

# Better Homes and Gardens® REMODELING IDEAS

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## MILWAUKEE AVENUE

Renovating a turn-of-the-century neighborhood in Minneapolis

Preservation Journal—Restoring old-house integrity  
Four novel solutions for the too-small house  
Four master suites—Three add-ons and a recycling





# MILWAUKEE AVENUE:

## TURNING BACK THE CLOCK

### 1880s

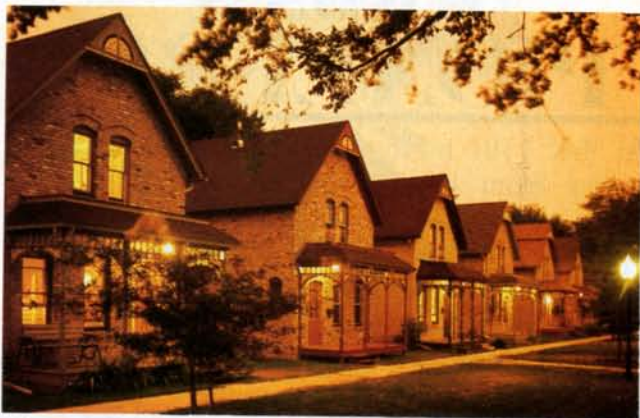
U.S.A. Boom time. It was the Gilded Age—robust, fearless, generous, full of gusto. Railroading was the biggest business of this big era. People were traveling more, farther, and safer than ever before. The world was indeed getting smaller.

One of the busiest places in the nation was New York's Ellis Island where hundreds of immigrants entered the country daily. In 1882 alone, when America was not yet a melting pot, 789,000 immigrants came to the New World. They came seeking work and the freedom that comes with self-reliance.

Housing developments sprang up in every major urban center—brownstone-front row houses in New York City, brick row houses in Philadelphia and Baltimore, wooden “three deckers” in Boston.

In Minneapolis, just beyond the periphery of the old walking city, a narrow, half-hidden two-block-long alley became the site of the first “planned workers’ community” in that city. Economic and demographic pressures demanded intensive use of land, so lot sizes were cut in half. Modest, repetitive housing was constructed using copybook plans.

After building was completed, 48 small, brick, 2½-bedroom houses with look-alike gingerbread on their front porches were tucked closely together along what



This simple late 19th-century streetscape speaks eloquently of the common man and woman, of hard work and plain living.

was soon to become Milwaukee Avenue. It was a unique streetscape with its continuity of modest and similar forms, its simple rhythms of gabled roofs built right up to the sidewalk.

Scandinavian immigrants coming to Minneapolis to work in the Milwaukee Railroad yards were drawn to the quiet dignity of nearby Milwaukee Avenue. Before long other workers took their places along the street—shoemakers, butter-makers, bakers, coopers, blacksmiths. A cohesive ethnic neighborhood was evolving. Milwaukee Avenue was getting a soul.

By the turn of the century, the avenue had come of age. When word of its friendliness spread abroad, the street became a stopping-off place for low-income Scandinavian families fresh from the Old Country. Needy friends were invited

to share a home, often creating an extended family of ten or more. Such generosity had even been incorporated into the house plans. The extra “half” bedroom was dutifully dubbed as “the mother-in-law’s room.”

So Milwaukee Avenue grew and changed through the social upheavals of 20th-century America. By 1970 the neighborhood had become aged and worn from years of overcrowding and neglect. Ninety years had taken its toll.

After suffering a seedy old age, the decrepit neighborhood was declared obsolete for contemporary living. Milwaukee Avenue was scheduled for demolition.

Surprisingly, the strong sense of neighborhood remained intact. “Renewal, Not Removal” became the rallying cry and a committee was formed to redirect the efforts to rehabilitation.

Finally, in 1974, the avenue was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Intense, prolonged community involvement saved Milwaukee Avenue from the wrecking ball.

Historians had decided that the neighborhood, with its regular if somewhat severe geometry, offered a visual lesson in economic and social history. Few of the residential areas built in the second half of the 19th century resulted in the construction of such a significant number of contiguous brick houses. So, the run-down houses on Milwaukee Avenue went up for sale, some for as little as a dollar.

Just as economics and demographics played a major role in the neighborhood’s construction, they again favored Milwaukee Avenue in its resurrection. Rising energy costs attracted workers wishing to be nearer their jobs. The intimate scale and harmonious facade of the streetscape offered a humane alternative to suburban sprawl.

Caring people soon discovered the area, and restoration began. Then a marvelous thing happened: Throughout the reconstruction, with its noise and rubble, close bonds between neighbors were again formed.

Today, the simplicity of this late 19th-century streetscape speaks eloquently of the common man and woman, of the hardships and pleasures that come from hard work and plain living.

Welcome to Milwaukee Avenue.

*Continued*



# MILWAUKEE AVENUE:

**W**hen Milwaukee Avenue was declared a historical site, the greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation stepped in and purchased several of the houses, some for only a dollar. Then, plans were made for renovation.

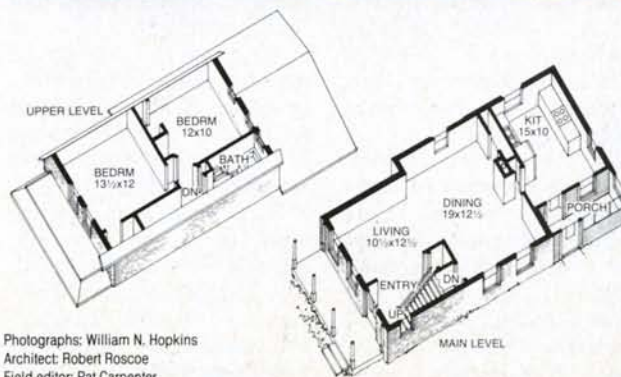
Because of the site's historical status, there were rules governing pitch of roof, porch construction, siding, setback from street, building elevation, fencing, walks, and windows. Care was taken to maintain the basic qualities of the houses while making them more structurally sound and updating them for contemporary living needs.

Since none of the houses had basements, one was dug for each and new foundations replaced the crumbling limestone ones. Great pains also were taken in restoring the exteriors to historical accuracy. Those houses in poor condition were spruced up with used brick obtained from other old buildings and new wood trim milled to simulate the old designs. Since only one of the houses had retained its original porch with decorative gingerbread, the trim was removed in sections and used to make a pattern from which replicas could be constructed.

The house *opposite* was considered in "minimally livable condition" when the greater Minneapolis Metropolitan Housing Corporation bought it. To bring it up to more acceptable standards, the antiquated heating, plumbing and electrical systems were torn out and replaced. New pine woodwork was milled to duplicate the

## SOME CALL THEM "URBAN PIONEERS"

At the 11th hour, Milwaukee Avenue was saved from demolition. Bulldozers ceased their rumbling. Then, the pioneers started coming, a hearty group of city-loving people committed to revitalizing what had become a dying inner-city neighborhood. Slowly, they breathed new life into the community by rebuilding it—one dream house at a time.



Photographs: William N. Hopkins  
Architect: Robert Roscoe  
Field editor: Pat Carpenter

original woodwork that had deteriorated. Then the house, along with one other, was offered for sale in a lottery.

Michael Cohen, a young urban planner in Minneapolis, was well aware of all the activity on Milwaukee Avenue. Ever since he walked the street with his wife Soni one snowy evening, he couldn't get the neighborhood out of his mind. The Cohens had been looking for a house to buy, but given the current market, nothing they could afford appealed to them.

On the day of the lottery Mike phoned Soni at work saying, "The deadline for two houses on Milwaukee Avenue is 5 p.m. today. I'm going to put our names in."

Monday morning a representative of the Housing Corporation called Mike at work with the good news—the Cohens had an option to buy their choice of the two houses. Their name had been drawn first!

Later, Mike said buying the house was easy. "Everything was taken care of for us. There was no bidding on the house. The price was already set. We just had to tell them which one we wanted, then find financing."

Four months afterward, Mike and Soni moved in. It was the middle of winter. Everything was completed but the exterior painting. It was part of the deal, though, and was done later when the weather improved.

"I felt really guilty," Soni admitted. "Everyone around us was working so hard, living in houses without electricity. Ours was not only finished, it was so clean we could've eaten off the floor."

*Continued*











## "URBAN PIONEERS"

*Continued*

**A**dded Soni, "Friends of ours who live in the suburbs like to call us urban pioneers. But really, the people who lived through the whole rehab-restoration project are much more worthy of that title."

From the beginning, the project was meant to be interpretive restoration, not 100 percent historically accurate. Although the exteriors are fully restored to their 19th-century facade, the interiors are another story. Mike and Soni's house, for example, harmonizes yesterday's space with today's tempo.

Since the interior had to be gutted anyway, the architect decided to create an open floor plan, one that would give the illusion of more space and light. This appealed to the Cohens since they like a lot of unbroken, uncluttered space.

On the main floor, *left*, you can see how the open spaces flow gracefully into one another. Several walls were removed to create this effect. For instance, one wall was torn down to create the expansive, 7½-foot entryway to the living room, near left. Before the change, there was only a small, standard doorway here.

Walls also were removed between the dining room and living room, and between the living room and the mother-in-law's room (now a music area, *see page 38*). Three houses on Milwaukee Avenue have this floor plan.

For a look at what an original floor plan is like, just walk down the street to Marge Miller's house (*pages 46 through 52*).

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## "URBAN PIONEERS"

*Continued*



Once inside this house it doesn't seem 100 years old. The Cohens' 1980s life-style is readily apparent here. It's a clean, earthy atmosphere with a basic, natural charm.

All white walls and ceilings make this small, 823-square-foot house seem much more spacious than it really is. All the floors are wood (as in the music and dining rooms, *right*) except for the entryway where the floor is natural slate. Rather than cover all this beauty with carpeting, the Cohens chose colorful area rugs. Now the floors are warm and the rooms are better acoustically. Blinds instead of curtains accentuate the no-frills life-style.

The home's practical, natural appeal is carried through in the 11x15-foot kitchen, *above*. Cabinets, counter tops, and backsplash are all natural wood. The kitchen window represents a struc-

tural change. Because it extends lower than the counter tops, it was moved to the center of the wall.

In many ways, living on Milwaukee Avenue is like living in a goldfish bowl. Tourists are always walking down the street, curiously peering through windows. How do the Cohens cope with that?

"If you're looking for privacy, this isn't it," Soni stresses. "There are times when I run downstairs in the morning with a towel around me and I see 12 people staring through the window. But that's all part of living here. If you don't have the patience for that, or feel the pride of neighborhood here, then you can be sure that this is not the place for you."

"But for us it's important to know our neighbors and be a part of a community. We help each other out in good times and in bad. Milwaukee Avenue is a true neighborhood in the strongest sense of the word."









# MILWAUKEE AVENUE:

**A**ll during the rehabilitation, Milwaukee Avenue was the lively scene of activities, including many publicity and social events. There were house-gutting parties, vacant-house patrols, an open house for bankers, and a mayor's tour, among others.

It was during one of these tours that Earl Craig first saw his house. At the time, Earl was chairman of the city's Advisory Committee which was in charge of selecting inner-city areas for federal rehabilitation grants. It was in this capacity that Earl toured the avenue and discovered his house, previously used as a duplex. When he said he wanted to buy it, he was advised to apply for two or three others so he would be sure to get one. But Earl insisted, "I only want that house."

After an initial screening to determine his interest and dedication to the project, Earl was the first person chosen to buy a house on the avenue. At that time the neighborhood was an enormous gamble. Would the community blossom or just fester as it had been doing for several years?

According to the sales agreement, Earl could hire his own contractor and architect as long as they adhered to the already established guidelines. Since most of those guidelines regulated the exterior, Earl was able to get a \$6,000 federal grant to refurbish the facade. Then, work began.

Because it was too close to the house next door, the entire structure had to be lifted off its foundation and moved over three feet. All old brick was peeled off and replaced

## LIFE IN AN "ELEGANT OLD ENVELOPE"

For Earl Craig, it was the house, not the neighborhood, that beckoned. He was the first to buy a house on the avenue. From the start Earl wanted to create a contrast in design: The stage set by the home's exterior—an elegant old envelope—with an interior reflecting a spirit Victorians would never dare.



with old brick in better condition. New windows replaced old ones.

By carefully removing all the wood trim from the porch and renewing the finish, Earl was able to save all but two small pieces of the original trim. Then, with enthusiastic help from his new neighbors, Earl proceeded to gut the long-neglected interior.

"I immediately saw the possibility of opening up all interior spaces," Earl reflects. "In fact, I wanted it to be open to all three floors, but that couldn't be done because the roof and the third floor stabilize the house structurally."

Acting on a friend's recommendation, Earl hired architect Herb Ketcham to execute the open design. When the two first met in Earl's former city high-rise apartment, Ketcham's creativity was sparked by Earl's impressive collection of contemporary art.

"I purposefully wanted to create a contrast in design," Ketcham explains. "The stage was set by the exterior—an elegant old envelope—but when you open the door I wanted all the old elegance turned into grand, open contemporary space—the perfect backdrop for Earl's collection of contemporary art and his contemporary lifestyle."

Earl was his own contractor during the 14-month project. In March, 1977, he moved in.

The courageous design scheme worked. Gingerbread and old fawn-colored brick mark the exterior of this century-old dwelling. Inside is an atmosphere as crisp as bond paper with beams and light dividing nearly wall-less space.

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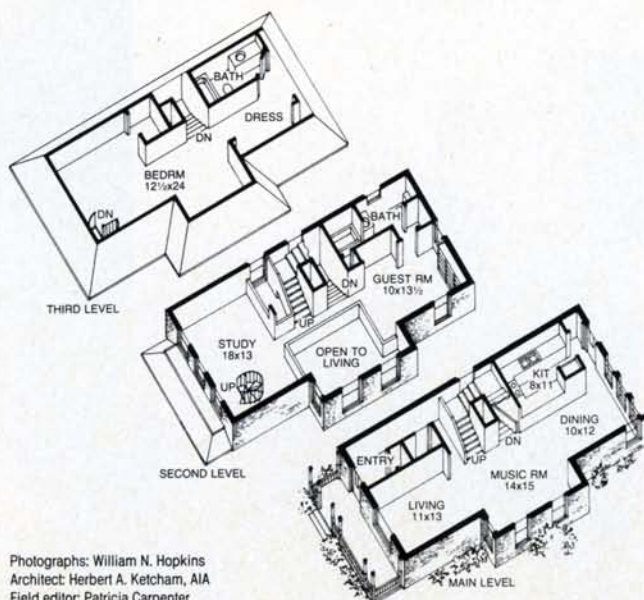






## "ELEGANT OLD ENVELOPE"

Continued



Photographs: William N. Hopkins  
Architect: Herbert A. Ketcham, AIA  
Field editor: Patricia Carpenter

Coming into the house, visitors pass through a small art gallery where Earl displays his temporary collection. Then, just around the corner, the main living area opens in grand contemporary scale, *opposite*. In place of traditional walls dividing the space, beams and light interplay to create a lyrical sculptural atmosphere.

A classic center living space with a monumental stair now forms the basic plan of Earl's home. This stairwell also ties the open, contemporary interior to the traditional period exterior. Another staircase, this one a spiral, serves as a private bridge between the second-floor library and the third-floor master suite.

The view from the second-

floor library, *opposite*, shows the relationship of the center stairwell, at far right, to the spiral staircase at top.

Even though both first and second floors are open to each other, there is still a distinct division of activity areas. On the first floor, an area rug defines the conversation space; chairs and table establish the dining room next to the kitchen, and the baby grand piano naturally sets off the music/bay area.

Simple furnishings make this relatively small house seem much larger than it really is. The main-floor conversation area measures 10x12 feet; the bay/music area is 13x14 feet, and the open dining spot is 9x11 feet.

Blinds on all windows accent the austere decor, yet provide privacy from activities on the mall beyond.

Continued



## "ELEGANT OLD ENVELOPE"

*Continued*



**T**he trim galley kitchen, *above*, is only 8x14 feet. But a generous-sized pass-through allows Earl to prepare meals yet keep visual contact with guests in the other rooms when he entertains. The pass-through also helps circulate air through what could have been a stuffy work space. Simple cabinetry trim helps set the clutter-free tone of the small space. And light-colored walls add some openness to the windowless room.

The second floor, *right*, contains a study, balcony, bedroom, and full bath. Even though it is open to the first floor, the study is still a private, almost-hidden retreat, ideal for concentration. The central stairwell helps establish the space, yet unifies it with the first and third floors.

Refurbishing the 2,400 square-foot house (three floors and basement) cost Earl \$68,000. That's \$27.20 a square foot. Not a bad price for a classy, one-of-a-kind showplace.

*Continued*









# MILWAUKEE AVENUE:

**M**arge Miller found out about Milwaukee Avenue from an article in the Sunday paper. She was intrigued enough to join the citizens' planning committee for the project. That's when she found the house that eventually became hers, *opposite*.

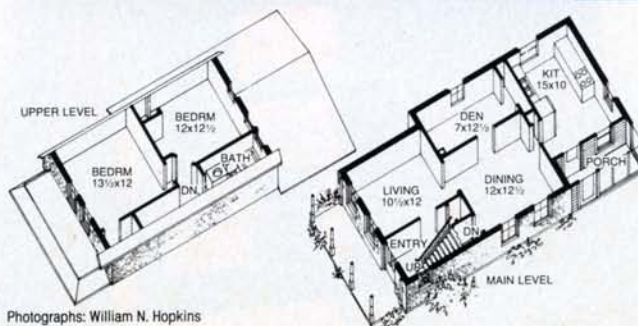
"After reading the article, the thought of such an old urban setting really appealed to me," Marge relates. "I like the stimulation of the city. Being close to the theater, music, the university, shopping—that's important to me. Living here, I can bicycle downtown; I am five minutes from the Guthrie Theater; I'm near the river; and close by there is a lovely running area with nature paths and picnic spots, even a spring where we get natural spring water."

For four years Marge was a member of the Milwaukee Avenue citizens' action committee, the group in charge of the restoration project. It was through the efforts of this group that a distinct neighborhood identity and sense of purpose was maintained. Through such daily involvement with the project, Marge decided she definitely wanted to live on the avenue.

"I had always wanted to have an old house," she says. "When I saw this house, everything began to fit together. It was an old house, an old neighborhood, but the worrisome things—wiring, heating, plumbing—had all been replaced, so I wouldn't have those problems. The house was insulated, everything worked, and it was a size I could manage. Really, for me, it combined the best of both worlds."

## RESTORED TO ITS ORIGINAL CHARACTER

Down the avenue a little way is Marge Miller's house, a true journey back in time to the turning of the 19th century. Of all the houses on Milwaukee Avenue, this one comes closest to its original character. Marge wouldn't have it any other way. The old urban setting is ideal for her interests, the old house is perfect for her life-style.



Photographs: William N. Hopkins  
Architect: Robert Roscoe Field editor: Patricia Carpenter

Everywhere in Marge's home you meet a past as evocative as old lace. As soon as you enter, you see it in the moldings on the front door, the gracefully turned balusters on the stairs, and the finely worked leaded-glass window in the entryway, *left*.

Marge was the first one to move into a finished house on Milwaukee Avenue. That was in 1976 when the avenue was still a one-way street. Later that year a mall and mini-park replaced the street, so it's strictly a pedestrian avenue now. Residents and visitors park in assigned spots in lots near the homes.

Parking, though, has never been a problem, Marge says. "It's been a long time since I lived in a home with a traditional driveway and garage. I don't miss it, though. My parking place is close to my house, I have visual contact whenever I want it, and I'm close enough to carry groceries and shopping bags."

A homeowners' association maintains the mall and the neighborhood with money (\$5 a month) collected from each homeowner. That same association functioned as an ad-hoc organization during the actual restoration. It provided a pool for sharing information and opinions about such things as where to get discounts on building materials, what permits and legal steps were required in rehabilitation, and which contractors were the best to work with. Participation in activities within the organization became an excellent way to meet prospective neighbors and share the joys and dilemmas of restoration.

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## ORIGINAL CHARACTER

*Continued*

All of the rooms and ceilings wore a fresh coat of white paint when Marge moved into her home. There was wall-to-wall carpet on the floor. And, like the other houses, hers had a brand-new basement.

Now, period wallpaper covers the walls and area rugs highlight the beautiful wide-planked flooring of the original house. Those changes, coupled with turn-of-the-century antique furnishings, make Marge's house the most authentic period restoration on the avenue.

Furnishings in the home are mostly Victorian and reflect a popular, turn-of-the-century style. At that time such items could be ordered through a mail-order service.

In the living room, *left*, the gracefully curved channel-back armchair and open-back side chair are typical of this period. So is the cane-back rocker and the two oil lamps, now wired for electricity. An Oriental-style rug completes the grouping while adding a rich, deep red to the color scheme, also typical of the era.

The oval portrait behind convex glass was a turn-of-the-century status symbol since photography was then a recent invention. To hang a portrait in your house proved you were genuinely modern, and showed you valued keeping a historical record for posterity.

Period wallpaper in a delicate tracery pattern blends well with the nostalgic look of the furniture. Marge chose all her wall coverings from a Victorian pattern catalog.

*Continued*



## ORIGINAL CHARACTER

*Continued*



**I**nterpretive restoration, like period restoration, forces you to weigh the advantages of authentic charm against old-fashioned inconvenience. Some of our modern-day innovations just make good sense, like plumbing and electric lighting, for example.

In the kitchen shown *above*, Marge chose interpretive restoration, opting for modern convenience with a period flavor. Instead of an old-fashioned wall-hung sink, there's a neat stainless steel one. The golden wood cabinets are the same hue as the period oak furnishings and the hardwood floors found throughout the house. White porcelain doorknobs were common accoutrements in turn-of-the-century homes, and are available today.

To capture a period flavor, Marge chose to stencil the painted kitchen wall.

She did the designs herself at chair-rail height and at ceiling level.

In the dining room, *right*, the round oak table is the center of interest, a familiar feature in 1880s dining rooms. Oak side chairs with cane seats are gathered around the table. An art nouveau table lamp with a metal-stained glass shade lights the area. Lamps such as this often appeared on the dining table to light a game of dominoes, a friendly conversation, or a family Bible reading.

Hanging graciously from the ceiling is an original, old electric chandelier. An elegant oak mantel clock with fancy fretwork carving highlights the glass-doored, oak china cabinet.

The adjoining mother-in-law's room is a small space, the perfect size for Marge's sewing room.

*Continued*











## ORIGINAL CHARACTER

*Continued*

**A**lthough there's wall-to-wall carpeting throughout the upstairs, period furnishings help keep the bedroom, *above*, firmly placed in the 19th century. Old-fashioned golden oak was definitely the popular building material of that era, and all the furnishings here are oak—the bed, quilt rack, and combination dresser/washstand. Ewer and ba-

sin are hand-painted, well-preserved antique pottery.

Marge purchased her home on Milwaukee Avenue simply because it was the only one available at the time. However, the house has turned out to be the best one for her. Originality means a lot to Marge. She wanted the restoration to be as authentic as possible. Since the house she bought retained its original floor plan, she had a good start in the right direction.

However, if she were to do it over again, there are a few things Marge would change. For instance, she would use ceramic tile or hardwood on the kitchen floor, not vinyl. Instead of duplicating the old woodwork, she would strip and reuse the original. Instead of textured ceilings, she would have the original ones.

Still, Marge is happy with her house. "It's perfect for me," she says contentedly, "just what I always wanted."