

The House With a Surprise Inside

By [NANCY KEATES](#)



Behind the walls of that Tudor or Colonial, a dramatic contemporary may be lurking. Faced with strict codes and steep construction costs, more homeowners are installing modern interiors in old homes.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Michael and Amy Cohen live in a classic, stately stone Colonial. Until you step inside, that is. Following a recent remodel, the four-bedroom, three-story house, built in the 1920s in the West Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, has an electric-blue fireplace and a wall that doubles as a "found art" installation project, with multicolored plastic bread tags embedded in a large pane of clear Plexiglas. A custom-made living-room rug echoes the shapes and drips of a painting Mr. Cohen made in preschool and matches the Coca-Cola-red sofa.



"Brick and stone says 'home' to me. But I really like modern design. I never thought that exterior and interior had to agree," says Ms. Cohen, 48, a high-school and middle-school social-studies teacher.

It's a tough time to build new. Construction costs have risen sharply over the past year, while existing-home prices, though rising, are still about a third below their peak. As a result, the number of custom single-family homes built in the U.S. last year was less than half the number built in 2005, according to Robert Denk, senior economist at the National Association of Home Builders. And finding an existing contemporary or modern house can be difficult, especially in older cities and towns.

So what's a modern-design aficionado to do? Redo an older home. Remodeling spending is up 9% over last year, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard. And according to Sheila Schmitz, editor in chief of home-décor website Houzz, there has been an increase in

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popularity of the "transitional" look, which blends the comfort and warmth of traditional design with the clean profiles and understated colors of contemporary counterparts.



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The concept of installing a modern interior inside a traditional home, long seen in Europe, is becoming particularly popular in older U.S. cities. In San Francisco, architect Stephen Verner of Aleck Wilson Architects says most of his clients want contemporary interiors even in the oldest homes.

Pittsburgh-based architect Lewko Korzeniowsky recently finished turning the traditional, Colonial-style

Images courtesy of Kelly Turso Photography



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floor plan of an old 4,600-square-foot French Normandy mansion into an open, contemporary interior, reducing the



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number of bedrooms
to four from six and

introducing floor-to-ceiling glass windows and recessed lighting. Mr. Korzeniwsky says he is getting many more requests for projects that keep the exteriors but modernize the interiors.

This "hybrid" phenomenon is particularly evident in Philadelphia. The city is full of old stone and brick homes. Construction costs are among the highest in the country, reflecting taxes, union labor rates and extensive regulations. And strict historical codes can make it difficult to change a house's exterior. Yet the way people live has become increasingly contemporary, say architects and designers, so more owners are demanding interior changes to incorporate bigger kitchens, cleaner lines and open floor plans.

The market has been responding positively. Bruce Benjamin, a real-estate agent at Plumer & Associates, says houses whose interiors have been renovated in a contemporary way appeal to buyers because they're a "refreshing" change and, as a result, have a higher resale value. He points to a 2,300-square-foot, 150-year-old townhouse that sold last summer for its asking price of \$1.15 million even though it lacked parking, usually a must for that price category. Mr. Benjamin attributes the sale price to the home's modern interior.

"No one in their right mind would knock down one of these beautiful old houses," says Alan Metcalfe, the principal at Metcalfe Architecture & Design in Philadelphia who designed the remodel for the Cohens. "It is a matter of reorienting them to the way people live." Local

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architects estimate modern redos cost about \$200 a square foot in Philadelphia, depending on the materials and scope of the work.

Built in 1800, Hank McNeil's Neo-Georgian 13,000-square-foot Rittenhouse Square mansion is red brick and cube-shaped, with rectangular double-hung windows all aligned and a red front door flanked by Corinthian columns. When Mr. McNeil bought it in 2003 for \$1.3 million, it had been converted into law offices, with the interior rooms chopped up. Now, the interior is highly contemporary, and filled with one of the leading collections of minimalist modern art in the country.

Mr. McNeil, an heir to the Tylenol fortune, couldn't touch the exterior due to historical regulations. So he turned his attention inside, knocking down walls to create three rooms on the main floor. He installed glass doors, skylights and modern Bulthaup cabinets in the open kitchen.

The overall interior look of Mr. McNeil's house is sparse: He has a few pieces of furniture, mostly Danish, and simple rugs over the white oak floors. The focus is the art, which includes 14 major wall drawings by Sol LeWitt, 14 sculptures by Donald Judd and works by Carl Andre, Dan Flavin and Richard Tuttle. "People are really surprised when they come into my house. They're taken aback by the openness," says Mr. McNeil, who regularly hosts tours of museum board members from around the world.

→ Joan Wadleigh Curran opted for more of an industrial modern look when she turned three internally connected 19th-century carriage houses in the heart of Philadelphia's downtown into a 4,300-square-foot three bedroom home.

An artist, Ms. Wadleigh Curran focused on keeping original details like the brick walls and unsealed concrete but added other natural materials like steel beams and an open, steel staircase to give it what she calls an "unfinished look." "The building has a feel of history to it. It's like life—there's a history to things but there's also the new. I wanted to keep that juxtaposition," says Ms. Wadleigh Curran, who bought the house for \$907,000 in 2010.

In Philadelphia, it makes sense to buy an old house: The city's housing stock is venerable, with a median year of construction of 1925. Besides, people love the way the old houses look. "You can get a very nice 2,500-square-foot Colonial, Queen Anne or Romanesque home in a beautiful, tree-lined neighborhood for \$300,000 to \$600,000," says Kevin Gillen, a senior research consultant at the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. "Since you would pay at least double that in other markets, the savings on the price can be used to undertake significant rehabs of the interior."

Like a number of other cities, Philadelphia has also experienced an urban revitalization that is spurring greater interest in modern design. From 2006 through 2012, Philadelphia's population

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grew by 58,897 after falling for half a century, with 20- to 34-year-olds' share of the population up to 26% from 20%, according to Census estimates. Philadelphia also has a strong contemporary-design community, with seven college-level design programs as well as a number of new design-company startups and stores, that has influenced the type of interiors people want.

"The city is getting more sophisticated, but people don't want to forget about its past," says Stefan Sklaroff, who just opened a 10,000-square-foot, two-level modern-furniture store called Cella Luxuria in a 19th-century brick building downtown.

Yet unlike design-friendly cities such as New York, Miami and Milan, Philadelphia loathes showiness, reflecting its Quaker heritage. The contrast between the staid exteriors and the vibrant interiors of homes is a metaphor for the city, says Val Nehez, an interior designer who works both out of Philadelphia and New York. "Philadelphia doesn't wear its style on its sleeve. It's behind closed doors. You have to be in the fabric of society—to enter into peoples' lives—to see it."

Not everyone celebrates the demolition of details like wood moldings and stately fireplaces in favor of white Sheetrock, loftlike spaces and glass. While the interiors of homes are almost always up to the owners, Philadelphians aren't always shy about voicing their opinions.

Ms. Cohen, whose recently remodeled home includes the blue fireplace and red sofa, admits she was shocked by some nasty comments that were posted when photos of her house appeared on an online forum. Commenters described the inside as a "circus horror story," "like a clown threw up" and "like a day care." Wrote one: "I don't hate modern design, but the total mismatch between exterior and interior is disturbing. Imagine it reversed, modern exterior/traditional interior. It's not right, is it?" In response, Ms. Cohen says she told her two daughters: "Day cares are bright and cheerful places, and I'm sure it's quite lovely when a clown vomits."

Some owners try to merge the two sensibilities. It took art curator Eileen Tognini, 52, about 25 years—and her daughter moving out to go to college—before she and her husband finally turned the interior of their three-story, 2,500-square-foot Victorian 1882 brownstone in what's called the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia into the contemporary design they'd long wanted. "Victorian has never been my sensibility, but I appreciated the bones," she says of the 10-month renovation, completed last June.

The result is very modern, particularly toward the back of the home: The dining room opens to the midcentury-modern and Japanese-influenced wood-and-steel kitchen, where double-panel cabinet doors are made from laser-cut steel and feature an abstract design modeled after a historic map of the neighborhood. There is a massive, wraparound glass staircase, and dropping down from the 24-foot-tall ceiling is a 12-foot-long "found art" light sculpture made by a local artist with steel rods and old trumpets, toy train tracks and parts of old pistons. But the couple

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decided to maintain the traditional feeling of the home's front rooms, retaining the original tile in the vestibule and the chestnut molding in the parlor. A Victorian mantle sits not too far from a second, newly installed glass-and-steel staircase. "We felt really strongly it was important to preserve the history and not to assault that sensibility when you first walk in," Ms. Tognini says.