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Moving Horizontal

When I first arrived at the house it was a closed dark wood-paneled box, a psychologically introverted construction. It suggested a certain narrow mentality about what it means "to dwell." My most immediate visceral response was to open it up.

—Michael Barry, architect

We once lived our lives vertically at 1637 Rosewood, a four-over-four Victorian with finished attic. The house held most of my husband's and my twenty-five year marriage, and all but three years of our two daughters' lives. We lived through elementary, middle, high school, and college applications, a twenty-two inch snowfall, a burst appendix, the euthanasia of a beloved rabbit named Meatloaf, a tornado, bunk beds, My Little Pony, multiple piercings, piano flute voice mandolin drama soccer lessons, a recovery from alcoholism, Smashing Pumpkins, Modest Mouse, straight As and the first D, new drivers and five minor accidents, Nintendo arguments, a plague of mice, eighteen tall and skinny Christmas trees to fit in our foyer.

The feeling was one of containment. We were eggs in a three-story egg carton. One child lived in the attic, another in a second floor bedroom: daughter cubicles. My husband and I slept just next door, our studies also right on top of each other. Far below were the living/family/dining rooms, where everyone tossed and tumbled together. The children kept us microscopically focused with their various crises, sorrows, pleasures, and accomplishments. We were living in the "now," not mystically, but perforce. A life was *one day*, with various components, compliments or complaints, and little thought of yesterday or tomorrow.

Two pencil-scratched growth charts on a closet door documented our daughters' progress up and out of the house. At 5'7" and 5'3", they were gone, living in tiny houses of their own in a blue-collar area of town with train tracks and a funky grocery store.

We took a deep breath and looked around.

All around us in our visual field is a world we understand and simultaneously take for granted. We assume that trees remain as they are...rooted in the ground. Intuitively, we understand that water seeks the low point and then seeks its level. These are subconscious phenomena that we live with every day. Most of the time I don't even like to think of what I do as "design"—as it conjures in the mind something graphic or sculptural or high-tech. I think of my process as making conceptual connections. In this case, finding things we recognize and bringing them forward, or raising them up into our field of vision.

What do you do when your house turns against you? When maintenance of the body occupies an hour of each day, with brushes and paste and tweezers and emery boards? There's the little click inside your shoulder when you do your sit-ups, and the floor responds when you lie back against it. You know the spot, where the joinery rubs and the nail squeaks.

With the children gone, we expected a sudden influx of oxygen, a second honeymoon, this one lasting a couple of decades. But the press of middle age was upon us. My father-in-law suffered a stroke, triple bypass, lung cancer, and finally died, a thin contrail of the FBI strongman he once was. The girls entered their bumpy twenties with minimum wage jobs, romances, unsympathetic landlords—a long way yet from self-sufficiency. Indeed, with larger pressures from both younger and older generations, we felt like squashed sandwich meat. The once brand-new renovation at 1637 Rosewood too was not just twenty years older; it had landed in that unfashionable place between antique and contemporary, retro and old-fashioned, like waist-high underpants or a Dodge Gremlin or a middle-aged man who refuses to give up smoking dope.

A house is a body. Just look at the argot: dental molding, eyebrow window, face board, face brick, footer, footing, head, knee walls, nosing, shakes, sleeper, toenail. Thus, a leak in the roof is unsettling because it's like torn skin, a scorched chimney like a dirty neck. Sometimes you can waylay disgust by choosing what to see and what not to see. Don't look in the mirror. Wear gloves when you wash the dishes. Or, develop immunity, called "growing used to."

One day I let my guard down. It was mid-winter. Without the healthy distraction of sunlight, I was more than a little depressed. I opened our back gate, which sits on an alley lined with trash bins

and recycling containers. Next to our silver maple a half-full beer bottle, left by a homeless man who made a recessed area behind our fence his bedroom. Then, to my dismay—a spray of aqua-colored safety glass, sour cream containers, and a dozen soggy French fries, like the debris of last night's raucous party. I began to sweep in a cloud of gray dust and glass shards, pushing the mess further into the alley, where it became the city's responsibility. My sneakers were coated with grit, as I knew my lungs were. For eighteen years, we had passed this kind of scene without seeing it.

The second thought was simply—how best to do this? The lot, as it was, being very narrow and deep provided the answer. So long as one follows one's own line of consciousness (analytical and intuitive) about sense of place, I believe one will always find the answer.

To cheer ourselves up, we bought a shiny red Vespa, and when that was stolen, replaced it with a silver one. We buzzed down to the coffee shop, took long loops through Olmstead's Cherokee Park, unembarrassed though we knew we resembled Mama and Papa bears on a tricycle. We rode further out of town to a scenic byway known as River Road. The air pummeled our faces; we sailed through wells of scent—sweet, damp, pine, or possum decaying. To the left, the swollen river and a barge pushing by. To the right, a lone real estate sign marked "Exquisite!" in bright yellow. A long gravel driveway extended back from the road between crumbling posts. We said why not, let's look, we can't, oh come on, useless, no one's around, couldn't hurt, why not, OK.

For over two centuries, Kentucky has offered up more than its share of vices, featuring a wicked blend of liquor, horses, and tobacco. The state produces almost all the world's bourbon and thirty-seven percent of U.S. horse sales. Just minutes outside Louisville, the landscape dips and gently rises and horse fences painted rich brown follow suit, the animals grazing fields or bunched together under a tree, tails swatting flies. Along with the bluegrass, you'll see acres of burley tobacco, and the barns where the crop is air-cured. These are beautiful structures, with bright silver tin roofs and slate-blue siding. Often the fencing is whitewashed and in sunlight or gloom the palette is always startling and elegant. Tobacco barns

inspired architect Michael Barry, who took on the task of renovating and expanding a dowdy seventies house off River Road. Its siding is now the same gray-blue, the roof silver tin, and the doors are framed in a warm, orange-tinged pine the color of dried tobacco.

We slid off the scooter, treading carefully, as if trespassing in more ways than one: the property belonged to someone else; it was likely way beyond our means, though a number of modest homes lined River Road; and finally, we had no business considering a move with one child still in college. From the front, the place was modest, a cross between a Cape Cod and a windowed barn, with garage and second floor guest room connecting at a forty-five degree angle. We stole around to the backyard, a large expanse of grass dropping to a creek and woods beyond. Turning around, we faced the house the way it was meant to be seen, panoramically: angled roofline to the left, a vast stretch of windows and two sets of double glass doors across the middle punctuated by a pagoda-like porch with white cross-beams, and five, count them, *five* huge decks extending into the grass like a great stair. *Oh, my God*, we said. We peered through the windows into the great room, where blonde hardwood extended more than forty feet west, disappearing right and left into channels formed by half-walls and frosted glass. We could see a sleek cement and steel fireplace, its mantle raw cherry, the firebox set slightly off center, and could it be, there was an outdoor shower too! To call the plan “open” was an understatement; but somehow, the house was both spacious and deeply human in scale. We backed off with an *oh well*, confident the price would be over a million. Heading out of the driveway, we grabbed the info sheet, which announced in bold, “You’ll feel like you’re on vacation!” Underneath, an asking price of less than a third of our expectation. *We could do this*, we whispered simultaneously, then called our realtor, the listing agent, and both of our daughters who all drove out to meet us. Four hours later, our bid was accepted.

As one stands in the grain of the site, facing its depth of field, one also stands in the grain of the dwelling. As few doors as possible, consciously eroded parallel walls, a kind of “sheared space,” with beams extending from inside to outside—all reinforce this “in-the-grain” attitude.

Our old house had many doors—twenty-five to be exact. Pocket, closet, French, doors marked “DO NOT ENTER,” covered with hex signs and skateboard logos. Behind them, the girls entered puberty, tried their first cigarettes and beer, my husband and I had covert sex and hasty arguments. We all had our secrets and, in theory, we were safe. The house was rocked by all kinds of weather, but the weather that affected us most was interior.

The new house had only *two* inside doors, both leading to lavatories. The first-floor master bedroom flows around a partition into the great room. The great room veers into the master bath, sink, and shower. The kitchen pours into the great room. Large open “windows” front the guest bedroom, though there is no glass, only space, and a discrete stairway rising from the foyer.

We could *bowl* in this place, or contra-dance with a dozen couples. We could throw a wedding, or hold an auction, or hire a Big Band orchestra. We could run laps, ice skate, shot-put; the possibilities were endless. We stretched out on the taut, bare floor and let the dogs flop and sniff.

No whining or squeaking or inch-long splinters; no creases, dents, or sun damage; no history at all. The house gave us a new skin and permission to explore it. The house was young, unembarrassed in its nudity, and so were we. This was *horizontal* living, our past and future laid out at once, in the open, where we could see it. Which doesn't mean we were untouched by difficulty; we just had the sudden oxygen and range to consider it all.

I grew up with a deep respect for all things antique, objects that survived fashion, sturdy enough to last for centuries. My grandmother willed me a set of flow-blue dishes from the 1800s, a French writing desk from the 1700s, nine miniature portraits with piano-key frames. I never shopped at stores like Ikea, selling fashion furniture that would most likely be gone in a decade. We were both raised on the East Coast and our heirlooms fit well in the Rosewood place with its early 1900s atmosphere of compressed history and withheld energy. Shaker chairs with sagging cane seats, rabbit holes inside a cupboard—these objects contained centuries.

In the new house, so tuned to the sprawling Kentucky landscape, they looked fussy and stubborn—in short, ridiculous. We used the fireplace as an anchor, threw down a small rug, shuffled the couch,

Biedermeier chairs and recliners around it. Seating for six, theoretically. But in a forty-foot great room, the rug felt like a raft, chairs and couch legs hanging on like shipwreck survivors. The floorboards established an east/west current, better left unimpeded—no dams or backslashes. Without banisters, balustrades, carpeting, doors, partitions, or skid-tape to keep from slipping, we slipped. The dogs spun around corners, back legs flying. At first we were disoriented, confused. How to settle, where to step first? Should we bother with furniture at all and just throw down a few sleeping bags?

For more than fifty years, every step we've taken has been shadowed by seventy-eight million fellow baby boomers. We were born in a crowd, schooled, worked, married, divorced, remarried, had 1.86 children, paid for their educations, and now little explosions are going off everywhere as baby boomers empty their kids' bedrooms, and begin to enjoy a little free time and discretionary income. You can track our interests by watching the Food Network or HGTV or a flock of tourists visiting vineyards. On a whim, my friends Leslie and Bill purchased land in Costa Rica and plan to spend half the year there. Stephen divorced, remarried a gorgeous, intelligent younger woman and finds himself a father again at fifty-five. His last e-mail, written in a sleepless fog, announced they were calling the child *Elvis*. We'll retire in a crowd and die in a crowd. When we get to that point, there'll be a national ad campaign for ashes shot into space or your DNA mapped and published, you wait. It'll happen. We're already seeing "green" cemeteries, where biodegradable caskets or burial shrouds of natural fibers are used, and graves are placed randomly throughout a woodland or meadow, marked with the planting of a tree or shrub.

The new house opened our eyes to design and, like thousands of others, we surfed the Internet for Sapien tower bookcases that would put our books within reach but not clutter the landscape of our great room. We shifted a small vase on the mantle until, slightly off-center, it looked exactly right. On our backyard deck, we placed five Ronde chairs, all facing southeast. The chairs resembled seagulls head-first into the wind. Not coincidentally, our mailbox was stuffed with catalogs from Design Within Reach, CB2, and we understood the slick TV ad, in which a black-suited woman sits before her condescending architect, pulls a Kohler faucet from her purse, and says, "Design a house around *this*."

The door is a missing piece of wall; sometimes a wall is closed and sometimes the wall is open.

Even where walls were necessary, Michael minimized their effect by cut-outs, half-walls, artful “absences,” and subtle irregularity. A larger symmetry was implied, not doggedly spelled out. Wherever possible, he dispensed with traditional trim. Instead, between sheetrock and frame, he built a half-inch indentation, like an irrigation channel. It adds an elegance and depth to the joinery. It seems more truthful to the juxtaposition of two dissimilar materials, that there is a crevice of shadow and mystery—a mixing space, as well as a little breathing room. We run our fingers inside when turning a corner, like caressing the valleys between knuckles.

Side by side at the dinner table, my husband and I chew silently, each of us absorbed in a book. We work in separate wings of the house, but this distance can be intimate too. Across the great room, he shouts, *Can you get the phone? Please? Or: Do you have a minute? I want to read you something . . .* Sometimes we have no choice *but* to listen to each other. Sneezes, snores, sighs, the rattle of keypads, the dog licking a ripe spot on the carpet—sound leaves its source, gullies, ambles, spreads. There’s a strange noise somewhere and, like ship radar, we rotate our heads about, trying to locate it.

In a vertical dwelling, we stand at attention, prepared for battle, whether the conflict simmers in adolescence or the obstinacy of aged parents. We are backbones when their own skeletons are evolving or devolving. We are fence posts, traffic signs, door frames. We mark their territory and ours—this is where you should go, this not. I was always on my feet in the old house, which also was on its feet, and had been for more than a hundred years.

Now in middle age, our vision’s softer, taste buds not so discerning, and one ear catches only a half-sentence at best. We’ve been knocked about enough to learn that no plan is a sure thing, no matter how well structured, and no body will last, no matter how well maintained. Our new house celebrates the gray areas, dissolves categories, subverts traditional outlines. A vertical house, with its right and proper posture, *holds*. A horizontal house cradles, then *releases*.

Shortly after we moved in, we discovered we weren't the first to take residence since the sale. Twenty feet down the chimney, just above the flue, was a nest of barn swallows. Outside I watched the female swoop from sky to nest without pausing to re-adjust her aim. Then the thrumming of her young began, faint at first, but as the summer wore on, nearly deafening, primordial. We could hardly talk without acknowledging the famished birds. They outgrew the nest, three of them bouncing into our living room, slamming into the windows, frantic, till we could catch and release them outdoors. Here and there, droppings on sills, stretchers, beams—evidence of their panic. My husband bought a wire screen for the chimney, but we never got around to mounting it. We rather liked the role we played in this swallow drama, a small part but essential: cupping the fledglings in a dish towel and carrying them gingerly to the porch. The birds did the rest.

All italicized quotations are from an e-mail interview with the architect Michael Barry of Arcumbra Incorporated, Louisville, KY.