

In Fishtown, 11 new homes dramatically update the style. For one thing, they're not in rows.

Redefining the rowhouse



A second-story catwalk, above, in one of the Rag Flats homes looks down on the kitchen, with a window view of the courtyard. The townhouses and lofts, below, are on the site of an old factory.

By Inga Saffron
INQUIRER ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Tim McDonald and his merry band of architectural pranksters have moved north to Fishtown, and they've taken their guerrilla design-and-build tactics with them. Only this time, Philadelphia's most free-spirited architects are behaving like serious housing developers. Their latest project merges high ideals with high style, and combines the two in a way that is likely to appeal to both the aspiring bobo and the 9-to-5 cubicle nerd.

Don't worry, their new project — an 11-unit mix of townhouses and lofts — will never be confused with one of those brick-fronted, plastic-gabled, faux-Victorian developments that have been sweeping the empty lots of Philadelphia.

McDonald's Fishtown houses, which were designed collaboratively with his brother Pat and a long list of fellow travelers, are roughly the size and shape of a typical Philadelphia rowhouse. But in most other respects, they are as different from the city's new crop of townhouses as the 19th century is from the 21st. With their ochre and khaki stucco, black-stained cedar window bays, and layered interior spaces, they evoke a California cool without being too sunny for Philadelphia. They're as refreshing as a white-wine spritzer.

There have been other attempts by Philadelphia architects to reengineer the rowhouse for our complicated modern lives, but most have been one-house demonstration projects. McDonald's architectural collaborative attacks the problem on a larger scale. The development, which they christened Rag Flats in honor of the rag factory that

See **RAG FLATS** on E3



The project uses space creatively, and the houses nearly touch. Each is different, inside and out.

ONLINE EXTRA

Go to <http://www.ragflats.com/> for more information about this project.



Rowhouse revisited: New style in Fishtown

RAG FLATS from E1 once occupied its East Berks Street address, includes seven townhouses, and each one is a thought-provoking riff on the multi-story-house form.

For one thing, they've taken the row out of the rowhouse. Instead of marching along like good soldiers, the houses are organized around a tiered, central courtyard, poetically landscaped by Anastasia Hudgins with wispy bamboo and other hardy, sustainable plants. Following the principles of green design, the architects embedded porous paving stones in the courtyard and installed rainwater-collection tanks for watering the gardens. And unlike a typical rowhouse development, each home is slightly different, both inside and out.

The McDonald brothers have

been challenging the architectural status quo in Philadelphia for years, often forming working partnerships with like-minded compatriots. They embrace a hands-on philosophy, which means they act as developers and contractors — and sometimes plumbers and carpenters — for all their projects. Beginning with a building on Market Street in Old City, and then moving to Northern Liberties, they have renovated a succession of forlorn industrial structures. For Rag Flats, they collaborated with Minus Studios, an architecture firm, and Cover, a custom steel-fabricator.

Because Philadelphia's supercharged real estate market has sent prices soaring, they took their latest quest for cheap property to Fishtown, an old rowhouse neighborhood where the

backyard swimming pools are nearly as big as the houses. The McDonalds were drawn to a sagging two-story brick factory on East Berks Street, near Belgrade, because its carriageway opened onto a large yard. And unlike some tonier and more historic neighborhoods, Fishtown didn't balk at the prospect of having modern-looking houses in its midst.

From the start, the McDonalds decided to keep the low-slung factory and convert it to lofts. That decision set the tone for the rest of the project. With the unassuming factory and two adjacent structures acting as a screen, they were free to indulge in modern design for the courtyard houses. They kept the traditional Philadelphia street wall intact by turning the two side buildings on Berks Street into full-size rowhouses. Faced in brick and celery-green stucco, the pair presents a layered composition of voids and solids to the street. While clearly modern, they're still good neighbors.

One of Tim McDonald's convictions is that architects should get their hands dirty. But he also believes they have a responsibility to improve on traditional building forms. The screened courtyard, he said, gave his group the opportunity to reconsider how houses relate to one another in Philadelphia, a city where the attached rowhouse has always ruled.

"We were thinking about the spaces between the buildings, and the light between them," he explained. Most rowhouses only receive light from the front and back, not the sides.

The architects threaded the courtyard houses around a common garden, leaving space between each unit and creating narrow shafts for light. They exploited the space by tacking projecting bays and terraces onto the colored cores of the houses. The bays are fitted with strategically placed windows that capture views of Fishtown and the Center City skyline. Those bays also contain the winding staircases, which means the rooms



TIM McDONALD

In a living room at Rag Flats, a steel staircase rises to rooms that cantilever into the space overhead. A catwalk connects the different levels.

inside the main house core are bigger and more open.

It's hard to believe that the architects crammed so much lofty space and natural light inside three-story houses occupying a modest 20-by-20 footprint. All share the same gravity-defying approach to room layouts. There are triple-height living rooms, bedrooms that cantilever over double-height kitchens, staircases that weave in and out of the house plane, and delicate, hand-forged steel catwalks to pull the spatial circus act together.

Because the garden is similarly tiered, each house has a private

feeling green nook outside its front door. At the same time, those semiprivate spaces flow naturally into the common center. The houses and factory act as a garden wall, sheltering the space and creating a serene refuge just steps from a busy city street.

It is rare enough to see such bold experiments with interior space in luxury housing, but even more unusual in homes that sell for under \$500,000. McDonald and his collaborators could never have pulled it off if they didn't do much of the work themselves. With Rag Flats, they hired more professional craftsmen than they

have in past projects, and the improved construction quality shows. Tim McDonald said he realizes now that "you don't have to put in every nail yourself to be immersed in the project." That's just one of the lessons of Rag Flats. It's equally clear that you don't need a clean slate to create thoughtful modern design. It can flourish even in the most traditional neighborhoods.

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The houses surround a courtyard garden. There is space between the units, and bays and terraces project from them.