, we enhanced the project by expressing the structural foundations through the proper use of finished materials."

When the addition was complete, the house flowed seamlessly from the existing kitchen through the new space and out into the garden. Now, when you walk out the back door, you are standing in the enclosed garden space — not in a cement backyard staring at an old ruin wall. Wyant chose to retain the industrial feeling of the historic factory by replacing the old window with new wooden sills and fitting a steel door/window unit into the factory-sized door opening. A pergola was attached to the garden wall to further blend the new with the-old.



The addition focal point is a floor-to-ceiling view of the garden.



Jeffrey Wyant

EMBRACING THE PAST

The addition, built by Hanson General Contracting, supports four distinct uses within one very spacious and warmly lit area. The kitchen is now joined with a new informal dining room. The dining area is connected to the new family room, now furnished with a sofa, chairs, a television and built-in wooden cabinets and shelves. Tucked away at the end of the addition is a loft office space with a view through the factory window into the garden. A mud room below the loft provides a place for kids' coats, shoes and play equipment, stored in lockers.

By embracing the past instead of turning away from it, this project sets a great example for other city dwellers. It also demonstrates that the most vexing challenges often produce the most creative results.

Bridget McQuate is a Philadelphia freelance writer and the editor of The Philadelphia Architect, the monthly newspaper of the American Institute of Architects, Philadelphia Chapter.