



AN Open house

Owners of an expansive loft space in Durham make their home available to the whole community.

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Some people open their homes to the community during historic home tours or art walks. But Tom Stern and Tema Okun went a step further — they keep their door open year-round.

The couple, married for 22 years, moved from a residential section of Durham to the heart of downtown in 2004 when they found a loft space to call their own.

Sort of.

Their initial design plans were to take the 2,500 square feet, part of what had been second-floor storage space for a furniture store, and divide it into three sections. One portion would be their living area, a smaller area would be an apartment for an artist friend, and a large room in the middle would be a common space the three would share.

“We envisioned a nontraditional space that would have private areas and a communal room,” Stern explains during a walking tour of the couple’s home, filled with colorful folk art they’ve collected over the years.

When the artist decided she needed to move because there wasn’t enough natural light for painting, Stern and Okun reconsidered their plans.

“We wondered, ‘do we want to keep this middle space?’” Stern says. “Then we thought, ‘what if we made it a community space ‘for’ the community?’” And that’s how they designed their home.

Open-minded expansion

One door off the hallway enters into the 1,000-square-foot communal space, which has a bathroom and a kitchenette for users, while another door leads into the couple’s side of the home. The two sides connect with

Opposite: Exposed brick walls serve as a suitable background for the couple’s collection of art.

Below: Tom Stern and Tema Okun created a public gathering spot (**right**) in their home.



massive sliding doors made from salvaged wood, which complement the original heart pine floors.

Stern and Okun’s side has a kitchen, bathroom, large walk-in closet, small side room for a TV and stereo, and a huge living, dining, working, and sleeping area that overlooks Rigsbee Street, just across from Durham’s main post office.

Sometimes the community space is filled with artisans during the twice-yearly Durham Art Walk. But more often it’s used for meetings, workshops, performances, and even parties. The couple also holds fund-raisers for their favorite progressive and civil rights causes.

There are a few rules for using the space. Groups must have a personal reference, and their philosophies should be in line with Stern and Okun’s liberal views. Groups using the space have included El Centro Hispano; Traction, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a social network of left-leaning, politically active folks in their 20s and 30s; Southerners on

New Ground; and Katrina Neighbors Support Group. Another rule is that they have to clean up behind themselves and sign the guest book.

When Stern and Okun began to plan out the space, which had no plumbing or electricity, it was decided that Okun would oversee the day-to-day work because she was at home more. She teaches courses in race, class, and gender at area colleges while pursuing her doctorate in education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Okun also had some design work under her belt: She spent some time at the North Carolina State University School of Architecture before deciding that she’d rather be a teacher than an architect.

Stern’s office is only a quick walk up Main Street from home. In his education law practice, he represents the North Carolina Association of Educators, does training for the National Education Association, and teaches a course yearly at the UNC School of Law. During basketball season, he’s busy



Rich color dominates the Durham loft of Stern and Okun, both in the furnishings (left) and in the couple's favorite pieces of art (above).

working as a referee at high school games across the Triangle.

To lead the project they turned to Alliance Architecture, which has its offices just below them. Principals John Warasila and Vandana Dake owned and have since sold about half of the dozen loft spaces upstairs and down in the Rigsbee Street building they've slyly named The Eleanor.

Stern and Okun told the architects how they wanted the space to look, and the architects, serving as general contractors, designed the layout. Okun handled the interior, including materials, cabinetry, and colors, and she and Stern supervised the work crews. "It was a partnership in all decisions," says Stern.

"One door off the hallway enters into the 1,000-square-foot communal space."

Nontraditional details

One sticking point was the lack of light in the windowless community room. Okun turned to Wayne Place, one of her favorite architecture professors at NCSU, for assistance. Drawing on the back of a napkin during lunch, he sketched a daylight structure akin to a skylight with windows on each side and a roof to let in light while preventing the heat gain from the sun. "It's almost as bright as direct light," Okun says. The windows open and close with a long hook. "It's hard to open if you've had a few glasses of wine," she says with a laugh.

The couple, who do not have children, each have their favorite features. For Okun, it's the shower stall, tiled with

an asymmetrical pattern of purple and green slate and earth-toned concrete tiles.

"I thought from the beginning that I'd do the shower myself later, but then we found out we couldn't get the certificate of occupancy until it was done. I had three days," she recalls.

"The tile stores had only white or beige, and that wasn't going to do." One store had slate, and the concrete came from samples sitting around Alliance's office. Okun laid out the pattern on the floor first, and finally convinced the installer to follow her nontraditional plan.

Stern loves the shower as well, but he has his own crown jewel. "You have to see this," he says, leading the way to a large walk-in closet off the bathroom. At first glance, it's just a cabinet. Then he opens it to reveal a litter box for their cats, Ozzie and Pete, who enter through a cat door off the living room.

"That was my idea," Stern says with a grin.

The couple say they haven't had problems with the hundreds of strangers who have entered their home.

"It's not a hardship," says Okun, who is even trying to figure out ways to provide childcare for those who arrive with a need for it.

"It's really very satisfying," she says. "It's a way to contribute. I think we get more out of it than the people do." □