

AT HOME

This home narrows to just 8 feet. How did the architectural oddity come to be?

BY JESSICA MA

The Sacramento Bee/TNS

On the way to a co-worker's holiday party, Richard Stapler spotted a house that stopped him in his tracks.

He and his now ex-husband had been on the hunt for homes in midtown and downtown Sacramento. They had seen the "Skinny House" in the newspaper but didn't know it was for sale.

The Sacramento landmark, at 4920 Del Rio Rd. in Land Park, is a 1,109-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath house. What makes the building striking is its narrowness — the house is only 8 feet wide at its south end.

"In a house like that, you feel more like a steward than a homeowner," Stapler said in July. "Anybody who drives down Del Rio Road, you say 'Skinny House,' and they know immediately what you're talking about."

They bought the house in 2009 for what Stapler calls the "bargain of the century," or \$190,000. Stapler and his ex-husband called the Skinny House their home until September 2015.

"It turned into this unique fun ride over the next several years," he said. "We don't have a great deal of iconic structures, and this is one that serves as this guidepost."

WHO DESIGNED THE SKINNY HOUSE?

The architectural oddity's first owner was John Johnston, who designed it in 2006 with help from Sheybani & Associates according to *Midtown Monthly*, a local magazine. Johnston also owned the duplex next to it.

Johnston told *The Bee* in 2006 that he received varied reactions while constructing the house. People kept asking "What is it?" and coming inside, which stopped the workmen, he said.

"So I finally put up a sign that said, 'It is a house,'" Johnston told *The Bee* in 2006.

When Johnston bought the duplex, the lot came with a narrow strip of land, which the Skinny House was later built on. "[Johnston] had a sense of flair and drama, and brought that to designing and building the Skinny House," Stapler said in an interview in July.

After moving out, Stapler's ex-husband rented it out for several years, Stapler said. Then, the current owner, Rebecca Fong, bought the house for \$494,000 in 2021, and now, rents it out.

Growing up in Sacramento, she would drive past the house on the way to soccer practice.

"It was kind of a unique property that maybe scared some people off," Fong told *The Bee* in August. "But I was very in-

trigued by it."

Fong assured that the inside makes for a "very livable space." Other than the house's narrowness, the antique green doors also make the house special, since they were flown in from Italy, Fong said. She tries to preserve the doors and keep them intact.

LANDMARK FOSTERS COMMUNITY IN LAND PARK

Despite the small space, Stapler liked to entertain, calling his dilemma the "party paradox." At the house, he hosted political fundraisers and Christmas parties, which could reach a guest list of up to 120 people.

The key is to invite the right mix of socially outgoing people, Stapler said. Though the kitchen is about 9 feet wide, Stapler once counted about 22 partygoers in there. Guests would spill into the living room area and onto the back deck.

"People are curious," Stapler said. "(They think) 'Yes, I want to go to this party, but yes, I also want to see this house.'"

Kimberly Insigne, who lives across from the street, called the house "a nice little hidden gem." During the spring, the trees in the front of the house bloom with flowers, she said.

"I'm just always looking at it from different angles," Insigne said. "It



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makes me happy to live across from a unique little piece of architecture."

SLIM, BUT NOT THE SLIMMEST HOUSE IN THE WORLD

The house on Del Rio Road is far from the world record of skinniest houses. The Keret House, in Warsaw, Poland, takes that title, measuring at 2.4 feet at its thinnest point and 4 feet at its widest, according to *ArchDaily*, an architecture news site.

Skinny houses — or micro-homes — are not a new concept, as architects have been fitting buildings in unconventional spaces for centuries.

Narrow houses are pop-

ular in densely-populated Japanese cities, according to Bruce Monighan, an urban design manager for the city.

"I've seen homes in Japan, where ... the bathroom is not even in the unit," Monighan said. "Land is at a premium and therefore, you use every bit that you can."

These unconventional-sized houses are a "response to an opportunity" to use space, he said.

But by Sacramento's standards, the Skinny House on Del Rio is "unusual," Monighan said. According to Rocket Mortgage, the median square footage of a for-sale house is over 2,000 square feet,

whereas Skinny House is 1,109 square feet. [cq]

SMALLER HOUSES COULD MEAN MORE AFFORDABLE ONES

Sacramento's minimum lot size is 1,200 square feet, compared to the previously established 5,200. That change was meant to encourage more small homes, Monighan said.

"We hope that the ability to build small is encouraged by some of the things that we've changed, and people see an advantage in living on a smaller footprint," he said.

In-fill development refers to making use of unused and underused lands, which creates opportunities for both residents and businesses, Monighan said.

"Infill could be a really strange lot, like on Del Rio, or it could be a two-block area that has been unattractive," Monighan said.

As houses are becoming more expensive, young people are getting frozen out of the housing market, he added. Small infill homes allow buyers to "get in the game," since they're cheaper.

Living so close to the architectural oddity makes Insigne wonder about the possibilities that houses like it offer.

"It also makes me think about other little plots of land that people could do stuff with," she said.