

# Designing for Comfort and



A cramped '60s colonial opens up  
with French doors, more windows, and

# Light

wider passageways

BY STEVE AITKEN

The small 1960s colonial with its characteristic dark halls, closed-up rooms, and cheap trim detail didn't really suit the Pratt family's personality. The Pratts are a creative, easygoing family with two boys at home and one in college. They spend much of their time outside enjoying the yard they love, but they also pursue various indoor activities alone and together, like playing music or reading. In addition, they like to entertain groups large and small.

Even though they didn't love their house, they did love the land it sat on. After deciding to remodel the house rather than move to a new one, the family did research to be sure they would get what they wanted. When they finally met with architect Jennifer Huestis, they presented her with a notebook filled with pictures cut from books and magazines to convey the look and feel they were after. They wanted more space, more light, less formality, and rooms that were separate and connected at the same time. Their new house, they said, should be a year-round home that felt like a vacation house.



## DOUBLE DUTY—WIDER OPENINGS MEAN MORE LIGHT AND BETTER FLOW

Rooms flowing into each other have an informality about them that the Pratts liked, but their colonial was a maze of hallways that impeded this flow. To strengthen the connection between rooms, Huestis eliminated the hallways by expanding the rooms into them. She then connected the rooms with openings 6 or 8 feet wide. These wider openings make a smaller area feel large while still delineating individual spaces.

The result is that someone in the living room can feel connected to the activities in the adjoining rooms without actually being a part of them, perfect for this close-knit family that enjoys independent activities. If one of the Pratts wants some privacy, he or

**BREAKING OUT.** Before a major remodel, the old rooms were self-contained little boxes. Now, thanks to wide openings and many French doors, the life of the house flows easily from room to room and from indoors out.

she can retreat to the library or the kitchen, both of which have glass doors that separate the rooms without closing them off.

The widening of the openings between rooms also added much-needed light to the house. More light comes from transom windows that sit above the openings. These doorways could just as easily have been open all the way to the ceiling. They still would have added to the informal flow and increased light, but they would have been too tall. By using the transoms, Huestis retained the assets of the large openings but brought them down to a more manageable scale.

The common rooms all have one wall dominated by windows. The kitchen now has three large windows over the sink. The dining and living rooms have French doors surrounded by banks of windows that look out to the backyard.

The informal, vacation-house feel of the home also comes from the blurring of the distinction between indoors and out. Thanks to the relocation of two closets, a visitor entering the front door can see through the house to the Pratts' expansive backyard. And in the library, French doors surrounded by windows lead out to the deck. The master bedroom has a new porch, as do the mudroom and the main entry.

#### THE HOUSE GROWS UP AND OUT, BUT ALL IN SCALE

A two-story addition on the south side of the house added room for a new master bedroom and porch on the first floor, and two bedrooms, two baths, and a laundry room on the second. The

**SPLIT PERSONALITY.** *The front of the house (below) faces the street yet maintains the family's privacy, while the back (above right) bursts into the backyard with exuberance.*

Before



Before

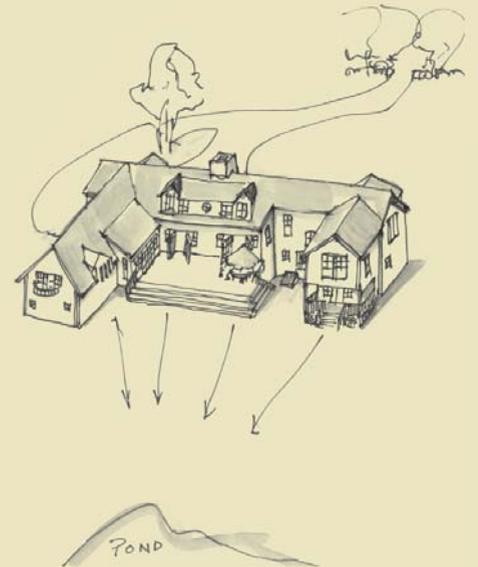


After





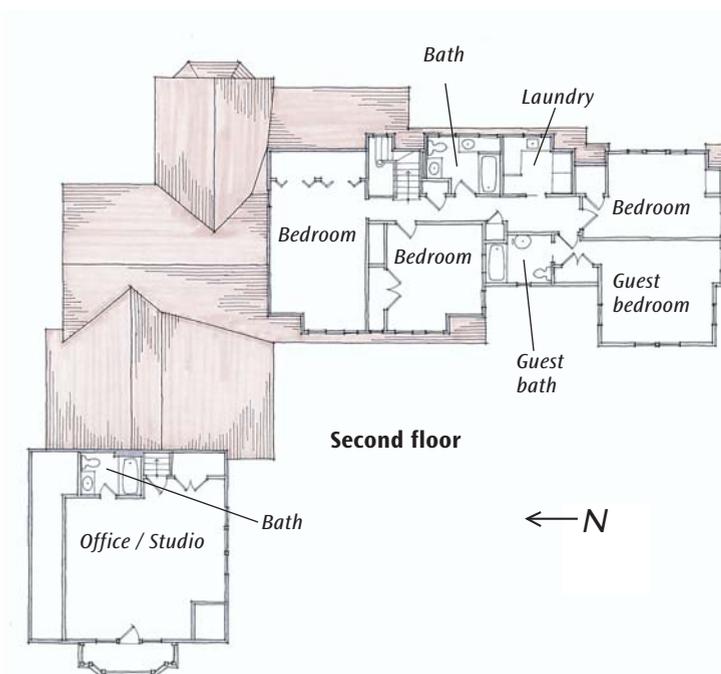
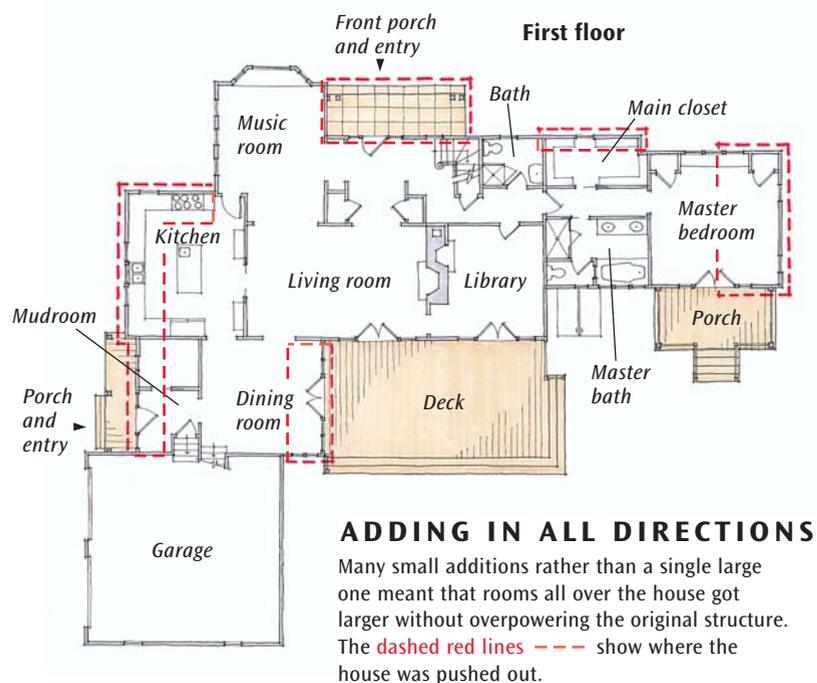
## WRAPPING A HOUSE AROUND THE OUTDOORS



There were two ways we tried to create light-filled rooms that open up to the beautiful landscape. First, we designed the library, living room, and dining room with lots of windows and French doors to take advantage of the views of the pond on the property. The French doors connect each of these rooms to the deck. Second, we created outdoor rooms, or in-between spaces, from which to enjoy the outdoors. The house wraps around the deck, creating the feeling that the deck is an extension of the house, an outdoor room, rather than an appendage stuck on as an afterthought. We added porches at the front door, mudroom, and master bedroom; these serve as places to spend time enjoying the landscape or as transitional spaces that enable you to pause before entering the house.

—Jennifer Huestis, architect

**A mere stoop** became a broad deck, connected to three rooms inside and to the entire backyard.



kitchen grew both out and up, gaining not only a 6-foot bump-out, but also a cathedral ceiling created from unused attic space. Beadboard and decorative horizontal beams keep the ceiling from being overwhelming.

One of the biggest design challenges is keeping an addition in scale with the original house. Rather than just add on to one side of the building, Huestis's approach expanded the house in all directions, similar to the way a balloon expands. The kitchen bump-out and the addition of the dining room, mudroom, and mudroom porch at one end of the house balance the large addition on the south side. Huestis then

added smaller-scale elements like the porches and dormers so that the new, larger masses weren't so overpowering. She kept the second floor of the house low and made the roof lines complement each other so that from the outside, everything looks like part of the original.

#### FINISH DETAILS MAKE IT LOOK RIGHT

The Pratts' house had minimal detailing and little if any woodwork, which is typical of many colonials built in the 1960s. The house had good bones, but its lack of embellishments made it bland.



## CREATING COZY SPACES WITH A LARGER FEEL

From some of the pre-1940s apartments I had lived in over the years I borrowed the idea of opening the public rooms to one another with oversize doorways and pocket doors. The glass transom windows over the cased openings at the entry hall add to that open feeling, connecting the entry hall to the stair hall, music room, and living room. Another way we made the house feel expansive and open was by creating vistas through the rooms. The house can be viewed the way you view a landscape: The different rooms become foreground, middle ground, and background. These vistas give the house a larger feel while maintaining a cozy and human proportion in each room. —Jennifer Huestis, architect



**TRANSOM WINDOWS ARE AN EASY ADDITION.** Most houses have standard 6-foot 8-inch-high doors and 8-foot-high ceilings, leaving about 16 inches of wall above the door. If the wall is not load bearing you can remove it above the transom (the frame piece above the door) and add a window, often called a transom light.

“You can see what’s going on in every room, but there are still places where you can be by yourself.”

—Annie Pratt, homeowner

“Our kitchen is open and airy but not cavernous.

Borrowing space from the attic gave us headroom, but we added only a few square feet to the room’s footprint.”

—Annie Pratt, homeowner



**KITCHEN CONNECTIONS.**  
A door in the corner of the kitchen (top) leads to the music room, which could become a formal dining room if desired. Double pocket doors link the living room and kitchen (above), maintaining a casual atmosphere in both rooms.



**EVEN PRIVATE ROOMS OPEN TO THE BACKYARD.** A grouping of French doors flanked by double-hung windows connect the master bedroom (left) to its own covered porch, and the library (above) to the far end of the deck.

The final touches of Huestis's design added details that the artistic Pratts desperately wanted. Larger, more substantial door and window casings, whose profile references shingle-style beach cottages from the turn of the century, replaced the colonial casings. Many doorways have a beaded band of perimeter trim at the top, adding to the rooms a horizontal element similar to an elevated chair rail. Doorways and windows are topped with a simple cornice molding that's repeated at the ceilings of the more formal rooms. Huestis also added built-in cabinets and bookcases to give the house the solid feeling of those built before World War II.

On the exterior, extended roof overhangs and crown molding on the eaves and windows created the refined look and texture of a much older, much better house. The Pratts couldn't be happier. 

[See Resources on page 90.](#)

Steve Aitken is an assistant editor at *The Taunton Press*.

## WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LIVE HERE

We're really pleased with how open everything is. If you need to, you can see what is going on in every room, but there are still plenty of places where you can go to get away and be by yourself.

I especially like all of the porches. They make it feel like we have all these extra rooms. My favorite way to spend the morning is out on the porch off the master bedroom, reading the paper. We wanted a casual feel to the whole house, so there wouldn't be just a family room or a bedroom where you would feel comfortable. And we got that: There isn't any one room where we spend most of our time.

— Annie Pratt, shown here with husband Tom, sons Nathan and Tanner, and dog Lucy

