

This is an Excerpt from the book

Updating Classic America: RANCHES

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Stretching the Envelope



ABOVE, The contemporary, taut steel-and-wood banister stands in stark contrast to the more traditional detailing of the built-in wood cabinetry throughout the house.

FACING PAGE, Finishes are important in conveying the tone of the room. Choosing to combine dark cherry cabinets, slate flooring, heavy granite countertops, and red oak flooring creates a classic adult look. Oatmeal cookies, milk, and sippy cups are welcome at snack time, but after hours the mood is suited to cocktails, canapés, and crystal.

IF YOU'RE INVOLVED IN A REMODELING PROJECT, there may come a point in the design process when you have to ask yourself which is more important, the integrity of the house style or how your family defines home? Mark and Ruth Ellen's 1960s vintage Minnesota Ranch was a typical contractor one-story Ranch with a shoebox plan. The house had some nice features—a large picture window with sidelights, slider windows in the bedroom, wood shakes below the eave line, horizontal wood siding above, and a stone chimney—but it lacked sparkle. It could have been anyone's home.

Here to Stay

The starting point for the remodeling was Mark and Ruth Ellen's intention that this was the house they would live in well into their old age. This decision freed them to design a house suited to their own particular taste, instead of playing it safe with a neutral fix-up for quick resale. They didn't go wild with off-the-wall ideas, but they did make some big-ticket decisions. Excavating a new basement and raising the roof for an eventual second story are things they probably wouldn't have considered if they were planning to move.





Unless the project is a complete makeover, it's best to use materials massing that reflect the original house. Here, the addition built on the character and materials of the original house, preserving the gable ends.

A long-term commitment means that the cost of the remodeling will be amortized over their lifetime and the remodeling can be done in phases as finances and family schedules allow.

What They Said

One atypical aspect of Ruth Ellen and Mark's Ranch is that it didn't have the usual open, free flow of movement. Even though the house was almost 2,000 sq. ft., the family felt constricted. They called on Tim Fuller of SALA Architects to help them with their remodeling ideas. Tim identified several key issues they needed to think about. First, which rooms worked well for the family? Operating under the assumption that if it's not broken, don't fix it, the family agreed that the two front bedrooms, the bathroom, and closets were fine just the





Both the master bedroom and the family room have access to outdoor patios, by simply projecting the entry bay, a privacy screen is created between the intimate and the shared family outdoor spaces.

Digging a huge hole in your backyard, building a new foundation, and ripping the roof off are not projects for the faint-hearted. But neither is house hunting and moving.



The family room is the heart of this house. The furniture can be rearranged any number of ways, to accommodate a crowd for a holiday party or for a family evening alone. Even the entertainment center is on wheels.

way they were. And the basement stair enclosure was in the right location for the planned second-floor expansion.

Second, Tim challenged them to think about what was in the wrong place and what was missing. The family wanted a family room on the first floor, convenient to the kitchen, the patio, and the backyard. The original kitchen was little more than a galley, and it felt disconnected from the rest of the family living spaces. And what is a remodeling without complexity and contradiction? Mark and Ruth Ellen wanted their home to have a feeling of free-flowing family togetherness and plenty of opportunities for quiet and private spaces.

The new roof configuration allows the introduction of skylights into the bedroom ceiling. The bedroom has its own private covered patio accessible through the double French doors, great for views and cross-ventilation.



What They Meant

Sometimes the thing an architect does best is listen. While Ruth Ellen and Mark were discussing their house, Tim kept hearing a tone of disappointment, contrasted with Mark's excited tone when he spoke of the time he lived in a loft space. It was obvious to the architect that the couple wanted to capture the dramatic feeling of loft living in a home suited for family life. He threw out the idea: Why not introduce a loft into the Ranch? The couple wanted both family and private spaces, and with the slope of the site and the configuration of the lot they had two choices: Go up or build a large addition to the back. The yard was important to the family, and they didn't want the Ranch to become a Rambler and take up all the yard space. Other homes in the neighborhood are two stories, so adding gables

would actually bring their house more into the character of the neighborhood.

What They Did

The final plan added another 630 sq. ft. of living space to the first floor and the same amount of storage and work space to the basement. For now, the second floor is a mezzanine that soars over the family room, its edgy and contemporary detailing sending a clear message that life in a Ranch can be full of surprises. The master bedroom suite is scheduled for phase two.

A hallmark of Ranch design is that one element does double duty. The mezzanine acts as ceiling for the kitchen, the lowered ceiling providing a sense of enclosure without shutting the kitchen off from the double-height family room. Now that the family can see the

Because the homeowners were thinking ahead to “aging in place,” they considered what kind of appliances and hardware would be best, and they located the laundry on the first floor, convenient to the bedrooms and baths.



backyard from all the active living rooms, the addition seems much bigger than it actually is.

Eclectic Interiors

One likely reason for the popularity of the Ranch style is that homeowners like the fact that it does not conform to any one style or period. Old and new can be mingled together. In this house, the kitchen combines an industrial aesthetic of exposed steel I-beams and high-tech lighting with handcrafted cherry Mission cabinets. The study is traditionally styled with built-in oak cabinetry, while the bathroom is cutting-edge Euro style. The hand-held shower drains directly into a floor drain, and transparent floor-to-ceiling plate-glass shower doors separate the shower and tub from the rest of the bathroom. The combining of different styles may make some architects and interior designers shudder, but an aesthetic mix can express the unique personalities that make up a family.

Ruth Ellen and Mark’s home is tiptoeing into the category of complete makeover, but until the second-floor bedroom is built it is still a one-story house with a double-height space. The design is flexible, the house looks complete now, and the skylights in the new roof flood the room with light and remove all traces of the constricted feeling that the family didn’t like. When and if they enclose the second-floor bedroom, it will fit in seamlessly—just the way original Ranch expansions were intended to.



A unique look doesn’t have to be more expensive. The architect chose to use standard super-sized 16 x 16 flooring tile on the walls, and with fewer joints the room appears larger. The tub surround tiles are 4 x 16, which provides a horizontal counterpoint.



In the future, the family might have use for a formal living room, but for the time being, most of the entertaining takes place in the family room and the backyard. The living room can be easily closed off from the active areas by two glass-fronted French doors. For now, the built-in bookshelves and desk accommodate a quiet study.