

NOVEMBER 2000

This Old House

Renovating A '50s Ranch

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betting **the ranch**

A Connecticut couple gambles on a 1950s tract house and hits the jackpot, turning it into a sophisticated shingle-style home

It takes a certain amount of vision to look at a mid-century French Provincial-style ranch house and see the dwelling of your dreams. But when these Connecticut homeowners were ready to downsize from the classic Colonial where they'd raised their family, the resourceful wife saw it as the perfect opportunity to, as she says, "create a house that really worked, with all of the things we wanted—and none of those we didn't."

The aesthetically challenged but well positioned residence offered a beautiful location—a tree-ringed 2-acre hollow in an affluent area of Connecticut—and the ideal footprint for the dwelling they hoped to create. The symmetrical arrangement of the house—two wings flanking a well-designed complement of formal rooms—was close to what they were looking for in terms of a floor plan, but it lacked the extra space they felt they needed to fulfill their wish list. The question they asked themselves was: Could they achieve the home they wanted on a single floor? In their vision, the house would incorporate features common to much new residential construction these days: his-and-hers offices; a first-floor master suite with dual walk-in closets and a spacious, compartmentalized bath; and a commodious and well-equipped



BEFORE



AFTER

Bumping up the roof of the ranch (BEFORE, TOP), gave architect Duo Dickinson the room needed to tuck in a new second story (AFTER).

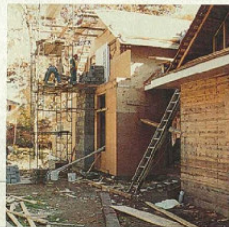
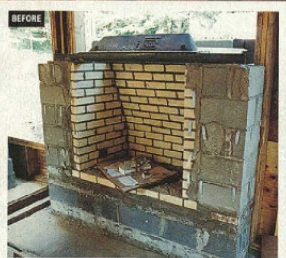


Dickinson connected the formal living and dining rooms with a greatly enlarged entry hall that also functions as a graceful link to the new second story.

BY JILL KIRCHNER SIMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHIC BY ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI STYLED BY ANITA GARGIODI



Duo Dickinson elevated the firebox on a large slab, forming a storage space for wood below. The slab also serves as an extra seat with or without a fire behind it.



HOT TOPIC

Appended to the house as a bump-out, the chimney is self-supporting. To carry the load of the massive fireplace and hearth, the crew sunk 4x4s into a concrete foundation reinforced with steel rebar. Masons constructed the chimney of concrete block (LEFT), built the firebox of firebrick (BEFORE, INSET), then faced the entire unit, both inside the family room (ABOVE) and outdoors, with fieldstone outlined with a thick mortar joint. Architect Duo Dickinson designed the fireplace "as an especially large, central hearth," he says, "because it not only serves the family room and the kitchen, but acts as a focal point when seen from the dining room and entry."

kitchen open to the family room. Even though they are empty-nesters, the couple also wanted to maintain a private suite of rooms for their children, who sometimes visit.

When the couple presented their list to architect Duo Dickinson, whose practice is based in nearby Madison, Conn., he recommended they add up rather than out—tailoring the 3,200-square-foot first floor to their personal needs while dedicating a new, 2,000-square-foot second story to their kids. This floor—comprising two bedrooms linked by a shared bath, plus a large landing off the stairs that would function as a "gathering room"—would, he said, offer privacy as well as efficiency. The couple could close off the upstairs when just the two of them were home. The plan sounded good to the owners, but, even though they understood they'd dramatically increase its size, they hated the idea that the house might end up looking too imposing. "When you walk up to it, we wanted it to feel like a home, not a castle," says the wife.

Meeting the challenge head-on, Dickinson came up with an ingenious scheme: To give the homeowners the space they needed without creating a monster in the process, he raised the roofline only enough to "make the house feel like a one-story with an inhab-

ited attic." He adjusted the roof to a 6-in-12 pitch (the best minimum angle for shedding rain and snow), then pivoted its face up and out at two places along the ridge beam to make room for a pair of large shed dormers fronted by casement windows. He narrowed the edge of the eaves over the windows, painting them and the trim white to augment the impression that the dormers were "simply slipped in, not tacked on," Dickinson says. To reinforce his slight-of-hand, he also replaced the roofs over the existing wings with more steeply pitched gables; they—and a third, smaller gable buttressed by custom-designed brackets over the entry—offset the sweep of the roof. In elevation, the house does indeed look as if it has a large attic, not a second story.

Dickinson's decision to add up and not out had a practical motivation. The house, he learned, was sited over a defunct swimming pool. This pool had been so well constructed that former owners had simply appropriated its walls for their foundation. Because they were so solid, Dickinson realized right away that he ought to reuse them. "We bought into the existing footprint because the pool walls were a couple of feet thick," he says, "so they could easily bear the weight of the core of the house—and a new second floor."

(continued on p. 106)



In the cooking area, the wife chose materials that, to her, "do not remind the Dickinsons' people of granite, granite on counters, and white tile for the backsplash."

Although the homeowners' wish list appeared to mandate extensive changes to the existing floor plan, Dickinson's masterful revision left virtually every exterior wall of the house intact. Only the family room required a bump-out, both to line it up with the back wall of the kitchen and to make room for a grand new hearth the architect designed to warm both spaces. Dickinson also retained the shapes of the living and dining rooms and their connecting foyer; during the demolition, the sections of interior wall that weren't to be opened or retrofitted for new doorways, as well as the floorboards in the living room, were left intact. Modifications to both rooms were minor: A bay window brings more light into the dining room, and French doors lead from the living room to the patio. To access the second floor, Dickinson tore out a pair of old closets and used that space for the graceful staircase, anchored by a slightly oversized newel post, that highlights the new double-height foyer.

Most of the reshuffling of spaces occurred in the two wings, which required complete re-framing of much of their interior walls. For the kitchen, which occupies the rear portion of one of the wings, the wife gave Dickinson a rundown of her cooking habits and a list of preferred materials and appliances. "I like to cook, but hate feeling banished to the kitchen when everyone else is watching TV or talking," she says. Dickinson linked the two spaces with a peninsula that also serves as a bar, so that family and friends are always within earshot.

Appliances in the kitchen are professional quality, with extras such as an undercounter refrigerator and ice maker in the peninsula, a warming drawer, and a pot filler faucet over the stove. Torn between placing the sink beneath the windows or in the island, the wife opted for the luxury of having both. Dickinson commandeered a small bed-

room off the kitchen to make room for her office, between the kitchen and the office lies the laundry, relocated from the basement. This wing also contains a guest suite.

Dickinson reorganized the entire second wing as a master suite. The master bedroom opens to the backyard while a home office for the husband, including an interroom, claims a former bedroom at the front of the wing. Between these are two walk-in closets, a linen cubby, and a master bath with a separate toilet alcove and shower stall. It was here that the wife, pressed into service as her own general contractor when the original one went bankrupt (see "D.I.Y. Contracting"), met one of the greatest challenges of her new job. After installation, the wainscoting shrank and expanded, leaving holes. "I now know that you have to let it dry out first, and also back-prime it," she says with the authority of a seasoned pro.

With the plan finalized and framing completed, Dickinson forged a completely new identity for the exterior of the house by drawing from "a palette of materials I often work with—wood clapboard and shingles." While the look borrows elements from Shingle-style and Arts and Crafts architecture, both the architect and the homeowners felt it would be a mistake to pay strict homage to the past. "We were fortunate to have room in the budget to design details specifically for this home," Dickinson says—such as the brackets that support the gabled entries (see "Making a Bracket").

While ranches such as this one seem like obvious targets for redos, "they can be disasters if they're not carefully thought through," Dickinson says. In this case the intelligence of the design rose to the challenge, despite the turmoil with the contractor. The house, then, is a triumph of both style and will. ■

D. I. Y. CONTRACTING

Despite the best intentions on the part of the homeowners and their contractor, "the worst possible thing happened at the worst possible time," Dickinson says: "Midway through the process, our general contractor suddenly went bankrupt." When this happened, the wife decided to assume the reins and, with absolutely no experience, serve as her own G.C. Dickinson stepped up his involvement (he had, after all, recommended the contractor), often meeting directly with the subs to help them interpret the working drawings.

The wife also hired a consulting contractor, Brian Fried, of B&F Construction, in Monroeville, to act as her adviser. He provided her with resources and expertise as she needed it, on a fee basis. Several carpenters and tradespeople stayed on the project with her, too, including one, Carlos Gonzalez, who became her right-hand man. "I have this philosophy that getting there should be at least half the fun," the wife explains. "I liked the learning process, and I think if you're not part of the process, you've missed a lot of what's going on. In hindsight, I'm glad I was my own G.C., because absolutely nothing gets past you. Also, I was able to make a lot of changes along the way—and know what they



would cost—without having to pay the additional fees to a contractor that change orders would have entailed."

Responsible for everything from procuring materials to scheduling and paying the subs, the wife often found herself hauling drywall out to the Dumpster and sweeping up at the end of the day. She participated in every discussion between the carpenters and architect about details such as how a piece of trim should be finished, and she selected every element down to the bronze (not shiny brass) door stops. Along the way, she learned a lot about what can go wrong as well as how to make it right. Besides having to reinstall the wainscoting in the master bath (above), the shower door in the guest bath leaked and had to be replaced. In every instance, she persevered until the subs corrected the problem to her satisfaction.

And she did all this while she and her husband camped out in the guest room, which became their all-purpose living, dining, kitchen, and bedroom during the entire renovation. As she succinctly explains, "This isn't for prima donnas. Just the amount of dirt involved necessitates a major change in your lifestyle."

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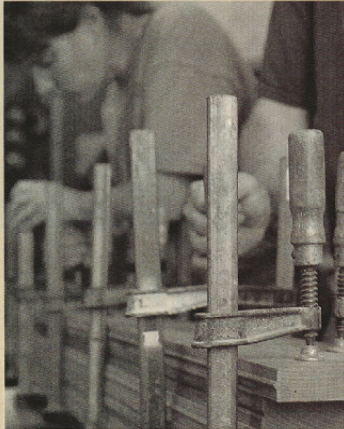
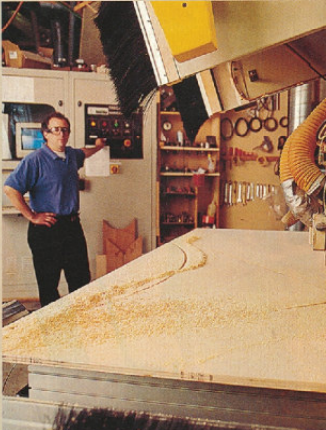
WHERE TO FIND IT: SEE DIRECTORY, PAGE 139



"The fit between this house and its owners is one of the best I've seen."
—DUO DICKINSON

Dickinson added a bay window to the red-glazed dining room to draw more light into the space. Doors to the foyer and to the family room and kitchen not seen improve the traffic flow throughout all areas.

MAKING A BRACKET



On those occasions when God isn't in the details, architects know it's their duty to try to provide them. For the front of the Starr house, Duo Dickinson designed bold, curved brackets to support the roof of the entrance portico. Dickinson feels that any architectural detail he invents must have practical merit. In this case, while traditional columns deteriorate because of exposure to the sun and contact with the ground, brackets are shielded from both influences, making them a perfect low-maintenance alternative. In addition, Dickinson estimates that custom brackets cost 50 percent less than custom columns designed to do the same job.

1. A draftsman at Breakfast Woodworks in Guilford, Conn., adjusts the measurements of Dickinson's bracket design to match those taken at the job site. He then enters the data into a computer-assisted drafting (CAD) program.

2. Cued by the CAD program, a computer numerical-control (CNC) machine—a robotic router—cuts two curved body panels for each bracket, which will be used to cover the framework between the horizontal and vertical arms of the bracket. The panels are made of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch medium-density overlay (MDO)—the same plywood material used to make highway signs. Clad in waterproof paper, MDO takes paint well and resists cracking and chipping.

3. Woodworkers glue and clamp together six 8-foot-long 2x10 boards of South American mahogany to form a lamination. Besides being less expensive than a single, solid piece of wood, this method offers other advantages, says Ken Field, vice president of Breakfast Woodworks: "The fabricated timbers are lighter and there's less movement in the laminate." Pressed to find a disadvantage, Field notes that the life span of the manufactured timbers is half that of solid wood, "though the brackets will probably outlast the house." From the lamination, members of Field's crew cut two octagonal beams, 8 inches wide from facet to facet, tapering one end of each to a point. The beams will become the horizontal arms of the brackets.

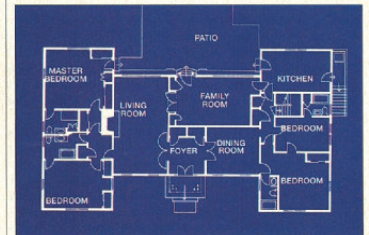
4. The clean, finished look required advance planning: Workers at the shop predrilled holes for four half-inch threaded rod connections in the vertical arms, which are made of mahogany 2x10s, and painted the completed brackets with white exterior primer. At the site, the crew toenailed the portico to the brackets, then attached the entire assembly to the exterior wall framing around the doorway. To support the portico structure, the framing is reinforced with multiple studs ganged together and married to the head and sole plates with steel angles. Because the brackets are bolted from the inside before the drywall is put up, no attachment points are visible.

—Ryan Robbins

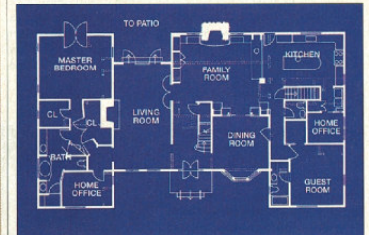
Building Up

The plans demonstrate how much space the homeowners gained by bumping up the roof at the center of the structure. Dickinson's reconfiguration of the ground floor allows for direct access from the entry to all three of the main public rooms. The master suite occupies one of the wings. The new second floor satisfies the wife's request that the couple's children have their own private space.

FIRST FLOOR BEFORE



FIRST FLOOR AFTER



NEW SECOND FLOOR

