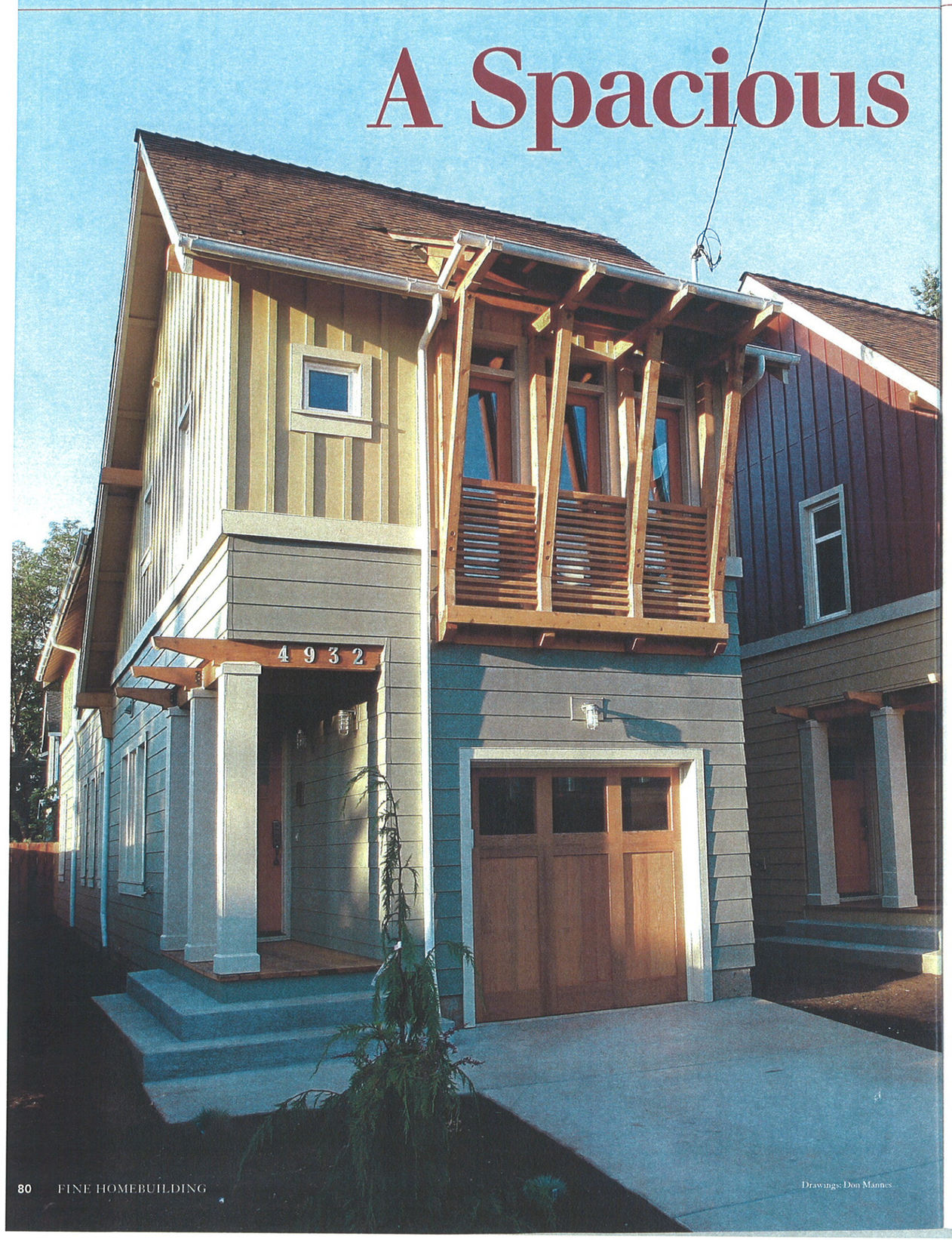
A Spacious House for a Skinny City Lot

A contest-winning design squeezes a vaulted living room, a master suite, and room to breathe onto a pencil-thin lot



Drawings: Don Mannes

BY ROXANA VARGAS-GREENAN AND TRENT GREENAN

As an architect and an urban designer, we like fitting more into a design than there seems to be space for. When we learned that the city of Portland, Ore., was having a design competition for a narrow urban infill house, we jumped at the chance. Portland wanted plans for so-called skinny lots (25 ft. wide by 100 ft. deep) around the city. The impetus for the design competition was to create a narrow house with curb appeal. Our entry could be no wider than 15 ft., yet include a garage.

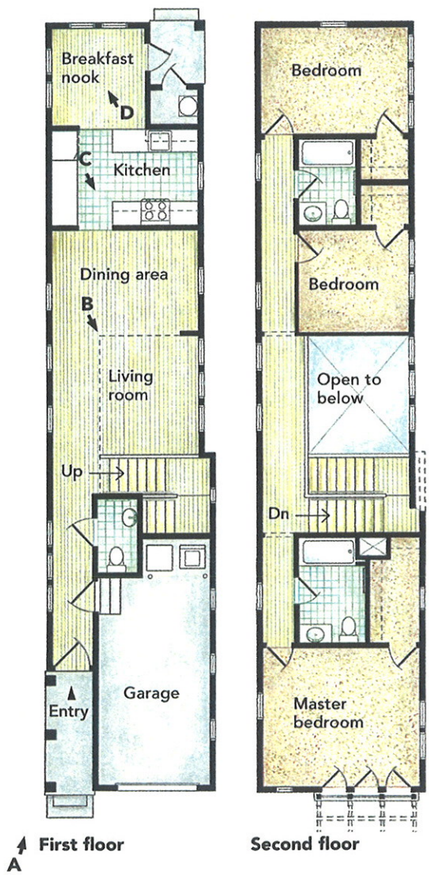
For livability and marketability, we wanted the design to have at least three bedrooms and large living spaces. It was important for the design elements to reflect the historic architecture of the Portland area. We wanted the interior to be comfortable and uncompromised by the narrowness of the house. Out of more than 400 entries submitted from around the world, our design won a People's Choice Award, and our entry was one of two designs the city chose to offer as permit-ready plans (www.livingsmartpdx.com).

Attractive street frontage was the big challenge

At 15 ft. wide, a house has barely enough room for a front door and a garage. We had to include a street-facing garage door because Portland blocks don't have alleys and because the city required the designs to accommodate parking. A garage, however, is not necessarily the most attractive element to see from the street.

To reduce the garage's prominence and to create an inviting entry, we added a small porch. This approach offers two advantages. First, it shortens the narrow hallway required to move beyond the depth of the garage when entering the house. It also creates a transitional space for people to pause as they move from the public street to the private home.

We de-emphasized the garage by reducing the size of the door from the standard 8 ft. by 8 ft. to a special-order 7 ft. by 7 ft. Additionally, we designed a custom garage door with



SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2½

Size: 1500 sq. ft. (lot size 25 ft. by 100 ft.)

Cost: $100 per sq. ft.

Completed: 2007

Location: Portland, Ore.

Architect: Vargas Greenan Architecture-Civic Design

Builders: Jack Wagnon of Prairie View Homes and Randall Palazzo of Palazzo Custom Homes

North

0 2 4 8 ft.

Photos taken at lettered positions.

APPEAL OF A COMPACT DESIGN

Less square footage benefits the occupants and the builder. Rooms are clustered around high-use areas like the kitchen and the bathrooms. The double height of the living room and its squarish shape provide a central focus. Builder Jack Wagnon likes the centralized plumbing and stacked wall locations for efficiency in building.