

## A flounder house provides new space for an old district

written by  
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**T**here's nothing fishy about the clean, crisp lines uniting the urban infill of this flounder house in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia. Situated just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., Old Town is a quaint residential and commercial village that has meticulously retained its historic urban fabric, low-rise streetfronts and pedestrian-friendly scale. Within this context, a small collection of historic Old Town buildings has been artfully rejuvenated.

A "flounder", also called a "half-house", or "half-flounder", refers to an urban home commonly found in Alexandria, Virginia and Old St. Louis, Missouri. The flounder house is so named because it resembles a flounder when it is half split down the center of the back. Typically, the long wall is set on the side lot line.

As Old Town's demographics have changed over time, many former support buildings have been absorbed into adjacent residential buildings. Reflecting this trend, the existing flounder is located on a midblock site and was once dedicated to service and support functions.

The flounder's original structure played an important role in the renovation. Over time, a suite of rooms had occupied areas between a Second Empire Town House, the flounder, and a garage. A previous renovation had created an oddly configured kitchen and family room. When the owners were able to acquire the small adjacent residence, they seized the opportunity to reorganize their living spaces, expand the garden, and create a new guesthouse.

To maintain the overall character of the neighbor-



■ A new metal and glass breakfast room projects into the garden. The historic flounder lies behind its crystalline form.

# Old Town's New Home



■ The new family room is a light and airy room that connects the wings of the house.



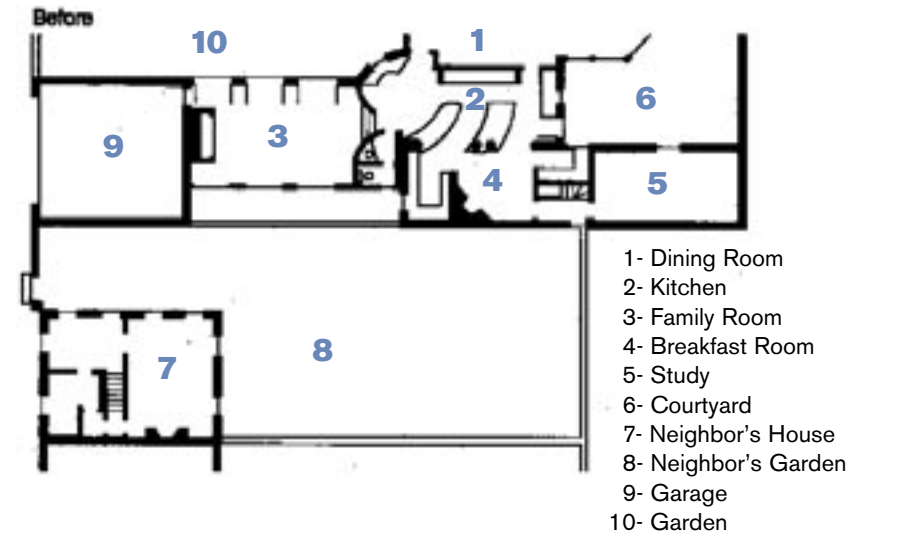
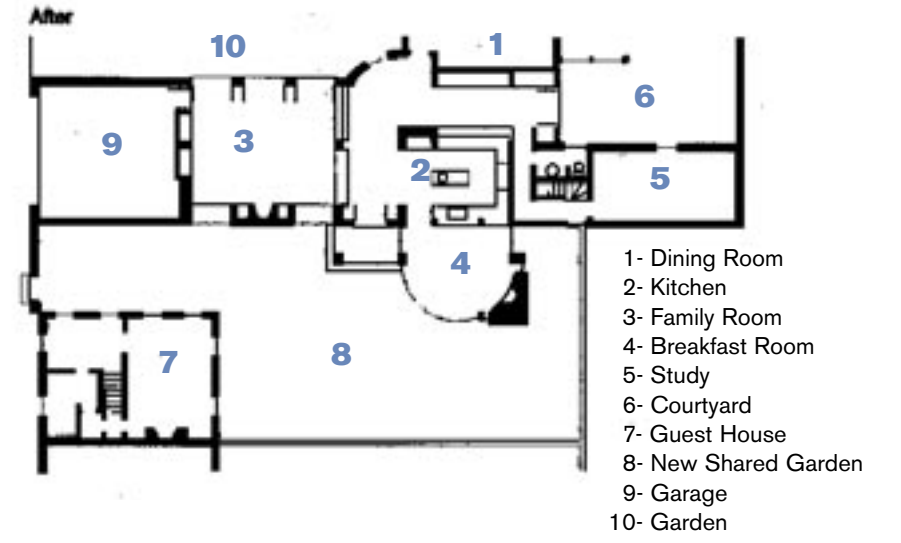
■ A steel and glass window gives a panoramic view of the garden, while the fireplace anchors the room.

hood, local historic preservation laws have strictly regulated exterior modification, says architect Mark McInturff. “We felt it was important to reconcile a contemporary use and new spatial configuration within the historic preservation parameters,” he adds.

The client’s design goals were to create an open, informal sequence of spaces that would be comfortable for family use and appropriate for large scale entertaining. In this case, acquisition of the flounder house provided more than a safety net of space; it inspired a new clarity of circulation and design elements that were not possible before.

McInturff opened the existing brick masonry bearing wall structure with the addition of new steel columns and beams. At the first floor, the original low seven-foot ceiling height made the kitchen uninhabitable. Removing the second floor and opening the space to the roof created a new, taller volume of space and revitalized the central kitchen area.

By sliding the breakfast room towards the garden, McInturff reorganized the remaining kitchen space to reflect the classic kitchen work triangle between the sink, stove, and refrigerator. Clear, direct circulation among these three areas





**BEFORE**



■ By removing the second floor and using the existing windows, the new kitchen in the flounder space takes advantage of the full height of the historic structure

## ORIGINS OF THE FLOUNDER HOUSE

According to “Pamphlet Architecture, No. 9”; Rural and Urban House Types in North America”, by Steven Holl, flounder houses are half split down the center of the back, like a fish, and always have the long wall set on the side lot line. These homes are usually two stories high with a half gable or shed roof pitched from the party wall into the lot. By emphasizing the dividing wall, this form is a variation of the repetitive row house commonly found in older, downtown city sections.

Several explanations exist about the flounder’s origins. In Alexandria, one theory is that at the auctioning of land in 1749, the city required landowners to build on land within a two-year period or the lot reverted to city ownership. As a result, flounder houses were built as wings of larger homes that were never completed.

In St. Louis, flounders were discussed in a St. Louis Heritage report: “The mystery of the half-house or half-flounder design may never be completely solved but one probable explanation is that the half-houses were built to shed roof rainwater to one side of the property.” Another explanation for the form relates to city taxes (although there are no specific mentions in the 1811, 1861, and 1871 ordinances). Taxes on a half-house were assessed at half-rate.

enhances kitchen efficiency and productivity—an essential design criteria for cooking and entertaining. The new, semi-circular breakfast room, with expansive full-height windows framing the garden view, strengthens the visual connection with the outdoors. These new spatial relationships in the kitchen and dining areas have created user-friendly places and views for daily delight.

The architect’s goals were to dovetail a contemporary architectural aesthetic within a highly regulated historic district, with

the understanding that these two contrasting concepts can happily co-exist. By successfully integrating an old flounder with adjacent existing spaces, McInturff illustrates how blending the past with the present can enhance the future quality of life with a fresh new design solution ■

**Architect:** Mark McInturff, FAIA, Stephen Lawlor, AIA, Mark McInturff Architects, Bethesda, Maryland