

little house in the city

living small within city limits



marc vassallo

“We don’t have a large, sweeping view or direct sunlight, but we have a little ‘forest,’ like you’d have at a place in the Berkshires or Adirondacks.”

—Brad Zizmor, architect and homeowner

designer and builder
J.A.S. DESIGN BUILD

location
SEATTLE



sisters in the city

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The house engages the street with an extra-wide walkway to the front steps. The sisters use the public sidewalk to reach their backyard or their street-facing bike shed. Should they bump into a neighbor along the way, well, that’s the point.

twin sisters Mary and Melinda lived in large suburban houses when they decided to pare down and find a small city house to share during their later years. They called on their close friends, Kim Clements and Joe Schneider, owners of J.A.S. Design Build. Kim and Joe pointed the sisters to a bungalow for sale across the street from the J.A.S. office, the perfect spot for a new life in the city, even though the house was a wreck. Mary and Melinda bought the house with confidence, trusting that J.A.S. could refashion it into a simple home for two sisters who, above all else, love to cook and enjoy good food with family and friends.

Kim and Joe run J.A.S. from a vintage brick storefront in Seattle’s Wallingford neighborhood, a block from their own house. Wallingford is experiencing a boom in the construction of large apartment buildings, but it’s still chock-full of Craftsman houses and bungalows, many with views south across Lake Union to downtown Seattle. Kim and Joe are passionate about sustaining the spirit of city neighborhoods like theirs, not by stopping growth—they’re believers in urban density—but by

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ABOVE LEFT: Slats of ipe wood add warmth inside and out. By extending past the sliding glass doors, the slats visually connect the indoor living spaces and the deck. The gaps between the slats allow the walls to function as a shelving support system.

ABOVE RIGHT: As the garden extends from the deck, it becomes more private. At its far end, an opening planted with Shasta daisies offers a veiled peek into the alley beyond.

Including the upstairs addition, the combined unit is still a modest 1,500 sq. ft. It works because of the garden connection and storage fitted in everywhere (inspired by Dag’s background with boats and Susan’s desire to stay organized). In the midst of the densest city in America, here is a snug home with the feel of a cabin, the warmth of wood, and a garden just beyond. “We live in the city, yet we have a relationship with herbs, with gardening. . . .” Brad goes on to talk about the power of architecture to affect family life. His home makes a pretty convincing case. ■■■



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FACING PAGE: In this 1,069-sq.-ft. house for twin sisters who love to cook, the open kitchen occupies almost half of the living space. The kitchen is unencumbered by upper cabinets (there's a pantry beyond the narrow glass door) and is dominated by a generous, metal-topped chef's table that takes the place of a dining table.

thoughtfully updating and adapting existing houses and buildings, and by encouraging a balanced mix of building types, old and new.

Project architect Mike Freeman reconfigured the 1,069-sq.-ft. main floor as an open, multipurpose living space in front, with supporting rooms (two bedrooms, storage spaces, a bath, and a powder room) in back, separated from the living space by a thick wall of bookshelves. Given Mary and Melinda's culinary passion, it's no surprise that the main space is dominated by a hard-working kitchen. Instead of a dining table, the sisters opted for a huge chef's table, at which they serve guests and enjoy their everyday meals. The back rooms are small and delightfully spare. Between the two bedrooms is a walk-in closet with doors on either end, because Mary and Melinda wear each other's clothes!

Although the original house had its charms, in updating it and remaking it for the sisters, Mike chose to simplify it. A window bay was removed,



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ABOVE LEFT: The main living space is open but ordered. A sofa and carpet establish a sitting area oriented to the woodstove. A thick wall of shelves divides the living space from the bedrooms and baths beyond. A drop-down desk stakes out a home office. The metal-topped chef's table marks the boundary of the kitchen and helps define a central pathway to the back rooms.

RIGHT: The beating heart of the house is an heirloom clock, handed down to the sisters from their father. Its special perch at the center of the house and the lack of distractions around it lend it a commanding yet calming presence.





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The original house had fallen into disrepair. In an uncertain moment ahead of the remodel, Mary exclaimed, "I sold my house for this?"

"In the city, your house is your block."

—Kim Clements, creative director

the chimney and fireplace came down, and a small porch protruding from the front was replaced with a deep, full-width porch under the house's simplified roof form. Mike turned the walk-out basement into a rentable ADU that adds a housing unit to the neighborhood and can serve as quarters for a care provider down the road. The basement also includes a space for projects or storage that acts like a pressure-relief valve for the main floor. The remodeled house occupies the same footprint as the original, and it's still a bungalow, albeit with a pared-down aesthetic, as well suited to city living now as it was when it was built.

Kim and Joe believe that small houses often fail when they're forced to do too much. "It's like asking a pony to be a horse," Kim says. Mary and Melinda's house is not a scaled-down manor, it's a right-size city house. It has only so much storage; it has one big room that handles almost every aspect of living; it has bedrooms large enough for beds and not much else. It has one spectacular front window, not more; one magnificent working table in the kitchen, yet no dining table; a welcoming porch but no foyer. The house doesn't try to do everything; rather, it succeeds in doing a few things really well. ■■■



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Two oversize wooden window sashes slide into wall recesses, creating an expansive opening that connects the main living space to the life of the street. Neighbors often sit on the porch or the wide windowsill for a chat with the sisters while they sit inside.