

The Small House



Done Well



Proper scale and great details make 1200 sq. ft. an interesting place to live

BY KURT OFER

Right away, I could see that this project wouldn't result in a big house that followed a ten-Dumpster teardown. The owners of a large farmstead here in upstate New York wanted the firm my wife and I own to expand a tiny outbuilding into a small house. The site was a real challenge: The building was situated near a busy road in front; behind, the ground rose abruptly up the hillside. The owners also insisted we save a 40-ft. cedar tree that grew only a few feet from the structure, which immediately limited our options. This project would be a challenge.

But despite this peculiar context, there are lessons here for anyone who is building a small house or addition, including this key issue: How do you make a 1200-sq.-ft. space an interesting place to live? Instead of using an open plan, we tried to create a sense of separation between the main spaces so that each room became a destination with its own views, light, and character. Of course, we wanted the new design to fit in amid the surrounding farm buildings, so the scale and the details were important, too (photos above, left).

Seamlessly blend the old and the new. Although the exterior style (photo above) remains faithful to the surrounding farm buildings, the interior, illustrated by the living room (photo left), manages to feel contemporary and traditional at the same time.

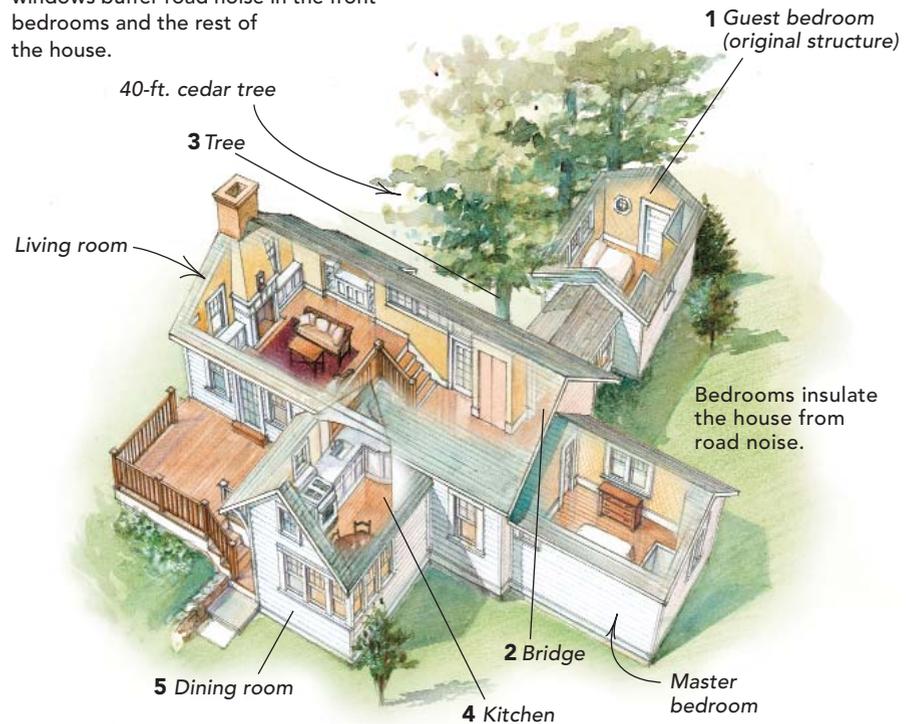
From an outbuilding to a house that belongs there



1

Arranging the plan according to the site

The original building stood on a level spot at the bottom of a hill, close to a busy road. Rather than flatten the hill to accommodate the house, the author incorporated the new living room into the elevation. To minimize noise, the new deck was located in back; closets and small windows buffer road noise in the front bedrooms and the rest of the house.



Integrating the house and hillside blends the design with the site.

The project's purpose was to create a small house by adding onto an old outbuilding. (1) Seen from any angle, the new construction was to match the scale and overall feel of the original. A small bridge (2) made an interesting way to connect the old and new structures while preserving a large tree. From the exterior, the bridge windows (3) help it to float visually between segments of the house; frosted glass maintains a measure of privacy.



2

Each room has its own character that makes the interior feel bigger. Stepping up the sloped site, the living room perches balconylike above the kitchen (4). Wrapping around the gable end, a line of windows gives the dining area (5) a unique sense of place.



3



4



Sometimes smaller projects are more suited to a surgical approach than to a bulldozer and a chainsaw.

Don't overwhelm the original structure

When many homeowners think about enlarging a house, they often want an addition that's much bigger than the existing building and thus run into a potential problem: how to preserve the character of the original and keep the addition from engulfing the house (for more on this topic, see "Drawing Board," p. 130). Choosing to preserve the overall scale lets the house remain integrated in its surroundings while still making more living space, a point that became central to our work on this project.

Because scale also was important to our clients, we used a cruciform-like plan (drawing facing page) that allowed us to distribute the rooms into gabled boxes that matched the scale and detail of the existing buildings. The small boxes also were instrumental in establishing a sense of separation between rooms that's essential to making the interior of a small house seem bigger and more engaging. Instead of an open, undifferentiated plan, each major room has three windowed walls with a different view and sense of place that changes from room to room.

The character of the house's interior also is affected by ceiling heights. From room to room, the ceiling heights change: high in the kitchen, living room, and master bedroom; and low in the hallways between. This constant variation gives a small interior a complexity that makes it seem larger. □

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