



Ranchformation

Fixing the hard parts first gets a couple into their remodeled house before winter



BY THOMAS PARKS

For many of us who grew up in the 1950s and '60s, home was a one-story ranch house. The finest examples of this house pay homage to many architectural influences, including Frank Lloyd Wright, the Greene brothers, and modernists such as Richard Neutra and Rudolph Schindler. But most of the ranches built in the '50s and '60s were in postwar tract-housing subdivisions. These versions copied some aspects of the early masters' ranches but neglected their spirit. The horizontal emphasis, low-slope roofs, and deep overhangs typical of Wright's early prairie style were eclipsed by a single-story arrangement of boxy rooms.

The last, best site had a ranch on it

Fast-forward 40 years. My friends Mark and Joanne, a midcareer professional couple, were looking for a site to build a house near Portland, Maine. They wanted a place with solitude, room for gardening, and, if possible, a view. They soon discovered that good lots were few and very expensive. And views? Forget it, unless you had six figures to spend.

Eventually, they found a lot about 20 minutes from Portland with good southern exposure. It was perfect—except for the boxy postwar ranch house. But the view was the clincher. It was not a dramatic mountain or ocean view; equally desirable, though, it was a soothing view of a tidal river and salt marsh. This protected wetland is a bird-watcher's delight that never can be developed. It was too good to pass up, and my friends jumped at the chance to buy it.

To save time and money, we decided to adapt the original house rather than tear it down and start over.

A speedy construction strategy

Now that we had a site, the race with winter was officially on. Mark and Joanne found the house in May and closed on it in July. I immediately began documenting the existing conditions, and design continued into August. Demolition was under way in September. Framing was done by mid-October, and Mark and Joanne moved into a rough but habitable house on Christmas Eve—less than six months from closing to open house.

As impressive as this progress was, it's unrealistic to expect a well-designed and well-crafted project to be completed in just a few months. At the start we agreed on a strategy of four elements: 1. Use the existing footprint; 2. Reuse building components wherever feasible; 3. Enclose basic shelter quickly; and 4. Finish interior details and exterior spaces as time and budget permit. Efficiency, simplicity, and economy were our goals.

The essence of a ranch in the shape of a Cape

With low ceilings, small rooms, and smaller windows, the interior of the ranch was dark and confining. My primary design goal was to open up the house and make small spaces feel larger by connecting related areas, or activity zones. Moreover, I wanted to open the inside to the outside and to highlight the view.

Besides an office for Mark (a general contractor), Joanne, a violinist with the Portland

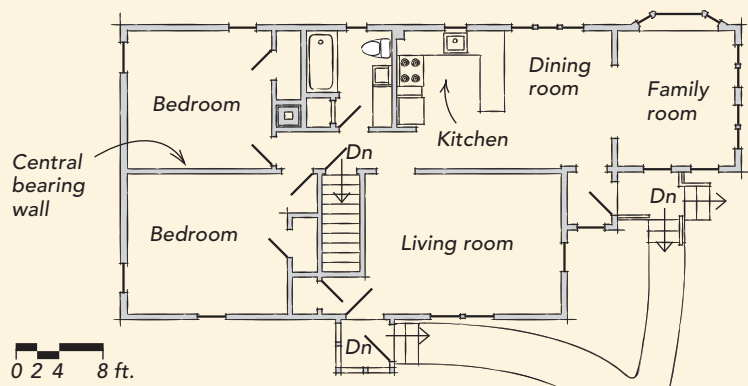
Hard to believe it's the same house. But it is. At least, the foundation and first-floor walls are the same. Adding a small chunk to the footprint and a second floor more than doubled the living space. And outdoor rooms boosted the beauty and utility of the house. Located adjacent to a protected wetland, this site will pay perpetual dividends. Photo facing page taken at A on floor plan; photos below taken at B on floor plan.



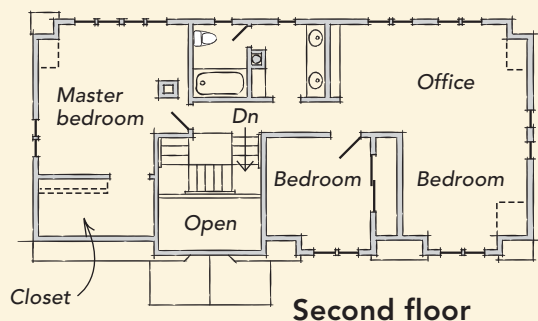
THE PRICE OF RENOVATION

Originally, the house was 930 sq. ft. We added about 1400 sq. ft. as a second floor and small addition in the northwest corner, and 1100 sq. ft. of outdoor living space. The construction costs were about \$200,000. This is artificially low because Mark Woodward, the homeowner and a professional general contractor, was the builder. But even after adding a 20% markup, this price is reasonable at about \$103 per sq. ft. for heated space. Taking the outdoor rooms into account lowers the price to \$86 per sq. ft. Including the land (2.5 acres) and the original house, the price is an absolute bargain at \$130 per sq. ft.

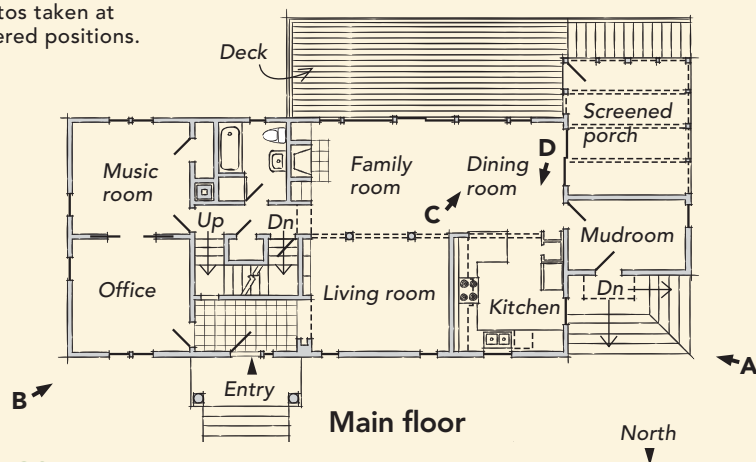
BEFORE



AFTER



Photos taken at lettered positions.



SPECS

Bedrooms: 2+1	Cost: \$103 per sq. ft. (see above)	Architect: Thomas Parks
Bathrooms: 2	Completed: Ongoing	Builder: Benchmark Construction
Size: 2330 sq. ft.	Location: Cape Elizabeth, Maine	

Symphony, needed a dedicated space to give private music lessons. Also, they wanted room for frequent overnight guests (my wife and me) and occasional large family gatherings.

To create these activity zones, I combined small rooms. The bedrooms became Joanne's practice room/office zone (floor plans, left); the former kitchen combines visually with the living room to form a public sitting zone; and the new kitchen is open to the dining room, forming a public work zone. The redesigned entry is a buffer zone: Public space is to the right, music rooms to the left.

The second-floor addition provides new living space under a steeply pitched roof, with dormers used to create additional ceiling height. The exterior walls were extended 3 ft., resulting in a house that resembles a Cape, but one that has been stretched upward. Stained white-cedar shingles, painted white trim, and a simple gable roof all recall traditional New England farm buildings.

We kept the walls and added up

The first order of business was enclosing a place to live. By saving the foundation and walls, about half of the building envelope



Light spills in from the sun porch. Open to the kitchen, deck, and screened porch, the dining room has a table that can extend into the family room for banquet-like seating or act as buffet space for outdoor meals. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

already was in place from the start. This saved at least two months compared to demolishing and starting anew.

A howling nor'easter in October buckled the oak floors, but Mark was able to save and refinish them. The original bathroom was functional and was left almost as is. The heating system, an oil-fired boiler and cast-iron radiators, was sound; we left the system essentially intact and expanded it to the second floor. Beefing up the insulation with rigid foam and high-density batts allowed the boiler to heat the new house, which is about double the size of the original.

For the first year, we kept the original kitchen cabinets, counters, and appliances, but moved them into the new kitchen space. The following summer, custom cabinets and new appliances were installed. Also, the original one-car garage remained intact in the first year, and a larger, two-car garage was built the following summer. In the third year, we added outdoor spaces: a screened porch, a deck, and a patio in the backyard (for the hot tub). We saved most of the mature landscape.

While budget and weather drove the decision to prioritize and build this way, the benefits were many, including design decisions formed by actually living in the house.

Trusses made the roof go up fast

Roof framing went quickly by using custom-made trusses. At first glance, a long shed dormer didn't seem to lend itself to a truss application. But the manufacturer designed an asymmetrical truss that provided the dormer on the back and a short cripple wall on the front.



The kitchen isn't a cave. Moved into the new corner of the house, the kitchen has three views and doesn't cut the cook out of the conversation. A beam and architectural columns, which actually carry weight, replaced the central bearing wall. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

This sped up roof and wall framing. Gable-end walls were framed and sheathed on the ground and lifted into place with the truss crane (photo p. 89). The gable walls and roof trusses were set in one day.

You can enjoy the view from anywhere—even the front yard

Mark was determined to use clad casement windows by Andersen (www.andersenwindows.com) because they were readily available and a good fit for his budget. Taking this limitation as a challenge, I used stock window sizes as a pattern-making element.

By maintaining a width-to-height proportion of about 1:2, I paired the windows to form nearly square openings. I placed them to take full advantage of the view from almost

everywhere in the house: sitting, dining, standing in the kitchen, lying in bed, and walking down the hall.

Exterior window pattern also was a design concern. Windows were aligned and arranged for balance without symmetry.

Views from interior to exterior were not the only ones considered. In a couple of instances, windows on opposite exterior walls are aligned so that you can see through the house. This transparency conveys the openness of the interior while reinforcing the connection of the house to its site. And those were the original goals of the Great American Ranch. □

Thomas Parks, AIA, has an architectural practice in Boston. Photos by Daniel S. Morrison, except where noted.

FEEDBACK

Saving the right parts of an old house takes smart choices

By Mark Woodward

When you're about to alter a house radically, a predictable question should come up: Are some things worth salvaging? Absolutely. Big, expensive things like foundations, framing, and furnaces are worth salvaging.

For example, furnaces often are oversize for houses. With a hefty insulation upgrade, we were able to double the square footage of our house without increasing the boiler size.

We also saved the first-floor bathroom almost in its entirety; the water closet was relocated to an interior wall, and the finishes upgraded.

The foundation and basement were sound, as was the first-floor framing. The ceiling joists were beefy enough to use for the second-floor framing (but that was just dumb luck). The house's stick-frame roof was easy to dismantle, so sav-

ing the ceiling framing and exterior walls was worth it. If the roof had been trusses, it would have been best to demolish to the first-floor deck.

Once again, however, I have confirmed my belief that you need to be ruthless about what is salvaged and what is demolished. Our intention had been to save money by salvaging interior finishes such as the plaster ceiling. But because the house needed to be insulated and rewired, and much of the exterior walls reframed to accommodate new doors and windows, salvaging these finishes was more of a barrier than a blessing for us.

As a professional builder, I should have tempered my optimism with my experience, especially where time is a factor—as it was in this case.

—Mark Woodward is a general contractor in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.