

Creating a Master Suite

Fewer walls, a bigger bathroom and lots of light turn a confining second floor into a spacious master suite

by Jon Anderson

Albuquerque, New Mexico, is justifiably famous for its clear mountain light. It's also known for its beguiling combination of stunning desert vistas, adobe pueblos and funky Route 66 road culture. But there's another side: that of established neighborhoods filled with modest, sturdy houses built in the first half of the century. The Ridgecrest neighborhood is such an area. Its quiet streets lined with mature elm and cottonwood trees belie its proximity to downtown. And the light there is just as clear.

A generously proportioned though undistinguished 1950s builder's home in this neighborhood caught our clients' attention. But before they committed to buying it, we discussed its possibilities. The house was large enough to accommodate their growing art collection, and the site provided views of the nearby Sandia Mountains. However, we all agreed that the house—especially the second floor—had a dark, confined feeling and failed to take advantage of Albuquerque's abundant natural light.

Making better use of the upstairs space—The existing second-floor plan was a conventional arrangement of small bath, bedroom, study and sitting room, all opening off a central hall (top floor plan, facing page). The area was constricted and dark. With no plans to expand their household, our clients imagined the upstairs as a suite of interconnected spaces.

We achieved the desired result by creating three spacious rooms from the original floor plan. Out of the darkness came a comfortable master bedroom; a large, open bath area; and a sizable home office (bottom floor plan, facing page). We also added built-ins to increase storage throughout the master suite.

Opening up the entry sends light where it's needed—Our basic strategy was to open up the floor plan—remove walls and add interior windows—to develop a more spacious feel. This approach required that the second floor of the house undergo substantial remodeling.



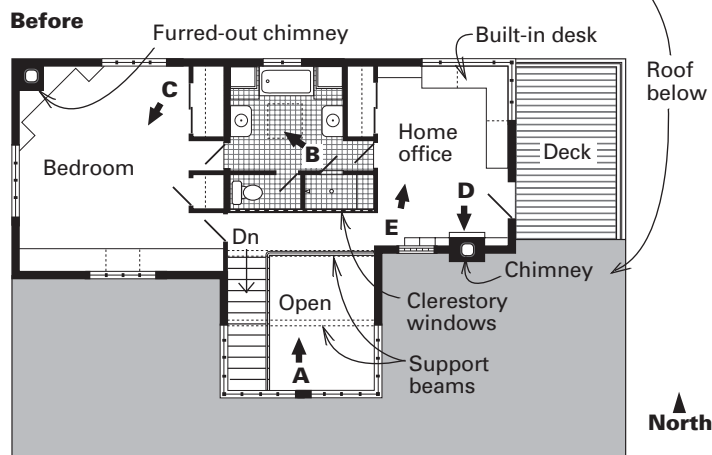
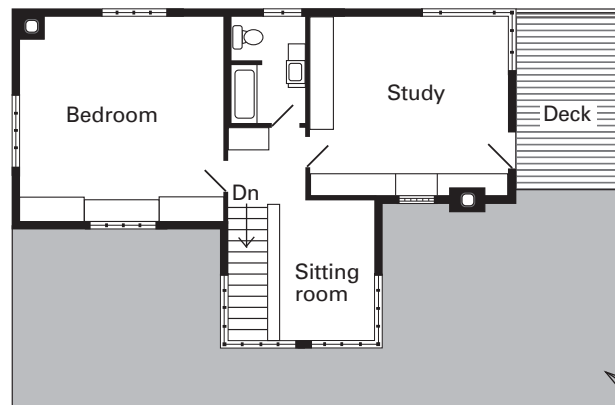
Lighting up the master suite



The existing stair (above) led to a dark, narrow hallway. Removing an upstairs sitting room to create a two-story entry (right) and adding glass along the top of the wall upstairs allows daylight from the front windows to penetrate the new bathroom. Photos taken at A on floor plan.



Eliminating a second-floor sitting room sheds new light on a renovated master suite. Borrowing space from the master bedroom and the old study allowed the bathroom to double in size. New clerestory windows open to the double-height entry and a skylight add light and spaciousness to the bathroom. The bedroom is marginally smaller than before; a wall of built-ins and new closets provide storage. The office is the right size for a desk and cabinets.



After Photos taken at lettered positions.

The gloomy existing stairway led directly to a homely built-in cabinet (inset photo, facing page) and a poorly lit central hall. Creating a double-height space at the entry would infuse light into the dark second floor, so we removed a piece of the second floor: a small sitting room that was slightly more than 100 sq. ft.

Carving out the sitting-room section from the existing plan required the addition of two large beams built up of 2x12s. One beam made of two 2x12s was buried within the ceiling at the top of the stairs; the beam made of three 2x12s crossed the entryway parallel to the other beam, but only a few feet inside the front door (floor plans above).

Our minor structural modifications to the building delivered an enormous payoff. The new entry has a dramatic ceiling height in excess of 17 ft. This vertical shaft allows light to enter the house from high windows above the front door, flooding the stair and hall, and penetrating the entire second floor (photo left).

A new bath is the centerpiece of the master suite—One of the first things we did upstairs was demolish the existing 6-ft. by 9-ft. bathroom. Then we borrowed space from the existing bedrooms and study to configure the new bathroom. To increase natural light in the new bath, we installed a 36-in. by 36-in. skylight centered over the room and replaced the textured window panes with clear glass. We also built in simple clerestory



Spacious and well lit. Borrowing space from the rooms on both sides of the master bath, adding a skylight and replacing the old textured glazing with clear glass meant more light, more storage and more room for the bath. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

A tad smaller, but much more efficient. The master bedroom was actually a little smaller after remodeling. But a full wall of cabinets and drawers and two new closets make up for the loss of floor space. Photo taken at C on floor plan.





These cabinets are built around the chimney. A full-depth cabinet would have been out of proportion here, but this necktie cabinet is shallow enough to fit the space yet deep enough to have substance. The shelves and drawers that flank it fill out the depth of the chimney. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

A corner office with a view. If you had a home office like this, why would you work anywhere else? It offers a 90° view of the Sandia Mountains and a handsome built-in desk with drawer fronts made of perforated aluminum panels. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

windows high on the south-facing interior wall that looks out onto the two-story entryway. Combined with glass doors on the shower and toilet compartment, these simple changes allow the room to be suffused with a consistent, soft light.

The new master bathroom is a spacious room, much more practical than the tiny bathroom of the existing plan. Separate enclosures for the toilet and shower open into the 10-ft. by 9-ft. bathroom. New ash cabinets, dyed a bright yellow, flank the built-in bathtub (top photo, facing page).

The matching sinks in the master bathroom were fabricated from black-granite slabs that were rescued from the facade of a remodeled office building in downtown Albuquerque. A local stoneyard cut and polished the granite, which was then fitted with under-set stainless-steel bowls and a hospital faucet set. The salvaged granite, a full 1 in. thick, was obtained for \$7 per sq. ft., compared with the \$30 to \$40 per sq. ft. cost for new ¾-in. material. The finished lavatories are cantilevered from the wall on brackets fabricated from 2-in. by 2-in. steel angle stock, lag-bolted to the framing.

The bedroom gets more storage—The master bedroom saw the least amount of change. The existing windows were more than adequate. The plan of the room offered plenty of usable space. However, because the existing master bedroom was basically a square space with no closets, storage was a problem.

So the redesign gave us the opportunity to provide abundant storage space where it was really needed. In the master bedroom, we added two closets and a full wall of built-in drawers and shelves made of ash dyed black, all covered by a 24-ft. black plastic-laminate countertop (bottom photo, facing page).

One more minor adjustment to the bedroom involved a cosmetic change. The chimney from the downstairs den sat slightly off center in the northwest corner of the room. To me, this skewed vertical rectangle threw off the diagonal axis of the room, especially with a corner bed placement. We furred out the chimney until it was centered in the corner, covered it with wire lath and plastered the whole into a seamless form. This may seem like a minor adjustment, but it's the small details that make a successful remodel.



Creating a comfortable, well-lit workspace—Opposite the bedroom, the home office/study has become a favorite room. Light enters the room from three sides, while the dimensions provide a feeling of retreat.

The study is fitted out with custom maple cabinetry designed and built by local artisan Steve Madsen. This work includes a built-in corner desk with cabinets and drawers (bottom photo) and a console of cabinets against the south wall. The centerpiece of the console is a shallow necktie cabinet built around the chimney (top photo). Deep shelves and drawers flank the tie cabinet and the chimney.

More light comes in through a custom-fabricated glass door that leads to a small deck. The original deck was rebuilt. It had been roofed in layers of built-up roofing and covered in concrete with a quarry-tile surface. Now, redwood decking fits loosely over a single-ply rubber membrane, which allows easy removal of the deck surface for cleaning. □

Jon Anderson is an architect in Albuquerque, N. M. Former associate Tim Christ helped on this article. Photos by Steve Culpepper, except where noted.