



Making Peace With Perry Homes

By Yolita Schmidt and Gerald Moorhead

Small changes, big differences: Top photos show how the standard Perry Homes kitchen can be transformed with new cabinets and color choices. Bottom photos reveal the advantages of removing trim, fireplace, and fan.



Before: A light well goes through from the second to the first floor. After: Closed in, the light well became a light-drenched seating nook.

OUR FRIENDS WERE SURPRISED when we, a pair of architects, moved into a Perry Homes townhouse. Now filling the inner city and transforming old neighborhoods, these spec structures are hardly the image of quality design and construction that would attract a design professional.

But last year, when we decided to look for a new house, we realized that land prices in our neighborhood at Shepherd and Alabama made building something we had designed ourselves prohibitive. We have lived in the area for more than 20 years and wanted to stay. Not eager to take on remodeling an old house again, we decided a spec townhouse was our only other economic option.

Driving to work, I watched as old tenement apartments on Woodhead came down and 16 Perry Homes townhouses went up. We were attracted to one unit in particular that had a north-and-east orientation and a large, open living and kitchen space filling the second floor. We knew

what to expect from this type of construction and how to make the most of a few simple changes to adapt the townhouse to our taste for a clean, modern space.

We bought the property during framing, which allowed us to make some alterations in the Perry Homes norm, alterations Perry Homes was quite accommodating about. We had the fireplace taken out, giving us more wall space for books. A light well over the entry was floored over, providing a second-floor seating nook. Then we simplified the trim, eliminating all crown moldings and changing the baseboards and door trim to a simple, plain profile. These small revisions did a remarkable job of making the rooms feel more light and open. Since we couldn't get the kitchen cabinets — marked by heavy moldings and an inefficient use of volume — changed, we replaced them after we moved in.

We unified the three floor levels with the use of colors inspired by Mexican paper flowers on the three walls that form the stairwell: a golden yellow, intense magenta, and a clear true blue. A softer set of complementary colors derived from Frank Lloyd Wright's palette turn the sliding doors of the new kitchen cabinets into a variable, three-dimensional Mondrian composition.

Like any architects, we're still making modifications. But we're pleased that we have a suitable house to work with, and happy we were able to change the heavy, traditional character of the interior to a light, modern space using simple means at a modest cost. It's evidence of the possibilities inherent in even the most basic townhouse forms. Someday, builders may respond to that evidence and provide more design choices for various tastes. Until then, sadly, the options are few. But they're not, as we discovered, nonexistent. ■