

New Life for Split-Levels That Sizzled, Then Fizzled

"Nobody in the past 20 years has ever once asked me to design them a split-level home," said Michael Piccirillo, a Westchester architect who designs homes for new construction and remodeling. "But a lot of people ask me to redesign already existing splits for a more contemporary look and more open space."

While it offered hot sizzle among builders and homebuyers in the 1950s and 1960s, the split totally fizzled by 1970. Nevertheless, splits are a significant part of our residential because they were built at the height of the post-World War II suburban housing boom.

Most of these homes are still standing, and not many are disguised to hide what they are, unlike raised ranches, now being treated to "re-dos" as mock colonials by adding a few details to the façade.

That's harder to do with the lopsided configuration of a split. One story is where the living room, dining room and kitchen reside and there's a connecting two-story structure with stairs that drop a half flight in either direction, ascending to the bedrooms and bath above and usually a family room and a garage below. A fourth living space is sometimes added in the basement below the living room, and another bedroom, perhaps a master suite, in the attic space above the living room, again ascending only a half flight of stairs.



By Bill Primavera

But a creative architect can do wonders. Today, people either love or hate split-levels, whether they are already living in one or are in search of a home.

On the love side, the interesting configuration appeals to some people who believe they get a lot of house within the footprint with every inch used for living space, including the basement and attic. Some like the idea of ascending only a half flight of stairs. Others like the privacy the design affords, allowing parents to be quietly on a different level from their kids' bedrooms or playroom.

On the hate side, it is felt that the design's boxy rooms make it difficult to achieve a more open floor plan, which is now preferred. The façade is usually dominated by the one-car garage upon which the two-level wing rests. While the concept was originally created for slopes, the majority of such homes are built on flat land, requiring that a flight of steps be climbed outside before getting to the front door.

Also, because this style was built as an economic option to the more traditional and more expensive colonials and capes preferred in the preceding decades, many were constructed with little attempt to add detail or charm. For instance, they didn't have many windows, sometimes featuring a side wall with none at all.



Before and after photographs of split-level renovation in central Westchester, done in a French Country style. Dramatic change included a second-floor addition of a master bedroom with cathedral ceiling, bath and laundry. The exterior now features stucco finish with asphalt shingles, new portico and shed roof over garage door.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the kitchen and family gathering space are necessarily separated by this design, which flies in the face of how families want to live today.

Here are some solutions to put the sizzle back into the split level. To solve the problem of adding family living to the kitchen, an addition can be built to the back of the house. Piccirillo said that it is easier to do with a split than a ranch, because you don't have to build as high to get to the kitchen level as you do with a raised ranch to connect a family room.

To add detail to the exterior, a bump out might be added to the entrance to give more interest to the exterior and more needed



space in the entry. Also, drab exteriors can be upgraded with new finishes, the addition of trim details and additional windows.

So, yes, there is hope for even the homeliest split with a little creative thinking and a good architect. For those who want to know the possibilities, Piccirillo offers a free assessment and quote. He can be reached at 914-368-9838 or visit www.mpiccirilloarchitect.com.

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