



# Make it Modern



A sensitive path to updating a traditional home with modern design details

BY DAN HISEL

There are few design topics that spark more disagreement than the addition of modern details to older, traditional homes. And there are many legitimate reasons why. Some feel that modern renovations might hurt the resale value of a home. Others are concerned about the home fitting in with other houses in the neighborhood. Many homeowners in historic districts are indeed limited by guidelines that demand conformance to a historic style. Still, there are good reasons why my firm is not shy about taking a modern design approach when remodeling older homes.

For one, many of our clients are interested in modern architecture and are frustrated by the lack of modern homes in the New England neighborhoods where we work. Unable to find a house that suits their style, they purchase older homes and come to us to help bring them into the 21st century with modern details and technologies that improve the home's performance and express their personal sensibilities.

Another reason for taking a modern approach is that nearly all homeowners renovating today are interested in three related goals: an open floor plan where the social spaces in the house (especially the kitchen) flow into one another, additional daylight with more glass, and a stronger, more fluid connection with the outdoors. These ideas all originate in the modern movement, and it is our belief that they require a modern expression. When done well, old and new can coexist comfortably.

Here, I'll offer a systematic approach to modernizing an older home based on a project we completed at 9 Salem Ave. in Newburyport, Massachusetts, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the country. The home was originally built around 1800, probably by shipbuilders working on the docks nearby.

### Identify the home's identity

Before we start a project on an older home, we research any legal constraints on the property, includ-

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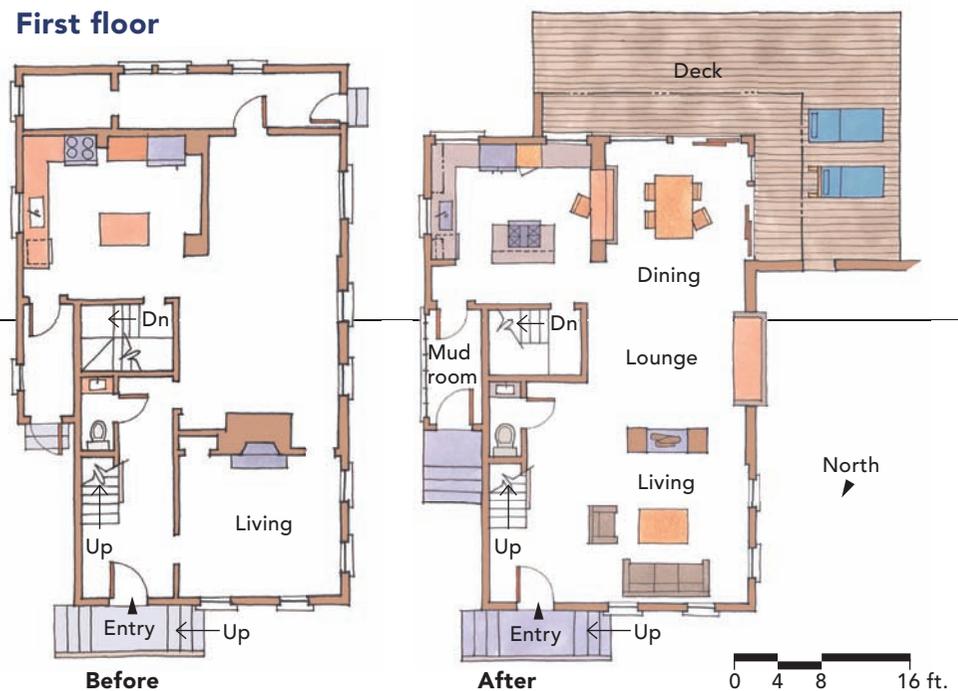
# OPEN IS MODERN



Today's open floor plans are a modern idea, and they should be articulated with modern design. But this doesn't mean you can't keep some of the home's original character intact. Looking toward the front door in this remodel (photo far right), you can see the beams in the ceiling where walls were removed and catch a glimpse of the original stair details. The large window seat allows people to occupy a unique place that is simultaneously inside and outside. Framed in bamboo plywood, the window seat is intentionally different in style from the small double-hung windows that were kept elsewhere to maintain the home's original character. Large sliding glass doors open the previously dark interiors to sunlight and views of the yard. Outside, the doors are set apart from the original home with a sculptural wall and a roof overhang that also offer privacy and shelter (photo above).



## First floor



## A PLAN, DECONSTRUCTED

The "Before" plan shows the small rooms and limited views of the original house. The front hall is especially cramped and dark, as are the kitchen and dining rooms. Reinventing the first floor meant removing walls to open up the space. The most significant change on the second floor was making two baths out of one, which gave the homeowners a master suite and a separate bath for the second bedroom.



## SPECS

**Bedrooms:** 3

**Bathrooms:** 2 full; 2 half

**Size:** 2,300 sq. ft.

**Cost:** \$130 per sq. ft.

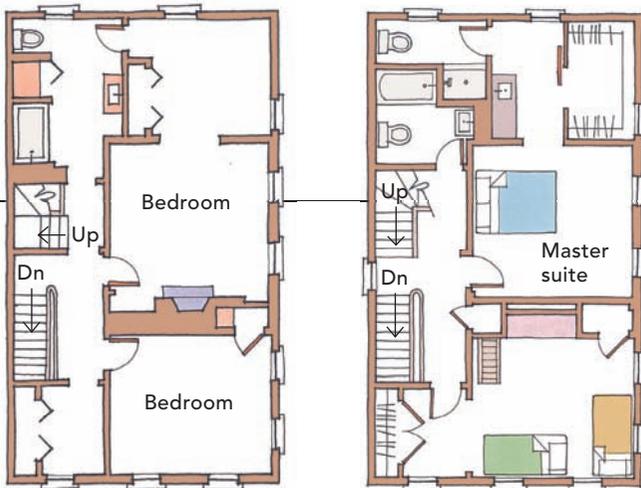
**Completed:** 2008

**Location:** Newburyport, Mass.

**Architect:** Dan Hisel, danhiselarchitect.com

**Builder:** Britton Construction, Inc., brittonconstructioninc.com

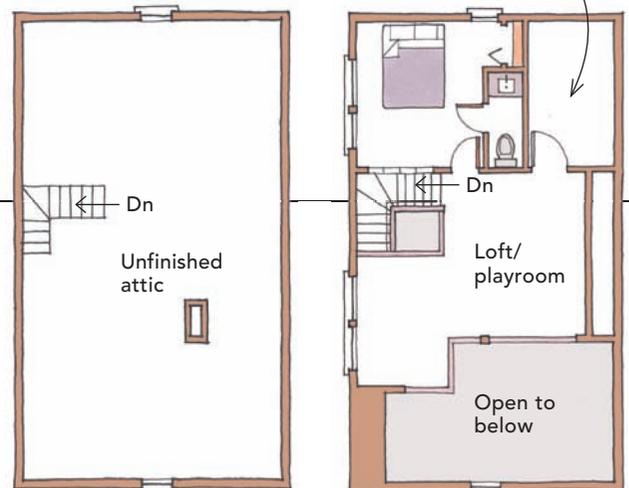
## Second floor



Before

After

## Attic



Before

After

**Still charming.** From the street, the house appears largely as it has for many years. The modern renovations are held back from the front of the house and are designed to help draw a clear distinction between what is original and what is new.



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ing those imposed by planning and zoning regulations, historic districts or commissions, or neighborhood covenants. Then, after a complete debriefing with our client to gain a full understanding of their goals, the next order of business is to become familiar with the house itself. We learn what we can about its history and identify the primary attributes that give the house its character.

Newburyport is full of marvelous examples of historic architectural styles, from Federal to Georgian to Victorian. The house at 9 Salem is one of many Greek Revival homes built throughout Newburyport in the mid-18th century. The house is set close to the sidewalk and has a simple gable form with an asymmetrical front door. It is one room wide and three rooms deep, with double-hung windows arrayed more or less evenly around its elevations. The identity of this house is its essential simplicity; it's Monopoly-house iconography. We decided to save this traditional form, along with its entry and window placement, and it became our partner in the design process.

An important thing to note about this house is that, at the time of purchase, it had suffered many years of abuse and neglect as a rental property. The interiors were dark and dingy and almost completely devoid of historic character. The house's overall condition was only marginally salvageable. While the roof was in OK shape, the windows were old and leaky, the shingles were at the end of their lifespan, and the systems throughout the house were in a very poor state. There was also a very ugly and dilapidated shed-roofed addition off the back, useful only as storage, which we elected to demolish in order to get more light into the kitchen.

### **Restore significant details**

Most projects we work on do not call for historic preservation, per se. That is the territory of restoration experts and professionals trained in the forensics of historic-building practices. Our projects—and most

of the houses available on the market today—are not historically significant. So, while we attempt to honor the character of the older structures, we do not treat them as precious objects.

We did elect to retain several historic details of the 9 Salem house, including the hallmark Greek Revival front entrance and corner boards on the exterior, and the stair railing and newel post inside. The entry trim was in keeping with details found around the neighborhood, and, while not terribly remarkable, the balustrade had some nice curves and traditional details.

We replaced the leaky old windows with new Andersen 2-over-2 double-hung windows with insulated low-e glass, which allowed us to keep the historic look while updating the performance of the windows. We have also done other projects in which we restored and reinstalled old windows along with new storm windows to increase performance. The pros and cons of these window strategies should be weighed for each specific home and budget.

We also did a lot of nonaesthetic work at 9 Salem. We installed new insulation and heating and cooling systems and replaced the electrical and plumbing systems in full.

### **Let the new look new**

The owners of 9 Salem were interested in opening up the plan of the first floor to create spaces that flowed into each other and allowed the family to be together while doing homework, making dinner, work-

ing, and hanging out. They also wanted to brighten the dim interiors and open the interior spaces to a new deck and the backyard. This list of objectives was impossible to achieve within the small partitioned rooms of the old house, with their small openings and double-hung windows. As I mentioned, our philosophy is that these new details require contemporary forms.

The new interiors are now unabashedly modern, with clean white walls and simple rectangular trim. In order to get more light into the house, we added large sliding doors and a sizeable window seat to the interior living space. The lounge where the window seat is located is quite small, so the seat is a functional solution that provides space for family and friends to gather. It's large enough to accommodate two adults, and because it straddles the interior and exterior of the house, the bamboo plywood box allows its occupants to enjoy the warmth of the fire inside while feeling as if they're sitting in the garden.

### Bring the plan outside

The blurring of interior and exterior space is one of the central tenets of modern architecture. The easy flow and communication with nature reflects a philosophy of the outdoors as healthy and therapeutic rather than dangerous and threatening.

At the 9 Salem house, the large sliding glass doors open onto an outdoor living space where the kids can play and the family can dine. These large sliders needed to be installed in walls alongside traditional double-hung windows, which presented certain design

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challenges. Our solution was to frame the sliding glass doors with contemporary Ipe walls and overhangs that achieve several goals. The walls provide the deck with privacy from the street, while the roof overhang provides weather protection and passive-solar shading for the large sliding doors. The deck is quite low to the ground, which eliminates the need for railings and gives the new exterior details a sculptural quality.

### Respect Scale

Our renovations at 9 Salem were modest, due in part to a limited budget and a shared desire to keep the modernity to a scale that could be described as subtle or quiet. This is not to say that there isn't room for bold gestures and dynamic forms, but it's a good rule in general to be aware of the scale of renovations as they relate to the original form. This, perhaps more than anything else, is how modern renovations come to exist in dialogue with, rather than opposition to, the neighborhood and community. □

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Dan Hisel is an architect in Arlington, Mass. Photos by Eric Roth. “Before” photos courtesy of the author.

**Clean is timeless.** Cabinetry and trim with very clean lines provide a timeless style in the kitchen, where concrete countertops and a back-painted glass backsplash add a touch of modern style and sophistication.

