



Small windows flanking the central upstairs window are graduated in size, leading the eye upward.

Secondary gables echo the central shape; the garage gable provides balance.

Arches create a unifying, uplifting theme.

Big Gable Hides a Boring

Except for the occasional termite attack, John and Christie's 1950s ranch house was in good condition, but it was becoming cramped. When their new daughter arrived, they decided it was time to add space and to update the house. In suburban Boston's real-estate market, ranch houses are no longer in favor, so owners who want to improve a ranch's value often add a second story. Tearing down and starting over is even more common, but I've never thought that approach makes much of a contribution; it usually results in another overscale house out of sync with the neighborhood. I encouraged John and Christie to talk to the developer who had done a standard knock-down-spec-built house across the street from them. After checking into the details, they thought that plan looked like a lot of money for an ordinary house and were emboldened to

take the architectural-renovation approach. A renovation would yield a more personal home and conserve resources and memories, even if it cost as much as a new house. I was pretty sure we could do it for less. Christie clipped images of historic houses from magazines to give me a sense of her taste. Their immediate needs determined what we could keep from the original house. They wanted to save the living room, the dining room, and the study; they also wanted to expand the one-car garage and add two more bedrooms, one bath, a bigger screened porch, and a state-of-the-art kitchen.

The ridge turns 90°, and the house is transformed

If we raised the existing roof and added another full floor, we would have created more space than needed and would have made the house

A symmetrical **window** arrangement on the upper floors creates a strong visual focus.

Strong horizontal lines balance the vertical.

Small windows in gables create visual interest.

Extra **texture** is created by adding a layer of board-and-batten siding.

Ranch

A change in a ranch's ridgeline transforms a suburban house without disturbing the neighborhood

BY FRANK RIEPE



The ranch before

Elevation details that have a purpose

Designed by McKim, Mead, and White, the unique shingle style of the Low house (inset photo below) provided the spark for our renovation. Certain design elements work together visually to balance each other in this house. The new central **gable**, repeated **arches**, and an ascending tier of **windows** all thrust upward, creating a strong vertical facade. This movement is anchored by the **strong horizontal lines** that extend across the house's entire width. The balancing act also works to resolve style conflicts between old and new. Vestiges of the original ranch house, such as the layer of stone across the base, the bay window, and the lower gables, create **texture** and a stylistic reference. Photo left taken at A on floor plan.

Inspiration from an icon



Top inset photo: Frank Riepe. Bottom inset photo: Cervin Robinson, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Under a canopy. The new master bedroom takes advantage of its proximity to the chimney with a corner fireplace and its top-floor location with an arched ceiling. Photo taken at B on floor plan.

too big and bulky. Another ranch house was next door, and it wouldn't be neighborly of us to dwarf it or fail to maintain a visual relationship between the two houses. I shared a book with John and Christie, Vincent Scully's *The Shingle Style and the Stick Style* (Yale University Press, 1971). It is the definitive treatise on our local late-19th-century architecture. The book featured a house I had always admired, the William Low House in Bristol, R.I., designed by McKim, Mead, and White (bottom photo, p. 101). Its central feature was a simple, unbroken gable roof that swept down over the second floor to the tops of the first-floor windows. By overlaying a similarly broad gable end over the first floor, I imagined that the ranch could be transformed into a bigger house with historical references but still remain relatively modest in size.

The builders demolished the entire roof, doubled up most of the old attic-floor joists, and introduced new beams to carry the new floor loads and the roof loads. They also tore down the chimney to the attic floor and in so doing discovered why the fireplace had never worked very well: The flue was blocked partially by a piece of broken glass. (I had heard of that trick. The mason working on the house closes the flue with a piece of glass to ensure final payment. If the owner, having looked up the chimney and seen daylight, complains that the fireplace still won't draw, the mason tells him it will work after he gets the final check.)

The new roof was framed conventionally with the ridge perpendicular to the street and swept down to the first-floor level in a 5½-in-12 pitch. The chimney had to be extended, which became the perfect excuse to add a new brick fireplace in the master bedroom. For the new sidewalls, I picked white-cedar shingles pretreated with bleaching oil and installed with a flare detail above the second-floor windows. I ordered the predominantly double-hung windows from Vetter (www.vetterwindows.com) with divided lites in the Craftsman style. Smaller windows punctuate the exterior and add interesting light to closets and attic spaces. I also decided to lower the stone veneer on the first floor's front and added a board-and-batten detail to the exposed frame wall, a move that created more texture on the front elevation.



Upgrading the interior, selectively

We doubled the size of the tired old kitchen by appropriating an adjacent bedroom that became the informal family room (floor plans, facing page). Manufactured by Glenwood Kitchens (www.glenwoodkitchens.com), the new red-birch cabinets feature flush inset doors in beaded frames and were installed with a mix of solid-surface and butcher-block countertops. Red birch costs a little more than regular white birch, but the grain and color are richer. Some cabinetmakers think red birch is harder to work with, however, because it tends to expand and contract seasonally. The island, outfitted with a six-burner gas cooktop and sink, makes meal prep a participatory experience, a big plus in the homeowners' eyes.

I located the new staircase at the front of the house in a spot previously occupied by the attic stairs. Formerly cramped and dark, the entry hall is now a soaring two-story space that brings light down from the new dormer above. Oak treads and mahogany railings give the stairs a period character. Upstairs, bookshelves line one wall and make the short hall to the attic a useful place.

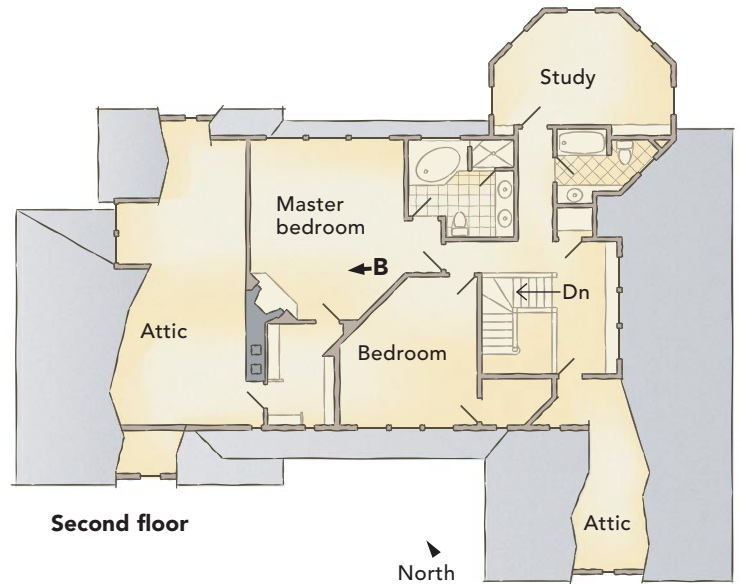
Construction took a year, but it was well worth the effort and expense. The neighborhood saw an evolution, rather than a revolution; John and Christie's friends were all quite astonished that a generic ranch house could become a graceful, shingle-style home that felt much older and still satisfied the needs of a modern lifestyle. □

Frank Riepe lives in Sudbury, Mass., where he has practiced residential architecture for the past 20 years. Photos by Charles Bickford, except where noted.



KEEPING THE PARTS THAT WORKED AND ADDING A SECOND FLOOR TO MAKE IT BETTER

During the initial design process, it became clear that the original living and dining rooms and the study (now the TV room) didn't need any attention. A bedroom at the rear of the house was incorporated into the larger kitchen space; the deficit was reclaimed in the new upstairs master suite. A new office added above the enlarged rear porch and an enlarged garage completed the changes.



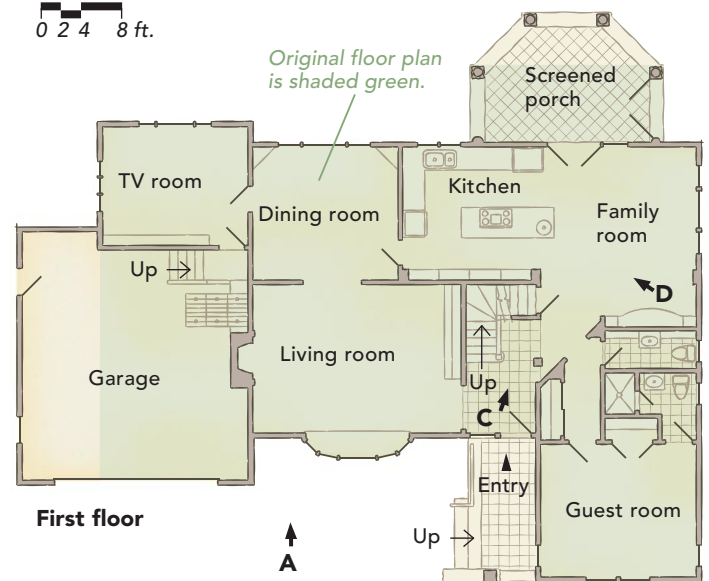
Second floor

Photos taken at lettered positions.

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SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 3
- Bathrooms:** 3½
- Size:** 2820 sq. ft. (including 1176 sq. ft. of new space)
- Cost:** \$375,000
- Completed:** 2001
- Location:** Sudbury, Mass.
- Architect:** Frank W. Riepe
- Builder:** Jenkinson & Broderick Corp.



First floor



The well-lighted stairwell. Built in the location of the original attic stairs, the new staircase brings light into the center of the house. Photo taken at C on floor plan.



Bigger kitchen is the place to gather. Anchored by a butcher-block farm table and warmed by red-birch cabinets, the renovated kitchen makes a comfortable family place to hang out. Photo taken at D on floor plan.