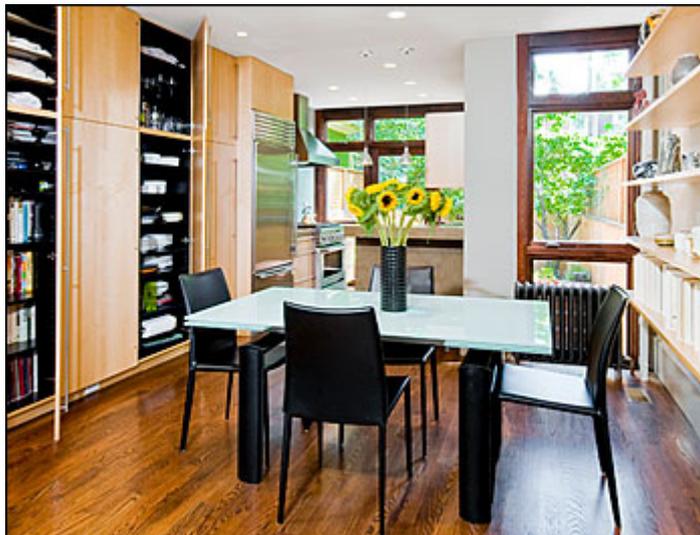


## **Straight and narrow**

*Nancy McKeon*

*The skinny on how 4 rowhouse owners solved problems of light, width and storage*



*Living in a Rowhouse - Whether built in 1890 in Georgetown or in 1990 in Gaithersburg, rowhouses present challenges: little natural light, a paucity of storage and vexing foot-traffic patterns. We step into some local rowhouses to see what problems they had and how the homeowners solved them.*

You can call them townhouses or townhomes. In my 19th-century Washington neighborhood, we like to think of them as historic rowhouses. By whatever name, the rhythmic repetition of their facades can define an entire city block, or even a suburban neighborhood.

But whether they were built in 1890 in Georgetown or in 1990 in Gaithersburg, rowhouses present certain, shall we say, challenges: little natural light, a paucity of storage and vexing foot-traffic patterns, to name three. At 12, 16 or 22 feet wide, old and new rowhouses have much in common. Not so their owners' responses to them: Some decorate around the challenges, some virtually nuke the interiors and start from scratch and some, especially in vintage homes, straddle the line, retaining the bones of a traditional rowhouse while giving the place a modern "skin" using sleek materials.

By tradition long and narrow, with neighbors attached on one or both sides and often with a rear dogleg room that's narrower than the rest of the structure, rowhouses rely largely on front and rear windows for natural light. That leaves the problematic middle room -- usually the dining room on the main living level and a secondary bedroom upstairs -- dependent on light borrowed from a skylight or from a window overlooking an often gloomy outdoor space. That eternal interior dusk has probably led to the demolition of more wall than was torn down in once-divided Berlin.

The long, skinny nature of townhouses can make for odd circulation patterns, too, turning rooms into corridors as homeowners and guests tramp through them to get from front to back. One of the reasons people have to keep moving is that in most historic rowhouses -- even in some suburban townhouses being built today -- a visitor can traverse the entire main level without finding a closet in which to hang his coat.

We step into four D.C. rowhouses to see what problems they had and how the homeowners solved them.

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