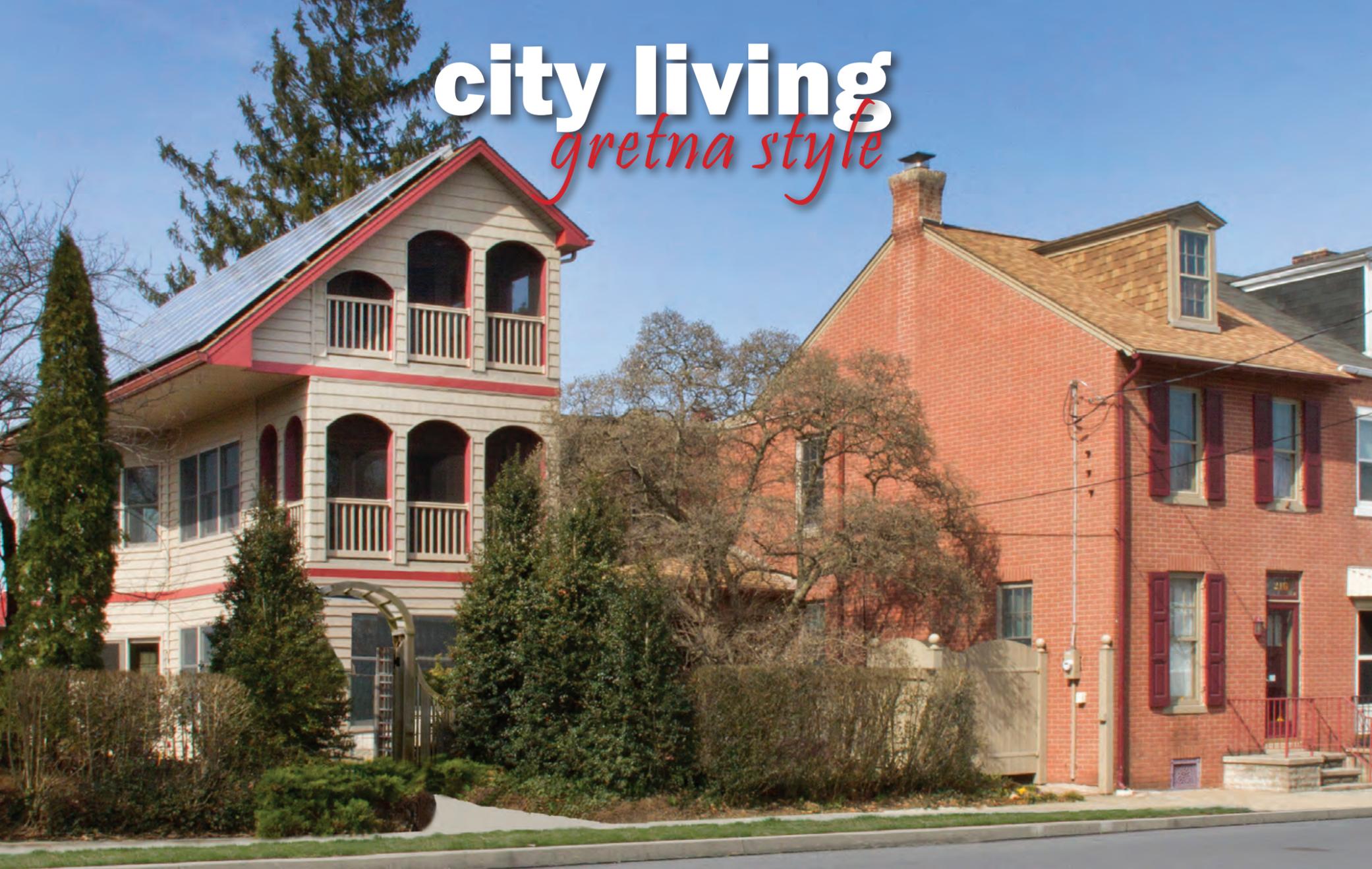


city living

gretna style



SPOTLIGHT

project description

Type:	Three-story city row house addition.
Contractor:	Stephen Black Builders, Inc. (see ad on p. 31)
Trade Partners:	CKC Wood Floors (see ad p. 35) Jay N. Crouse Excavating, Inc. (see ad p. 32) Leibley Plumbing, Inc. (see ad p. 36) Martin's Flooring (see ad p. 25) MillStream Landscapes (see ad p. 33) RP Electric (see ad p. 34) Wind and Solar (see ad p. 30)
Scope:	<p>This project consisted primarily of a three-story, 1,548 square foot addition onto the side of a 137-year-old city row home. The owners' goal was for the new space to feel like a Mt. Gretna cottage. Each floor was done with as many windows and doors as possible to create the feeling of "porches" even though they are year-round living spaces. Incorporated into the side addition design was a fire escape from a previous addition that had sentimental value to the owners. Also added was a front porch to provide a covered entrance as well as a private, covered outdoor area in which to sit.</p> <p>The owners decided to look to the future and add solar collection to the project. So with this in mind, and the existing home being oil radiant heat, the decision was made to go with a mini-split system on each of the floors with 1 large quiet outdoor unit to handle all three—a much more efficient alternative than going with an oil unit. In addition, access to the main basement was complicated due to several additions added to the house over the years.</p> <p>For ease of use, the steps to each floor were done with only 7-inch riser heights instead of the typical height of 8 inches. To accommodate an elevator chair (if and when necessary), the width of the staircase was increased to four feet. Each floor was done in hardwood flooring and the ceiling of each floor was insulated to help with noise reduction. For charm, the homeowners opted to expose and paint the existing house brick walls rather than installing drywall over them. The exterior of the house was done in insulated crane board siding—adding another 2.5-r value to the r21 rated new walls. In addition to added insulation, the solid core siding is very durable and stronger against hits. To the rear of the home, a 9' x 12' sunroom was added to an existing 12' x 12' addition (originally built as a summer kitchen) which as part of this project was converted into an exercise room.</p> <p>Exterior work included re-grading of the ½ acre lot which included the addition of a rain garden for both appearance as well as function—it was necessary to handle the property's rain water including the runoff from the home's extensive roof system. To supplement the rain garden, swells and dispersing water runs were also incorporated into the landscape design. Pavers were installed around the entire length of the addition along with a patio and retaining wall in the back as well as a smaller patio on the side of the house. At the back of the property, a hidden roadway (beneath the grass) was created to handle the weight of future landscaping vehicles—avoiding unsightly and contour altering tire rutting. The back fence was redesigned to have an angled gate which dramatically improved access to the yard from the narrow alley in the back. The back fence line and hidden road were lined with plantings for privacy.</p>

When Stephen Black Builders, Inc. approached the homeowners to suggest the idea of building a new home rather than putting on an addition to their city row home, they wanted no part of it. They loved their city and they loved their city life.

They didn't want to give up their ability to walk to the grocery, the drug store, or the friendly local breakfast spot. Besides, this property has always been in the family—all of its 137 years!

Given the homeowners' stated goal of designing for their future and interest in the aging-in-place concept, Stephen Black Builders, Inc. knew they had their work cut out for them. Building a new home to accom-

modate an aging-in-place theme was straight forward—start by building everything on the same level. Constructing a three-story addition hardly seemed consistent with typical aging-in-place design. But then again, these were no typical homeowners and this was not a typical city property.

"...the windows were high and it was difficult to look out and see the yard. It seemed a shame to have a half acre property that we couldn't see without making a deliberate effort."

While the end-row home was typical in its design—small rooms with high windows—the property was anything but. On its south side is a half acre that is recognized by the National Wildlife Federation as a *Certified Wildlife Habitat*. And because of its hilltop location

and east/west orientation, the home has great exposure to sunrises in the front and sunsets in the back.

To learn more about this unique project and the motivations behind it, we went directly to the homeowners for answers. Here's what we found out.

First off, tell us how you came upon Stephen Black Builders, Inc.? Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology had a hand-out at one of the Builder's shows held at Franklin and Marshall College. On the back of it was a listing of contractors who were working with them for *Green Building*. Stephen Black was at the same show, and we sought him out as a result of his being one of the contractors listed on the back of that flyer.

What did you like about Stephen Black Builders, Inc. that sealed the deal? Eric Kormos of Steven Black Builders

had come and sat with my husband and me for an earlier project to remodel our bathroom and make it as handicap accessible as the configuration of the house would permit. We liked the interview and the subsequent project. We found Eric to be an excellent manager of the project; and we particularly liked the long-term relationships Stephen Black Builders, Inc. has had with its sub-contractors. Many



Solar System: Wind and Solar

of the people who worked on the initial project also were involved in the recent addition— meaning that they already had a familiarity with the peculiarities of our old house.

Aside from the specific ideas that you wanted included in your plans, did any new ideas evolve as a result of Stephen Black Builders, Inc. involvement? Eric really knows his products, which helped us evaluate the benefits

and drawbacks to various building materials. Eric offered good suggestions for enhancing the project as well as a number of suggestions for minimizing costs. We always found him to be honest and felt comfortable that he was as much an advocate for our obtaining the best product as he was an advocate for his company.

What specific ideas were you planning to include in the project? Universal Design

to meet the needs of our friends or ourselves who might have handicapping conditions from time to time. These include no steps from the street in order to accommodate a wheel chair, walker, or market basket on wheels; 7” risers on our steps between the first and second floor as well as between the second and third floor and deep treads as well as wider than normal staircases to accommodate a chair lift for ourselves and/or our friends. The staircases are intentional as a way to do “sneaky” exercise as we go upstairs to see sunrises and sunsets out our windows which face due east and due west. We asked that the addition retain the ability to be closed off from the rest of the house so that in extremely

cold weather we could keep the temperatures in there very low except when the spaces are in use. The sun porches themselves insulate much of the house from the summer sun and create a thermal break to reduce our fuel usage in winter in the original house. We also added a connector room between a 1952 addition hallway and the original summer kitchen so that we could access this area for exercise equipment. The connector room provides a westward outlook to the yard and gardens. The intention for the second floor was to create a private ballroom—with the line of dance expandable into the adjacent rooms through French doors. An hour of ballroom dancing is about the equivalent of a mile of walking. The mirrors in the room provide a way for exercising to music or following a DVD of Tai Chi—which exercises 95% of one’s muscles with a pleasant and gentle routine.

You opted to go with a solar energy system—what was your motivation?

Our intention was to create a house that would serve us well for another 25 years as a way we could keep our electrical costs at a minimum over that time period. As conservationists, we liked the idea of enjoying our appliances while harvesting the energy from the sun. Now that the system has been paid for, there are virtually no additional costs on it for perhaps the next 25 years. We were perfectly situated for adding solar panels, and with Federal and State rebates could save 50% of the cost by adding the solar system while those rebates were still in effect. Even though the rebates have now ended, other homeowners wanting to add solar panels should benefit from the reduction in solar system costs over the past year or so. This was government’s expected result: the rebates created demand. The demand lowered costs for everyone.

Have you had a chance to measure the systems’ effectiveness? Yes, we have harvested about 600 kwh per month since the system started up at the end of September. Given that fall and winter have the shortest days, we anticipate that we will generate more than that during the spring and summer.



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Tell us about your design decisions to go with open spaces, many windows and screened-in porches. Even though we lived in an end-row home, the windows were high and it was difficult to look out and see the yard. Because of the house layout, opening up existing walls with more windows was not an effective option. The row home was a working person's home. With retirement, entertaining retired friends during the day became a high priority for

us. Because it is a row home, it sits on one corner of the property. It seemed a shame to have a half acre property that we couldn't see without making a deliberate effort. The addition of the sun porches created the best of all possible worlds. It is a great space either alone or with friends. The swivel armchairs we purchased make it easy either to sit and talk together or to sit facing the windows and enjoy the gardens and wildlife.

How satisfied were you with Stephen Black Builders, Inc.' plans meeting your project goals? Eric worked with us to design and then build the project the way we wanted it. He was patient, knowledgeable, and helpful at making our dreams a reality.

Was a construction schedule established? Absolutely. Eric kept us informed every step of the way on timelines, what we needed to do in order to get ready for a next phase, and what the sequences would be. Because Stephen Black Builders, Inc. has worked with its sub-contractors for such long periods of time, they have gotten to know each other and were pro-active throughout the project in letting each other know of any delays or opportunities for coming in earlier. We were impressed with the very evident camaraderie and mutual respect between the sub-contractors when as many as five of them were working on site at the same time.







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Did you live onsite during construction and if so, what adjustments did you have to make? The house was occupied the entire time of construction. Because we are morning people, we were comfortable with having work begin at 6:00 or 6:30 a.m. in the summer and by 7:00 a.m. in the winter. However, this did mean that we usually got up at 5:00 a.m. Because we were joining one section of the house to an addition, there was construction dust that permeated the nearby rooms. Since we needed to continue using most of the adjacent rooms, we perhaps had not sufficiently emptied those rooms prior to construction. Our main adjustment was to ignore construction dust until the end of the project.

Were you prepared for what to expect? As part of my past employment, I had become comfortable with construction projects and the unexpected kinds of things that can happen. Throughout the project, we had confidence that when problems did arrive, Stephen Black Builders, Inc. would make the outcome be what we wanted.

Did they adhere to schedule? To the extent that the weather permitted, they did stick closely to the schedule. Occasionally we re-negotiated time extensions either for something additional that we wanted or to accommodate an opportunity or emergency for them.

Did they keep you adequately informed during the process? Yes, absolutely. Eric was in constant email contact with us—with telephone follow up as needed.

Was the worksite kept secure and orderly? Yes.

Were you comfortable with the subcontractors in your house? We were thrilled with the camaraderie between the various sub-contractors. Stephen Black Builders, Inc. has used the same subcontractors for such long periods of time that they know each other and work with each other to deal with any scheduling opportunities or challenges.

How would you rate the performance of the subcontractors? Each of them does quality work and they know Steve



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Tile Flooring: Martin's Flooring (see ad on p. 25)



we added. They work well, are hospitable, and now allow us to fully enjoy our yard and the wildlife in it.

How has the new space enriched your life? Our home went from a place of dark spaces without easy views of the yard to a number of bright cheerful spaces that allow us to enjoy the yard from many vantage points with lots of ways to go outdoors. Guests get as much pleasure from the spaces as we do. The space is designed for "aging in place," with extra wide staircases that will allow for chairlifts, and 7" risers on the stairs make it easy to walk up and down them. We call it our house of "sneaky" exercise. In addition to converting the old summer kitchen into a room for exercise equipment (no excuses even when it's snowing), the east-facing and west-facing windows on the third floor entice us to go up the two flights of stairs morning and evening to see sunrises and sunsets. In addition, the second floor is intended as a private ballroom and a place for dance exercise.

Knowing what you now know, would you do it again? Yes. This addition coupled with this property have created a vacation home at home.

What, if anything, would you do differently? Probably nothing. The things we would schedule differently are only the result of knowing that Tropical Storm Lee created some nuisances that perhaps could have been avoided, but different scheduling might have created other problems.

What advice do you have for other homeowners contemplating a project?

Begin well in advance. Think about how you will live in each of the rooms of your project and how each room will interact with adjacent rooms. Think about the furniture you will put in each room and the amount of space needed for it. Visit rooms that you like and make sure you know the dimensions of those rooms. Be as clear as possible about your goals. Stand your ground about what your goals are and what you like and don't like. We found Eric to be excellent at providing good suggestions--some of which we followed and some of which



Plumbing: Leibley Plumbing, Inc.

we rejected. It does not help either the builder or you if you go along to get along. The more clarity you can achieve BEFORE the project begins, the happier you will be with the result.

Lastly, your property is recognized by the National Wildlife Federation as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. Tell us more about that. My husband filled out the form (available online at <http://www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Certify-Your-Wildlife-Garden.aspx>) to show that we had the four important components for wildlife habitat: Food, Water, Cover, and a Place to Raise Young. Not only is it important that we remember good stewardship for wildlife, but observing birds, squirrels, rabbits, and other creatures go about their daily lives helps provide perspective for us on our own lives.

R&A



and Eric will hold them to a high standard--which they appreciate. This mutual respect produced impressive teamwork and is one of the extraordinary strengths of Stephen Black Builders, Inc.. Individually and collectively they stand out as being independent contractors taking pride in their work and being proud to be part of the quality package.

How satisfied are you now with the finished product? We are extremely pleased with the finished project. We perhaps did not retain enough dollars for window treatments and landscaping, but are glad we fully completed the patio rather than doing only part of the work. We do still have remodeling work to do in the older part of the house, but that is more a function of renewal. We are extremely pleased with the livability and functionality of the spaces



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