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WITH DEBRA JUDGE SILBER

# A House Transformed

Using seven key remodeling principles, architect Pi Smith turns a family keepsake into her new home

Many of us live in houses we're not really happy with. The rooms may be too small, the ceilings too low; our home may lack character, or simply be worn out and in need of repair. We might be told the solution is as easy as replacing the siding or adding a window—or as complex and costly as tearing the house down and rebuilding the whole thing.

Can a house shed its coat and emerge as something new? Can something as large as a house be transformed? As stout and permanent as they seem, houses are malleable and capable of stretching and growing, just as people do.

Because no two houses are the same, there's no absolute blueprint out there to tell you exactly how your home should be modified. But there are some basic design guidelines that can help everyone.

As an architect, whenever I embark on any new design project, I refer to my own checklist of seven essential items that should never be overlooked when transforming a home. I call them the "Seven Knows" because each involves acknowledging something about your house as it is—and as you want it to be.

Fellow architect Pi Smith used these seven essentials to transform her family's 19th-century keepsake into an exuberant contemporary home. The Vermont farmhouse she shares with her daughter, Zia, and partner, Ann Bumpus, was at one time a beloved family retreat. But it was woefully ill suited to full-time living, particularly to a casual lifestyle that includes frequent entertaining and a busy toddler. "The house



**A CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION** turned a family retreat into a comfortable home for architect Pi Smith (left), partner Ann Bumpus, and daughter Zia. Facing page: Warm colors and new textures bring the old home up to date.









**TO OPEN THE HOUSE TO THE BACKYARD,** the homeowner added new windows and skylights, and painted the sliding door a bold blue.

had been adapted in a piecemeal way over the years," Smith says. "There was a poor flow for entertaining, and we were really limited by the existing layout." Smith knew that creating her perfect home would take more than another round of piecemeal fixes. It would mean transforming the structure into something altogether new, something closer to her ideal. Here's how she did it.

## 1 Know your place

**Acknowledge your region, town, or city**

Though Smith wanted to change the interior character of her house, she wanted the outside to retain the classic charm she had cherished as a child. "This was an emotionally important house in the history of my family," she says. "I didn't want to do something that was going to transform the outside in a way that took away those memories." So all the exterior changes were restricted to the rear of the house (photo, left), where several new windows and skylights were added to open the house up without changing its stoic New England façade. On the public side, Smith stayed with divided-light windows and also retained the rolling barn door, even though the opening behind it was eliminated (top photo, facing page). And although the interior is a riot of warm, inviting colors, Smith chose to leave the exterior its puritan white.





**THE FRONT FAÇADE, FACING THE ROAD,** was left as it has been for the last century and a half. Purchased by the owner's grandparents in the 1940s, the property is classic New England, with a big barn, sloping meadow, and gnarly apple trees, below.



## 2 Know your property

### Respond to your site

Smith had a second reason for holding onto the old barn door. Because the house, like many old New England structures, sits hard by the road, any additional windows in the living room section would have invited the intrusion of car headlights and glances from passersby. The sliding door breaks up the blank façade of the ell's 40-foot length without compromising privacy—a creative way in which Smith responded to her home's unique site.

In fact, where many would see the home's proximity to the road as a negative, Smith treated it as an asset. "Sited so close to the road, the house itself creates privacy from the world by putting most of the yard behind it," she says. "Depending on the road, being too close can be a negative, but the benefit is that the most beautiful part of the site doesn't have a building on it."

# 7 ESSENTIALS OF A SUCCESSFUL REMODEL

## 1 Know your place

There's an importance to understanding the established fabric of a region that is often taken for granted when a house is remodeled. Recognizing and respecting the distinct character of your community and incorporating local patterns of building into your new design strengthens the framework of the regional context and contributes to the sense of a unique place.

## 2 Know your property

The transformation of your home will be most successful when the design responds to the favorable features and climate conditions of your site—and addresses the negative factors as well.

## 3 Know your house

Designing compatibly doesn't mean simply matching the design of new construction with old. To truly transform a house—and do it with distinction—you must logically combine new and old planning patterns, forms, and infrastructure.

## 4 Know your structure

Design your home or addition so that it conforms to the requirements of local building codes. Explore structural solutions, whether they are daring or reserved, to a point that doesn't

exceed the capabilities of your construction team.

## 5 Know your palette

The materials that protect your family from frosty winters and boiling summers have to perform agreeably in their respective tasks. And the textures, patterns, and colors you choose for structural elements—the roofing, walls, cabinets, or flooring—are the language through which a home's architectural identity is expressed.

Selecting materials with care keeps that identity intact.

## 6 Know your lifestyle

Family activities and rituals have their own particular spatial needs: public rooms for gathering and entertaining, a quiet place for reading, and private areas for guests, working at home, and sleeping.

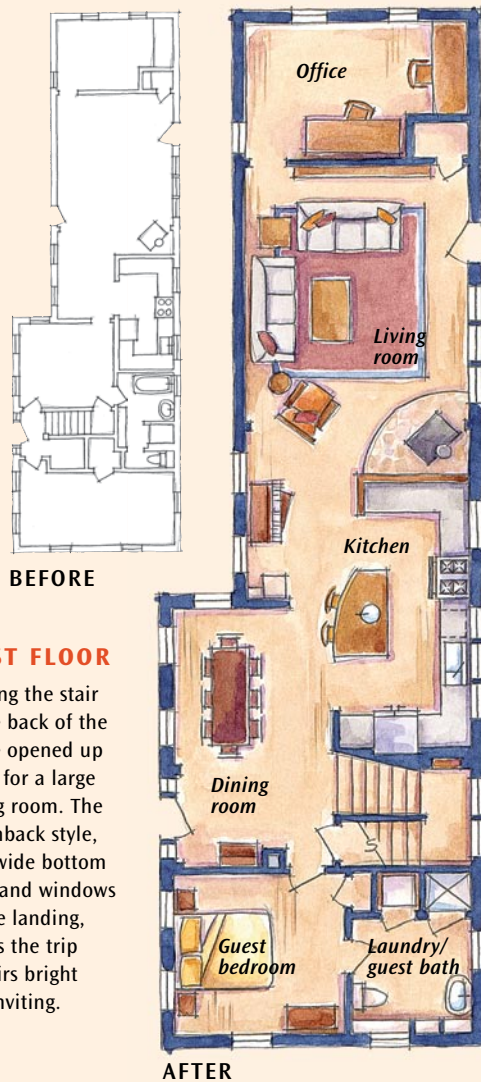
## 7 Know your passions

Be honest about your own desires, and incorporate into your home things that reward the senses and matter the most. It's O.K. to give your home, and yourself, a couple of extra feet in a hallway, or to get rid of an attic space and create a tall ceiling—all for sheer drama or whimsy. Make your home your own and try not to think too much about resale or what the neighbors are doing.

## SMALL MOVES, BIG IMPACT

**D**one right, even a simple alteration in floor plan can result in a dramatic change in the way a house lives, works, and feels. In Smith's house, this was accomplished by altering the structure and position of the stairway.

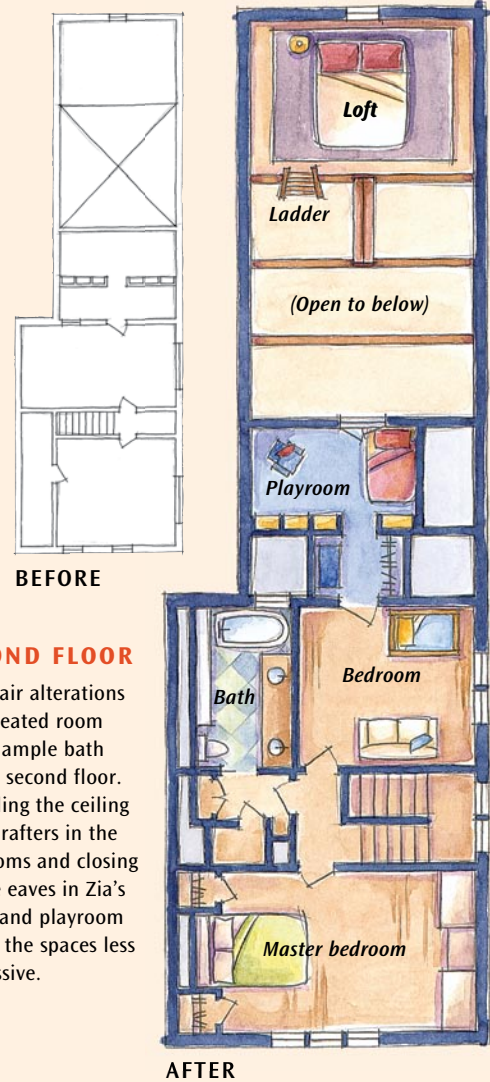
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### FIRST FLOOR

Moving the stair to the back of the house opened up space for a large dining room. The switchback style, with wide bottom steps and windows on the landing, makes the trip upstairs bright and inviting.

AFTER



### SECOND FLOOR

The stair alterations also created room for an ample bath on the second floor. Extending the ceiling to the rafters in the bedrooms and closing off the eaves in Zia's closet and playroom makes the spaces less oppressive.

AFTER

### 3 Know your house Understand how to design compatibly

Smith's house is an example of a typical regional style known as a knee-wall cape. Essentially a one-story structure, it has short 3-foot 8-inch sidewalls on the second floor, with limited headroom and few windows.

Understanding her home's limitations and potential enabled Smith to transform the house without moving outside its walls. Relocating the stairs to the side and reconfiguring them as a switchback rather than a straight run was instrumental in creating space for an open kitchen and dining area downstairs. It also allowed traffic to arrive in the center of the second floor, making it possible to create two bedrooms and a bath off a small upstairs landing. What's more, the switchback design worked in sync with the home's existing roofline by ascending with it

toward the center of the house. New windows on the landing are a bonus for the light they bring into the dining room. In the end, the 2,200-square-foot house didn't grow at all, but it now feels spacious and efficient.

### 4 Know your structure Understand how to design safely

Built of recycled posts and beams around 1840, Smith's home was replete with structural and safety concerns. Before she could even start the remodeling, she had to replace the rotten first-floor structure of the original rectangle. She then had the house completely rewired and replumbed. She also reconfigured the heating, improved the insulation, and installed hardwired smoke detectors. Even though other elements were sound, all





structural moves were carefully thought out. When Smith removed the wall that divided the kitchen from what would be the dining room, it required at least one existing ceiling beam to span the entire space. "These old beams are designed to do that," she says, but adds that she would have been hesitant to make the move if it had required more than one beam to cross unsupported. To create the cathedral ceilings on the second floor, she removed the low ceiling and replaced it with collar ties, allowing the shape of the room to follow the form of the roof.

## 5 Know your palette

Select materials that withstand the test of time

While the exterior of the house fits in as inconspicuously today as it did a hundred years ago, Smith and her part-

**TUCKED ABOVE  
THE OFFICE,**  
a hidden loft  
makes creative  
use of an  
empty space.



**THE ARCHITECT/HOMEOWNER  
INJECTED A BIT OF THE UNEX-  
PECTED** by broadening the new  
stairs at the base, creating a  
welcoming effect and a dash of  
drama. "As an interior design  
friend of mine says, it just brings  
so much more to the party," Smith  
says. The angle also left room for  
her to recess a standard-size  
refrigerator in the wall between  
the stairs and the kitchen.

**TO MAKE THE MOST OF SPACE**  
on the tight second floor, built-in  
cabinets and a long shelf are  
tucked under the angled ceiling  
in the family bath, reserving the  
tallest portion of the room for  
the vanity and a wall of mirrors.





ner chose a palette of vibrant and engaging materials on the inside, creating a mixture of old-house funkiness and modern sophistication. To stay within budget, items were rescued and reused: windows, an old claw-foot tub, hemlock and pine flooring. And compromises were made: The bathroom counter is maple instead of stone, and kitchen countertops are Fireslate, an industrial material available at a fraction of the cost of stone. The slate used on the woodstove surround and backsplash weaves together the ochre, terra-cotta, and muted greens of the first-floor palette. Contrasting with these earth tones, second-floor colors are airy and springlike. “When you live in a world surrounded by snow six months of the year, having these rich interior colors is wonderful,” Smith says. “It feels so good to come into a glowing house.”

## 6 Know your lifestyle

### Create a design that supports the way you live

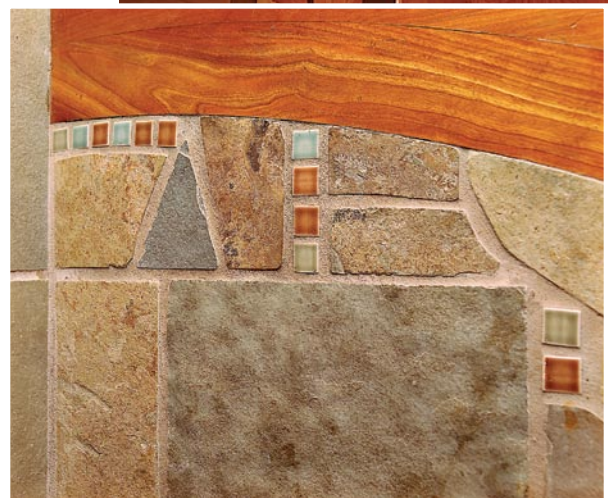
Smith loved the old house as a child, but she remodeled it as an adult aware of how one’s home must not only meet current needs but also anticipate those to come. Where the home once comprised awkward, confining spaces, she introduced subtle separations that allow easy room-to-room communication as well as visual supervision of a busy toddler. She was also inspired by her daughter’s imagination and scale—in the cheerful

upstairs playroom, the slanted roofline offers adults just 4 feet of standing room, whereas a toddler can easily poke around the entire space. Downstairs, the new central kitchen and main-floor laundry makes life with a toddler much easier. But Smith also



**IN ZIA’S SECOND-FLOOR PLAYROOM,** Ann Bumpus created a whimsical world in a tight space.

**THE HEARTH IS MADE OF THE SAME MATERIALS** as the kitchen backsplash, only here tiles are broken and placed in a mosaic that also incorporates tiny square glazed tiles.







**THE STRENGTH OF CEILING BEAMS** had to be considered in the removal of the wall between the kitchen and dining area.


**NEARLY ALL THE MATERIALS** and colors of the home's palette are present in the kitchen, where Fireslate and cherry countertops were chosen for economy.



knew it was important to have a first-floor guest suite to accommodate her aging parents when they visit.

## 7 Know your passions

### Design to evoke emotion

The home retained its traditional exterior, but the inside was a different story. Smith's modernist upbringing and Bumpus's passion for woodworking and furniture design led them to flavor their home with elements that are modern and artful. "We didn't want to wreck the historic look of the exterior, but on the inside we felt freer to weave in strands of modern design and some whimsical elements," Smith says. So beneath the home's rustic beams she placed modern cabinets and contemporary furnishings, architectural fragments, paintings by family and friends, and a small herd of colorful folk-art animals. From the regimental white siding to the splashy aquas in the playroom, from the unorthodox stairs to the hidden loft, here is a home that clearly plays to its owners' passions. "This house is a place of the heart for me," Smith explains. "Doing this whole project reinforced my intense love of this house and the spot of land I'm on. This is a house to be treasured, but it is also a house that could be transformed." 

*This article is adapted from House Transformed (Taunton Press, 2005) by architect Matthew Schoenherr. Debra Judge Silber is an associate editor.*

**For more information, see Resources, page 84.**