

# Masterful Attic

A design/build firm transforms a large attic into a cozy, light-filled master suite for its clients

By Laurie Banyay

**L**andis Architects/Builders excels at a design-build model for its clients. It starts off with a project team comprising a team leader, project designer and design and construction support staff. Three steps then ensue prior to construction: schematic design, design development and construction documents.

For a master suite in a 1923 Washington, D.C., home, Ethan Landis, CR, LEED AP, principal at Landis Architects/Builders, assumed the team leader role. "I met with the clients initially, looked at the project, took pictures, told them about our process, got a sense of what their goals were and wrote a design letter," Landis explains.

After that meeting, Landis brought project designer Tahani Share, Assoc. AIA, onboard. "I handed the baton off to her at that point," Landis says. "I worked closely with her in terms of what's practical and buildable, and how to incorporate systems into the shell of the house. She was the mastermind in terms of interior space, material selection and working with the clients to develop all of the finish and design details."

## SELLING THE ATTIC SPACE

"The house was beautiful," Share recalls. "The clients originally wanted to create a master suite on the second floor from two smaller bedrooms with a bathroom in between. We showed them an option that combined those two rooms, and then I asked them about the attic and if they'd be interested in moving the master suite there; it was so large. Although they didn't want to spend a lot of money in the attic, they were maybe open to some ideas. I knew there was a lot of potential there, and I



wanted them to see that." The attic is easily accessed by a standard set of stairs from the second floor.

After talking with her clients, Share sent a follow-up email explaining the concept for the attic design. Part of the explanation reads: "The intent is to show you the possibilities and what the space can offer should you decide to move your master suite to the attic. The main idea behind this option is to maximize the use of the attic space in terms of both square footage and volume. We will remove the existing ceiling panels and drywall the roof rafters, which will instantly give you increased volume. Then, we will push the existing walls a little bit to the back to increase the living space. The existing walls are now 7 ft. high. By pushing those back, we will create lower wall heights, which is how we want the space to look: dramatic angles, asymmetrical space and a true attic feel. We will maintain an open





**MASTER DESIGN  
AWARDS 2015  
ROOM REMODEL  
SILVER**

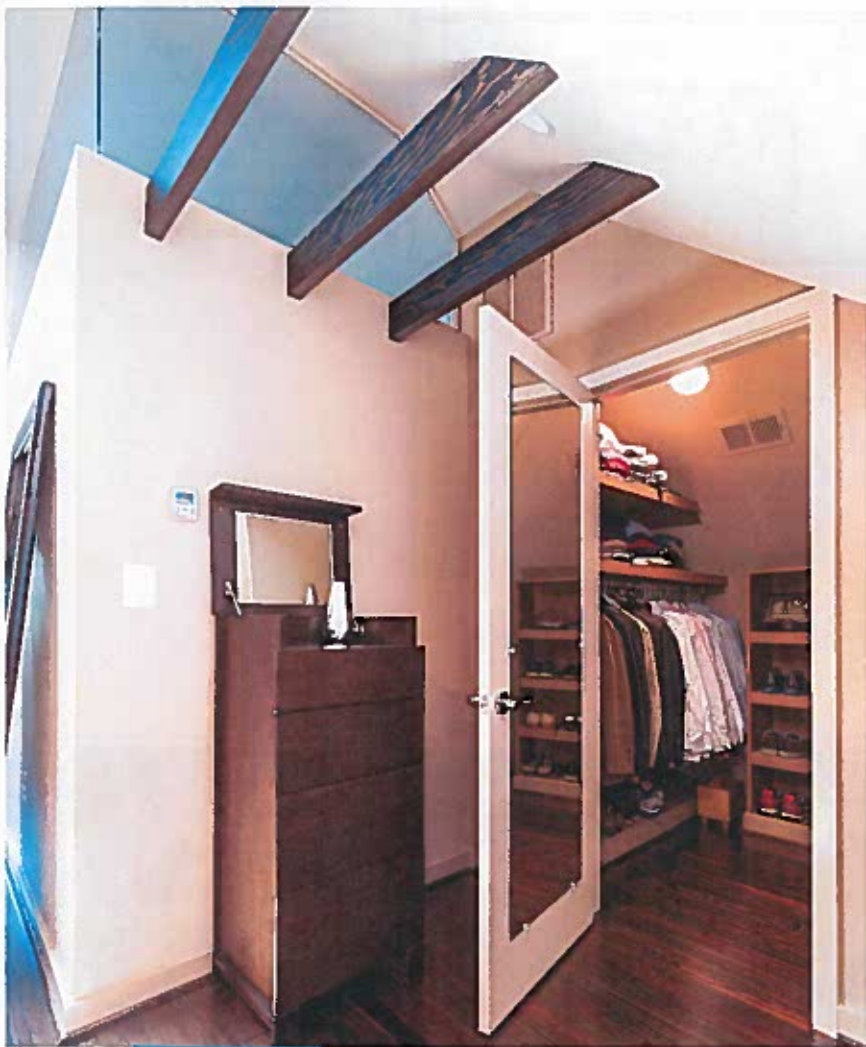
**PROJECT INFORMATION**

**Varnum Street Master Suite**  
**Design/Build:** Land's  
Architects/Builders,  
Washington, D.C.,  
landsconstruction.com  
**Completed:** December 2014  
**Square footage before:** 600  
**Square footage after:** 700  
**Cost:** \$229,203

**PRODUCT INFORMATION**

**Flooring:** Original wood  
**HVAC:** Carrier  
**Windows:** Pella Architect  
Series  
**Insulation:** Icynene  
**Cabinetry:** Bremtown  
**Countertop:** Carrera marble  
**Toilet:** Toto

**Shower faucet:** Danze  
**Sink:** Kohler  
**Sink faucet:** Danze  
**Tile:** Nemo GlasStyle  
**Light fixtures:** George Kovacs



■ This master suite has two closets, each placed in the eaves.

■ Long horizontal ceiling beams scale down the large-volume space.

floor plan and use glass panels and doors for privacy and separation of different functions.”

Share attached some inspirational photos to illustrate her email and, ultimately, the clients decided the attic was the optimal space for their master suite. “They were thrilled,” Share recalls. “They said to forget about the second floor plans; they were going to move the master suite to the attic.”

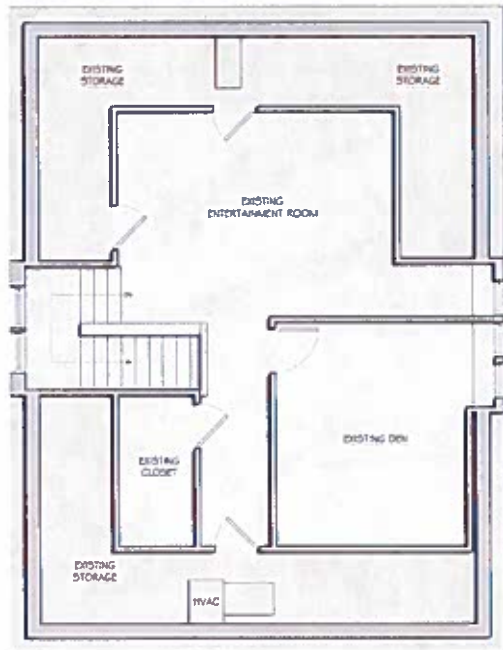
#### **MOVING UPWARD, EXPANDING AREA**

The existing attic’s walls were pulled in from the perimeter, leaving the home with a small attic space. Share proposed to remove the walls and push them out to create more square footage. “The trick was to give them shorter walls and leave the attic ceiling volume to the sense of openness,” she says.

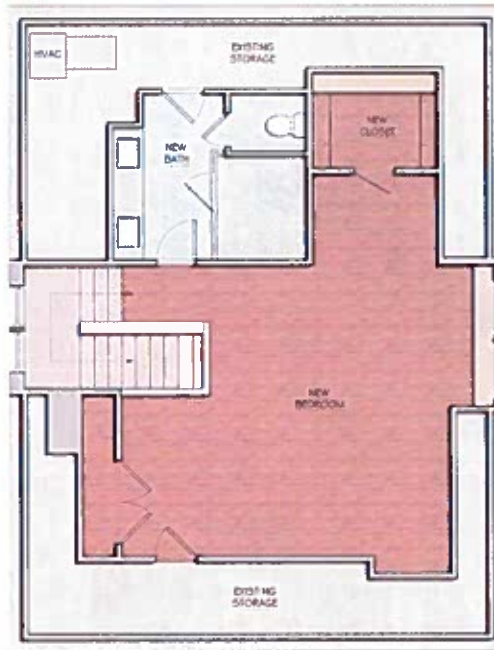


This open concept is simpatico with the rest of the house. Since purchasing the home, the homeowners gradually renovated it. “It’s kept with the character of the house with its casing, crowns and architectural lines,” Share says, “but it was remodeled in a very modern way. It’s all open spaces with nicely finished wood floors and fresh colors. A lot of the attic is modern style from the first-floor renovation. They wanted to do a modern design in the attic so that’s what we did.”

Roof beams over the bed and closet scale down the voluminous space and help it to feel cozier. To introduce more natural light, two existing dormers were reworked and an existing small skylight was upgraded to a larger skylight. “We rebuilt one of the dormers,” Landis says. “When we finished the demo, we discovered the way the dormer had been framed allowed us to rework the



*Before*



*After*

Removing existing paneling and pushing existing walls back so they were at a lower height around the attic perimeter allowed the master suite to maintain an open floor plan that is bathed in natural light via skylights and dormer windows.



The third-floor attic is accessible via a standard set of stairs from the second floor.

structure inside, make it a lot larger and improve the sight lines." Two long steps in the dormer hide ducts underneath and provide seating and storage. The new windows are casement windows for egress purposes, which are required by code in a bedroom.

The bathroom is the only enclosed space. Continuous clerestory glass panels wrap around the corner wall of the bathroom enclosure to bring more light inside. A frosted bathroom door maintains privacy while allowing more natural light in. The large shower has fittings on opposite ends and has marble floors and walls. Horizontal bands of

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Blue tiles with horizontal chrome bands add a modern touch to the marble shower.

Clerestory glass panels around the bathroom corner and a frosted glass door introduce natural light to the bathroom without sacrificing privacy.

thin chrome trim add a modern touch to the traditional material, as do ice blue glass tile accents.

Two closets are tucked into the eaves, as well as additional storage. The HVAC system also is located in the eaves and accessed through two doors — one next to the bed and one in the bathroom.

The 12-week process also included an HVAC and insulation upgrade. “We knew they would spend a lot of time in there, and we didn’t want them to not have good insulation and protection from the elements,” Share explains.

Landis, who is active in local and national sustainability efforts, says, “We are very committed to a number of fundamental best practices on almost all jobs, which includes insulating all accessible walls and roof structures very well. We also use high-efficiency HVAC equipment that



“Most everything else we pulled out of there was recycled.”

Landis Architects/Builders

is designed to be as energy efficient as possible, improve comfort, improve indoor air quality and be very quiet.”

Recycling and reusing also is a major part of any job. In this space, only the flooring was able to be reused. “Everything else in the attic was really old and not of any value,” Landis says. “Most everything else we pulled out of there was recycled. The waste management company we work with has very advanced technology for recycling wood, drywall, brick and other materials that come out of most residential demolition projects.”

Share enjoyed watching the project evolve. “When you work with attics, no matter how experienced you are, you don’t capture the feeling of the volume of the attic until it is in construction. I was watching it every step of the way and seeing it develop perfection was my favorite part.” | QR

