

'Little House in the City' — and a just-the-right-size home for twin sisters in Wallingford — celebrates the joys of living smaller



Before the remodel of twins Melinda Lloyd and Mary Speckart's Wallingford home, the front porch was falling apart and engulfed by vegetation, says J.A.S. Design-Build designer Mike Freeman. Now, though, especially with the sliding windows wide open, it serves as "a visual expansion of space," he says: a welcoming way to connect a smaller home to its larger neighborhood (and neighbors), and a natural spillover perch for parties.

A Question of Space

WHEN YOU UPEND your life; launch an unconventional adventure; discover valuable insights; *end up in a book*, for crying out loud, there likely will be questions.

Twins Melinda Lloyd and Mary Speckart posed the transformative first one — a biggie — themselves.

Question 1

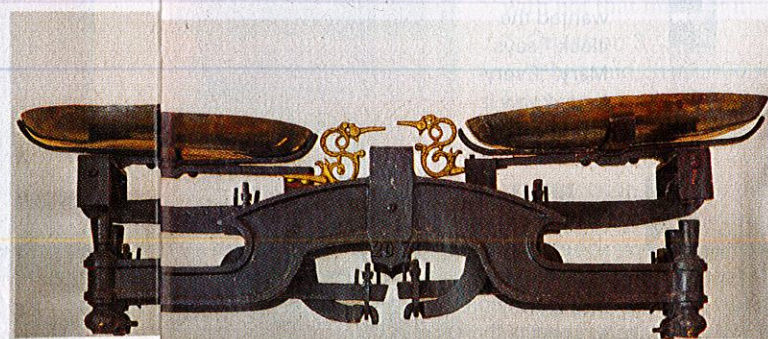
"Melinda lived on Mercer Island, and I lived in Kirkland," says Mary. "Melinda was single since the death of her husband; I have been single because of divorce. We have a home on Lopez Island, too. It was really stupid for two people to have three houses. We said: 'Why are we doing this?'"

From there, follow-up questions followed.



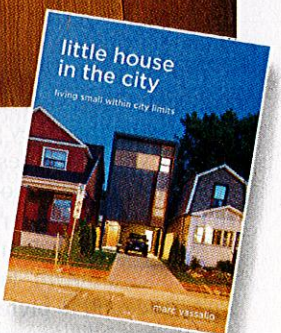
Mary and Melinda tinkered with the idea of sharing one home. They told Joe Schneider and Kim Clements of J.A.S. Design-Build (Kevin Price of J.A.S. had designed the sisters' Lopez home), "If you ever find a perfect house for us to downsize, let us know."

Schneider and Clements presented potential, anyway — right across the street from their Wallingford office — in the form of a sagging ►



A scale displayed on the storage wall near the kitchen "is the last thing my husband gave me," says Melinda.

The bright, open great room is anchored by a sizable chef's table with salvaged planks underneath. "It's a workhorse of function, and reads like a piece of furniture," says Freeman. "The kitchen, to both of us, is a very, very important room," says Mary. "We both love to cook; it's a must. And we entertain quite a bit; it's very conducive to parties." The wall at the rear closes off to the private wing of the home.



"Little House in the City: Living Small Within City Limits," by Seattle author Marc Vassallo.



The marble behind the fireplace in the living area echoes the countertops of the kitchen on the other side of the great room. "We decided in the city, we wanted a fireplace but not to mess around with logs," says Melinda. "I love the angle of it, and we just turn it off and on."



Mary and Melinda's friend and garden designer Paul Repetowski "did all the hardscape and planters," says Mary, including on the side of their 1,069-square-foot Wallingford home, where separate entrances to an exercise/storage room and a rented accessory dwelling unit replaced an interior stairway and a garage door. "With this level of concrete work, we have this modern crafted aesthetic and historical elements, and the landscape keeps it on the contemporary side," says Freeman.

◀ NW LIVING

1920s house that had sat empty and defenseless under invasion by icky syringes and greedy vegetation. Perfection would take considerable tinkering.

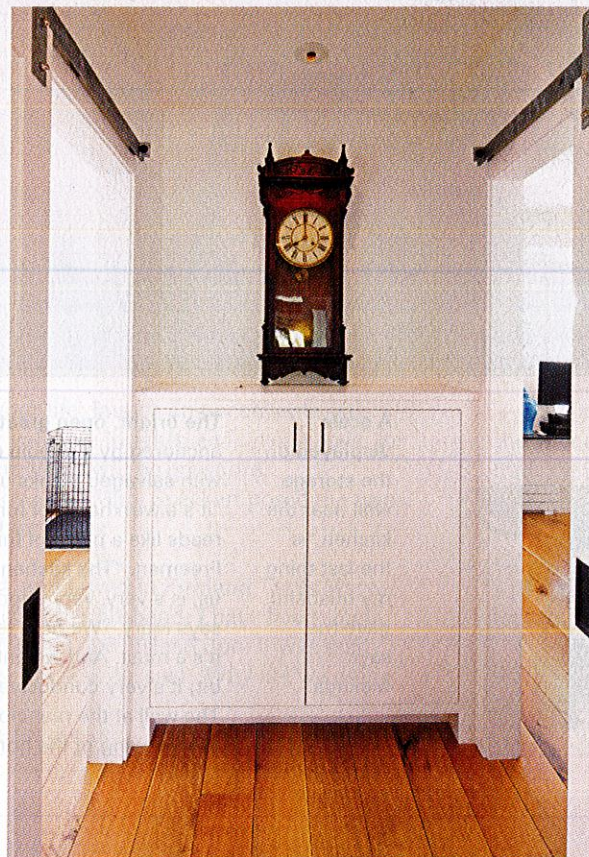
Question 2

"My first thought," says Melinda, "was, 'I'm giving up Mercer Island for this?'"

Yep. And Mary gave up Kirkland. (They kept the Lopez home.) And then they got down to work with J.A.S. designer Mike Freeman — remodeling and re-imagining, but not razing.

"A lot of people would have said knock it down," Freeman says. "We tend to prefer to use what's there. There were lots of good materials to work with: first-growth fir, 800 years old — you can't replicate that."

Beams were salvaged, as were the front door and sliding



LEFT: Only the most special possessions made the cut during the downsizing process — including this clock that used to hang in their family's grocery store. "In high school, I said I really wanted the clock," says Mary. "Everybody knew it was mine."

RIGHT: The twins share clothes and this closet, which connects their bedrooms.



windows.

"For the most part, we kept the structure, the stuff you can't see," he says. "One of the big tricks with a big, open kitchen/dining/office all in one is to not have any walls. To get to open space in here, which really did make sense, we retrofitted the entire front of the house into a truss system."

It's a critically efficient, light and lovely use of space in a home with not that much of it.

Question 3

"They said, 'It's 1,000 square feet; can you make it work?'" says Melinda.

It took some work — and some introspection — but, again: Yep.

"It's surprising in living a life how much you amass," Melinda says. "You think, 'That was a different time period; I'm evolved.' I had lots of frilly things before."

Adds Mary: "We threw a lot of

stuff away in our old households. Especially the repeats. We both have similar taste. We donated a lot."

In the end, they saved what matters most: nostalgic things (a scale displayed on the storage wall separating the great room from the private wing "is the last thing my husband gave me," Melinda says). Historic things (the clock at the end of the hall had hung in their family's grocery store in Utah). Things they both love (blue-and-white porcelain). Things they both need (like clothing).

Question 4

The sisters share a closet. It is not huge. But it is enough.

"People say, 'Oh my God; that's all you have?'" says Mary. "We share clothes; that helps a lot."

The closet opens at both ends, linking the twins' bedrooms, which both have bumpouts and

are almost exactly equally sized ("Parity for the twins," Freeman says). The bedrooms are not huge, either. But they are enough.

Questions 5 & 6

"For a house that's this size, why would we dedicate a whole lot of space for this area?" says Freeman. "The bedrooms are a place for a bed. They're comfortably large enough to get around a bed."

Mary responds with a question that answers itself: "What do I use a bedroom for? To sleep."

Question 7

Did someone mention a book? Yep! Seattle author Marc Vassallo has included the twins' inspiring home in his inspiring new book, "Little House in the City: Living Small Within City Limits."

It is not about "tiny houses." It is not about bashing big houses. ▶



KEN GUTMAKER, COURTESY THE TAUNTON PRESS

"Little House in the City" author Marc Vassallo lives with his family in this 1927 home in Seattle's Roosevelt neighborhood. "My house in Seattle is small, just 950 square feet, but my home doesn't stop at the front porch or even at the front gate," he writes. "It includes sidewalk garden beds; the street; the neighborhood; and the whole city, all near at hand."

NW LIVING

It is a celebration of 37 new/remodeled/even backyard houses, all under 1,800 square feet and all within the borders of 20 cities, from Toronto to Savannah.

"I call small city houses 'the next little thing,'" Vassallo says. "My editor and I agreed on one thing right from the start: This would be a fun book. It has points to make about the virtues (aesthetic, philosophic, economic, practical and environmental) of small houses and city living; it's aligned with several significant demographic and lifestyle trends; but, above all, it's a fun book."

Even more fun: His family's own house in the Roosevelt neighborhood is in there, too. "My house in Seattle is small, just 950 square feet, but my home doesn't stop at the front porch or even at the front gate," he writes. "It includes sidewalk garden beds; the street; the neighborhood; and the whole city, all near at hand." (Plus, two small "shed-studios" for storage, work, exercise, meditation, music — basically, backyard bonus space.)

Back in Wallingford, Mary and Melinda's bonus space includes a 550-square-foot lower-level accessory dwelling unit they rent out; a storage/exercise space they call "The Oyster Room"; and a private, low-maintenance back patio.

And, because the sisters love to cook and entertain, gatherings naturally spill out onto the broad and welcoming front porch where, even on nonparty days, Ella their adorable dog "is our ambassador in the community," Melinda says. "Everybody is really, really great with walking by and saying hi. We go out and sit with her."

And therein lies a very fundamental answer to the making-a-small-space-work question.

"With a little city house, everything you need is decidedly *not* in your house," Vassallo says. "Rather, you're allowing your neighborhood and your city to become extensions of your home; this is something to celebrate."

There are other things, too, he says: "the pleasures of living in a small house; the pleasures of living in a city; the pleasures of density and proximity, of walkable neighborhoods, of neighbors and neighborliness. The pleasures of smallness itself."

No further questions. ☐

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KEN GUTMAKER, COURTESY THE TAUNTON PRESS

Vassallo and his family have two handy "shed-studios" in their Roosevelt backyard. "Even with the shed-studios, we don't have a lot of indoor space," he writes in his new book, "Little House in the City." "What we have instead is a stake in a densely settled, walkable neighborhood of modestly sized houses that's part of a vibrant city, much of which lies within easy reach by bike or public transportation."

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