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Essential Remodeling Strategies

Before settling on a costly addition, make the most of the opportunities under your existing roof

BY KEYAN MIZANI

Many of us live in houses that need something. They might be cramped, confined, dated, dark, poorly laid out, or all of the above and more. If you live in an older home, it was probably designed and built to accommodate a lifestyle that has long since gone by the wayside.

Like a big Band-Aid, additions are often proposed as the way to heal a house's ailments—and sometimes they do, but not if the core problems aren't fixed as well. If an addition really is needed, designing it in tandem with improvements to existing space can minimize its size and result in a house that functions and feels better. When we work with clients who want to upgrade their home, we focus first on identifying opportunities within the existing footprint. After all, making the most of what lies within is often less expensive and one of the greenest things you can do. The remodeling strategies we typically use are all interrelated, as you'll see in the examples shown here.

Projects by Keyan Mizani and Alexia Zerbinis, partners in eM/Zed design LLC in Portland, Ore. (www.em-zed.com). "Before" photos by the author. "After" photos by Charles Miller, except where noted.



LOOK AT THE BIG PICTURE FIRST

This strategy is number one for a reason: It's the most important.

You don't want to fix one clumsy room only to discover that it needs changing in a couple of years to solve another room's problems.

How to do it right

- **Consider your future needs** and whether the current renovation either can expand to meet them or can be part of a larger overall plan that's accomplished in stages. Combining projects usually shakes loose more space, bringing better opportunities for creative rearrangement of available square footage. The project shown here illustrates this approach.

- **Rearrange room locations for the best fit.** For example, we've seen many poorly placed first-floor baths that act as a plug in a plan that could otherwise feel more spacious and open.

- **Subdivide extralarge or underused spaces.** Perhaps the living room is larger than necessary and can lend some space to form a better entry. What if the underused bedroom next to the kitchen became a family room as part of a kitchen renovation? Can you steal some space from an adjacent room to recess the refrigerator that has always been in the way?

- **Design spaces that serve multiple functions.** This strategy can free up a good deal of room for use in another part of the renovation. Home offices can occasionally be guest rooms, while hallways can sometimes accommodate a homework or bill-paying station. Stairways might include shelving.

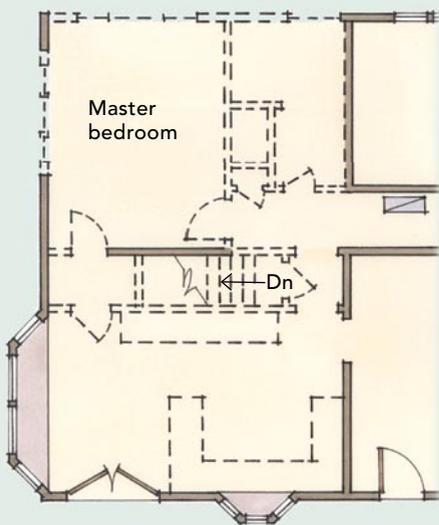


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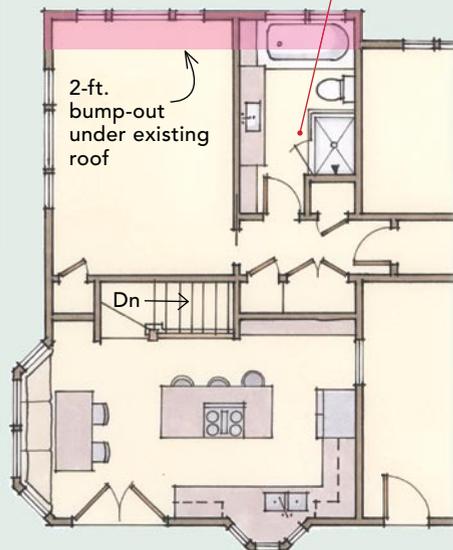


NEW BATHROOM

FOR EXAMPLE: A master-suite project grew to include an anticipated kitchen renovation. Working on both allowed for reconfiguration of the space separating them, which contained a short hallway and a dark basement stair that led to the laundry room. Reversing the stair direction and opening it to the kitchen made the kitchen seem bigger, brought more light to the downstairs family room, and eliminated the short hallway. Removal of the hall provided space for a pantry and a larger master closet. All this fine-tuning allowed us to shrink the size of an expected addition to a 2-ft. bump-out under the existing roof, as shown below.



Before floor plan



After floor plan

3 5 6 8 11 ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK

Drawings: Martha Garstang Hill. Photo bottom right: Keyan Mizani.

2 REMOVE PIECES

Never assume that all parts of an existing building should be retained, especially those added over time. Poorly positioned bays, bump-outs, and additions can actually detract from the function of a home, especially if they are in disrepair. A typical small-scale example is the prefab bow window applied to a large wall. Removing it can create opportunities for a wider expanse of windows that enlarges the feeling of the room without an appreciable loss of usable space. In other situations, removing larger portions of a house can have a surprisingly beneficial effect (photos below).



BEFORE



AFTER

FOR EXAMPLE: This hillside house lacked a direct connection to its beautiful backyard. A poorly conceived addition (foreground lower level, "before" photo) restricted views to the yard, blocked yard access, and contributed little to an already spacious lower-level family room. The addition was removed and replaced with a deck and a stairway to the yard. New, large windows and a full-lite door offer expansive outdoor views and provide more daylight to the family room. The rest of the back facade also received a face-lift to enhance its proportions.

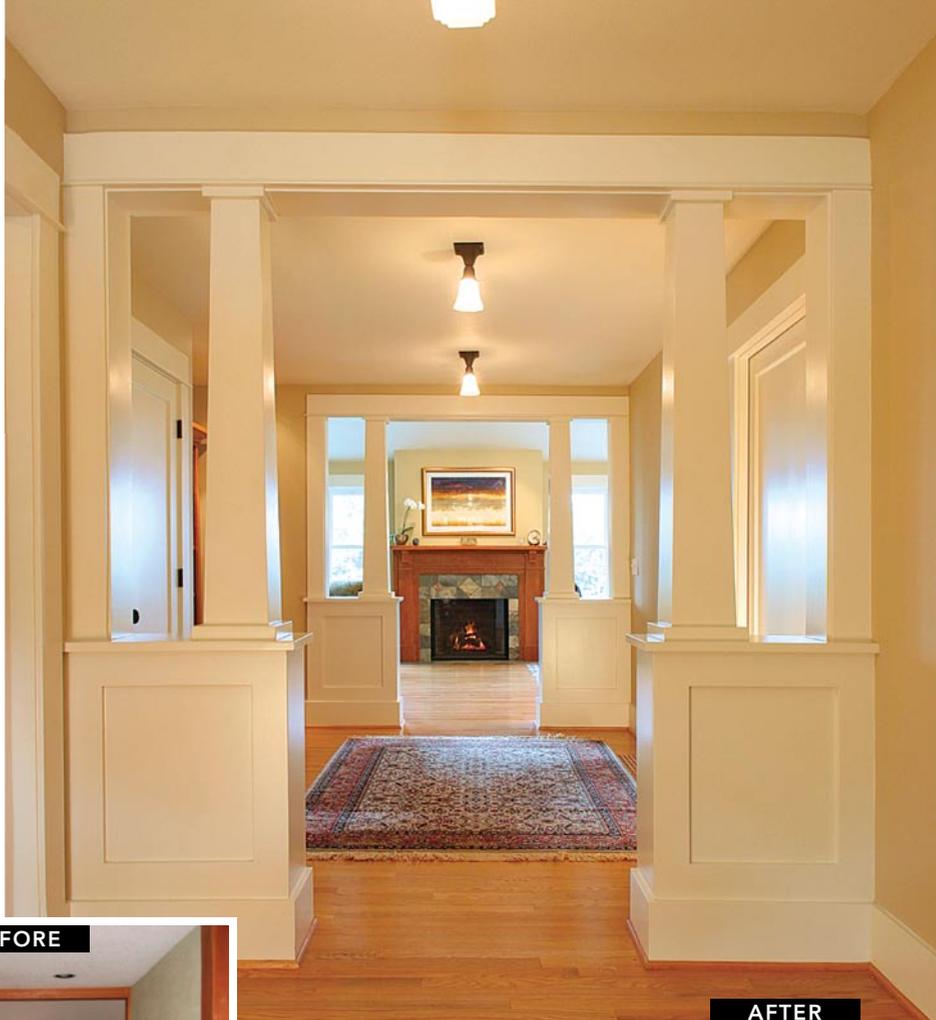
1 3 6 7 10 ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK

3 IMPROVE CIRCULATION

Circuitous circulation is great in a Japanese garden, but not in your house. On the other hand, while efficient circulation is the goal, it should also be enjoyable and a way to experience the unfolding of a home's interior.

How to do it right

- **Establish a clear hierarchy between public and private areas.** Openings to private spaces should not compete with those that lead to communal areas.
- **Make the width of the path feel generous** to impart a sense of spaciousness. Longer corridors should be wider to help offset their depth.
- **Preserve space for furniture** by placing through-room pathways along the edges instead of through the center of rooms. Most early-20th-century kitchens are common offenders, guaranteed to have at least three to five doorways with zigzagging paths to and fro interrupting the middle of the space. Eliminating some doorways and moving circulation to one side of the kitchen can provide more wall area for cabinetry, an undisturbed work area, and a clear path through for family and friends.
- **Convert a dreadful, dark corridor** into a welcoming one that shares light and air between rooms. At the end, either a window or an interior feature can serve as a pleasing focal point. Think: No cheap hotel corridors allowed.



FOR EXAMPLE: This house has a deep footprint with a 20-ft.-plus distance between the entry and the living/dining area. The original corridor was jumbled and uninviting, presenting a wide-open view of the laundry and a partial view of one side of the fireplace. The reconfigured corridor frames the new fireplace with two pairs of columns, frame-and-panel wainscot, and decorative lighting that leads the eye inward. The laundry is now behind closed doors.

1 8 11

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK

4 RESURFACE INSTEAD OF DEMOLISH

Sometimes one unattractive element can overwhelm a space. Your first impulse might be to remove it, and although sometimes this is necessary, first consider resurfacing it. If something can be resurfaced, the project will likely be less expensive and will lead to less waste. Don't like the texture of the 1970s-era brick-wall fireplace in your living room? A cement skim coat can change the wall and its texture entirely. Similarly, kitchen cabinets can be partially reused by replacing tired drawer fronts and doors.



FOR EXAMPLE: A cement skim coat gave new life to this old fireplace. The new smooth-painted finish creates a dramatic monolithic appearance and covers peeling paint ill-applied over unattractive stone. A mantel of reclaimed Douglas fir adds warmth. The new opening beyond the fireplace connects the kitchen to the dining area and shares light and views.

8 **ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK**

5 REVISIT THE STAIRS

Moving or reversing a stairway is not for the faint of heart, but there are times when it is well worth the effort. If a stair is in the wrong place, it can eat up much more space than necessary; relocating or modifying it can yield significant square footage and a better overall floor plan. Stair position and direction also affect circulation patterns on all levels of a house. Poorly placed stairs often have a ripple effect and cause more space to be wasted because of inefficient circulation to and around them.



BEFORE



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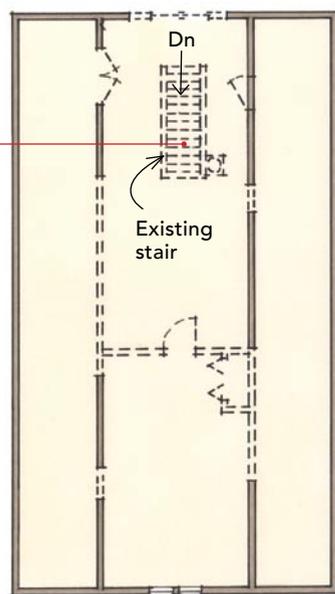
How to do it right

- **Position a stair for a centrally located landing** rather than at one end of the house, where it would require a long hallway. The goal is to have spaces pinwheel off the landing (see floor plan).
- **Stack stairwells.** If the stair to the basement is not located under the stair to the second floor, it probably should be, especially in an efficient floor plan. In one recent project, this change afforded enough space in the kitchen for a cozy eating nook.
- **Don't be afraid to change stair direction.** This low-impact fix sometimes is all that's needed when a stair arrives in an unfortunate place and can be flipped. This solution usually maintains existing floor framing and just requires new stair framing (see floor plan in No. 1).
- **Open up the stairwell.** Houses with stairs crammed between walls are passing up an opportunity to add drama and intrigue to adjacent spaces. Whether moving the stair or not, consider opening up walls to create two-story glimpses, shared light, attractive railing details, and a greater sense of spaciousness.

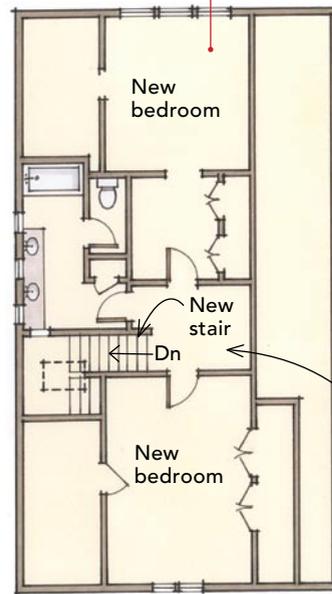
FOR EXAMPLE: Relocating the stairs in this house made a two-story rear addition on a small lot unnecessary. Cutting through the middle of the 1920s plan, the original walled-in stairs consumed prime real estate, were steep and narrow, and created wasteful circulation. Moving the stairs closer to the front entry and tucking them under the slope of the roof yielded enough space for another bedroom on the second floor and for a more spacious kitchen. A small, landlocked first-floor bedroom right off the entry was sacrificed to accommodate the new stair and a better-organized plan, a worthwhile trade-off. The new stair with a detailed railing and a skylight above creates a more open, graceful, and bright entry foyer. The foyer also gained a walk-in closet (white door in photo) from the former bedroom.



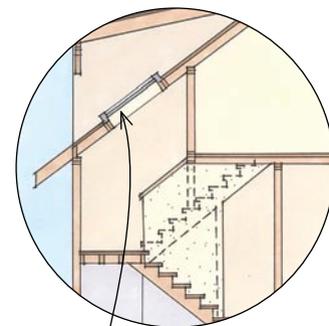
NEW ENTRY FOYER



Second floor before



Second floor after



The skylight increases perceived headroom. The new stairway takes advantage of the sloped space.

A centrally located landing takes up the least space.

1 3 6 8 9 11 **ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK**

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ADD MORE NATURAL LIGHT

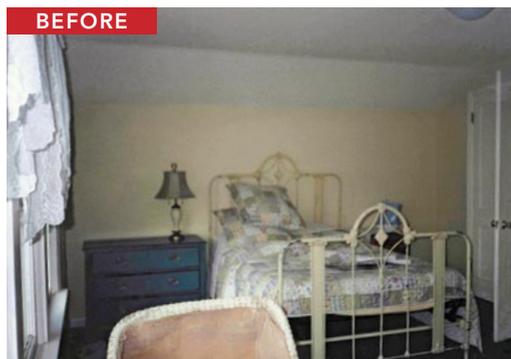
Almost every client's wish list calls for more natural light, and for good reason. Abundant daylight makes spaces seem larger, brings inside the drama of ever-changing weather and seasons, lifts spirits, and reduces the need for artificial lights. In the presence of daylight, details come alive, like the play of sun and shadow passing through a stair railing or the long reach of reflected sky across a floor near tall windows. In all cases, window and skylight placement relative to overhangs, trees, and solar orientation should be evaluated first.

How to do it right

- **Widen windows, especially those in need of replacement.** Adding width to openings admits more light and enhances views.
- **Raise window heights.** This change has even more impact, because the higher you raise the windows, the deeper the light reaches into the house. Although it depends on factors such as overhangs, trees, and the room's reflective surfaces, generally daylight can reach at least twice the window height into a room.
- **Use stairwells to deliver light.** Skylights and/or dormers can enliven the stairway and bring natural light into adjacent spaces.
- **Bounce light off walls.** A wall or plane placed perpendicular and adjacent to a window will be illuminated by daylight and will bounce it inside. Light, reflective surfaces distribute natural light; dark, absorptive surfaces absorb it. Merely changing a living-room floor from carpet to wood can result in a brighter space.
- **Share light through openings** between interior spaces.



AFTER



BEFORE

FOR EXAMPLE: Bringing in more daylight became an important way of making an attic master suite seem larger and lighter. Two existing dormer windows that previously occupied a low storage attic along the front of the house were connected to the new suite via niches that extend forward to meet the windows. Although the windows are not large, they provide another exposure, helping to balance daylight within the room and creating bright focal points with character.



ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK

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IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE YARD

In climates where outdoor living can be enjoyed for at least part of the year, direct access to the yard can extend the apparent boundaries of a house and add more square footage without more building. In addition to doors, improved yard access includes having enough well-positioned windows so that you can appreciate the views from inside. For families with children, being able to have kids playing in the yard in full view from inside allows parents to continue with other activities while maintaining supervision. The kitchen is one important room that can benefit from this strategy. Improving the connection between kitchen and yard facilitates outdoor dining and enjoyment of the yard from the hub of the home.



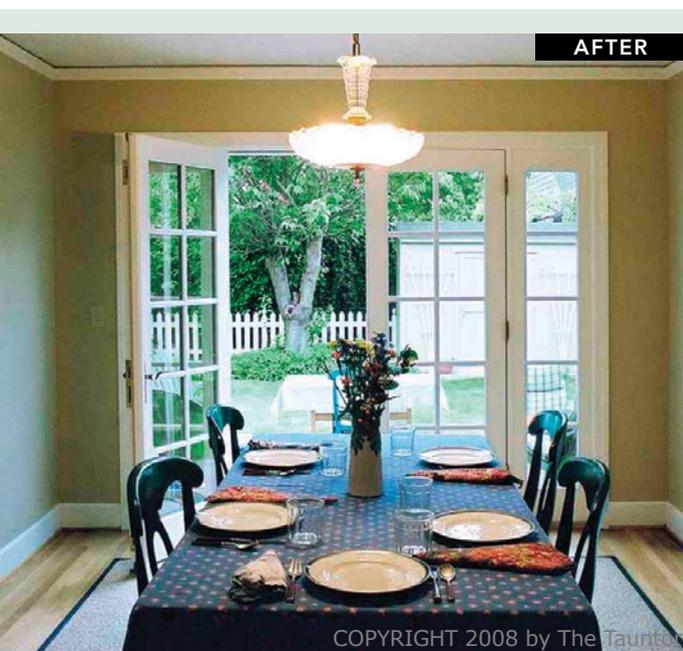
BEFORE

8 CREATE APPROPRIATE OPENINGS BETWEEN INTERIOR SPACES

Although most new houses have open floor plans, older homes typically do not. Houses with walls separating every room no longer fit contemporary lifestyles. Private kitchens, separate living and dining areas, and back halls can feel confining. More-open floor plans allow everyone in the family to feel connected, even when engaged in different activities. Openings between spaces can also share daylight and views, thereby brightening a room or hallway, expanding the sense of interior space, and providing additional views of the outdoors. When aligned, openings between several rooms can greatly enhance the feeling of depth and interest in a home.

How to do it right

- **Consider the opening carefully.** Although completely removing a wall is sometimes the right solution, there are situations where it is not. Walls with carefully proportioned openings can create spatial definition between areas, the absence of which can actually make spaces seem smaller. The answer could be to enlarge a space by moving a wall and then adding an opening in it.
- **Maintain a private space.** In most situations, there should be at least one common room in the house that is either completely private or able to become so via closed doors. This can be where the TV lives if it is not part of the home's open spaces, or where family members can go to have a quiet conversation, read a book, or work on a project.
- **Don't block daylight.** Where visual and acoustic privacy is needed but light can be shared, consider adding frosted doors or windows, sliding screens, or other translucent materials. For example, adding frosted French doors to a home office allows it to be open to surrounding spaces at times, and to share light even when the doors are closed.
- **Open up hallways.** Dark corridors and stairwells often have much to gain when surrounding walls are partially or fully removed. This change also allows for better ventilation. Matching the openings to common rooms on both sides of a hallway can create an interesting cross axis and expand the apparent size of a house.



FOR EXAMPLE: A relatively small maneuver results in a huge payoff. In a house that had no direct connection to its backyard, replacing the dining-room windows with French doors and side lites opened the interior to the exterior. A simple paver patio beyond the doors provides a convenient outdoor dining area. Rerouting major circulation to the yard through the dining room also relieved the kitchen of an intrusive travel path to an exterior side door.

FOR EXAMPLE: Reorganizing a kitchen can create opportunities for opening it to adjacent spaces. In this kitchen, the refrigerator, ovens, and most upper cabinets were relocated to another wall, making way for a new opening that connects to a renovated living and dining room. Although generous, the opening preserves the surrounding wall area that defines the kitchen and adds layering between the rooms. The extended diagonal sightlines between rooms and the rows of windows beyond make an enormous impact on the interior's brightness and overall sense of spaciousness.

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1 3 6 ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK

Top photo: Keyan Mizani

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USE AREAS UNDER SLOPED CEILINGS

Many houses have unused real estate under low portions of the roof. These attic areas can be annexed to the floor plan in a variety of ways, depending on their location.

How to do it right

- **Make room for little people.** Bed nooks or play spaces for kids are great uses of low-ceilinged areas. Children love spaces that aren't big enough for grown-ups and delight in creating forts under sheltering sloped ceilings.
- **Fit furniture under the roof.** Nooks under sloped ceilings can accommodate the head of a bed, a sitting area, or a desk for people of all ages (see No. 6 photo).
- **Tuck in convenient storage.** Under-roof space shouldn't go to waste. Storage can be created using doors, drawers, and recessed shelves. In very low areas, drawers are the most functional way to retrieve stored items.
- **Relocate a stairway.** In some cases, a stair can rise up parallel to the roof, making use of low space.
- **Squeeze in a small bath.** Bathrooms can be expanded or added to areas under a sloped roof as long as code-required head heights are maintained above showers/tubs and in front of toilets and sinks. However, the depth of sinks and toilets can usually extend into lower spaces. Showers can also extend into lower spaces, provided a bench or other barrier is present. In some cases, a fixture with a noncompliant head height might be grandfathered.



BEFORE

FOR EXAMPLE: A child's tight bedroom was transformed by carving into adjacent attic space. The new bed nook creates a cozy sleeping berth and expands the width of the room. The nook is also sized so that the twin bed could be replaced with a full-size bed whose headboard tucks under the skylight. Additional attic space was used to improve storage, including new recessed shelves, drawers, and an adjacent closet. The new window and skylight brighten the space and provide more outdoor views.

5 6 11

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK



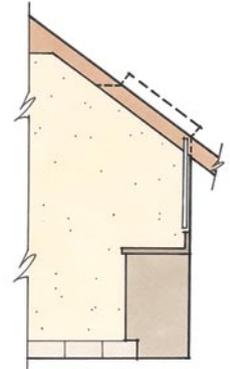
AFTER

Just enough headroom for an attic bath

Toilet against a low wall
Codes allow the ceiling to slope downward if it meets the minimum standard at the front of the toilet.



Mirror between the rafters
A skylight well can give the lavatory mirror a lift.



10

CONSIDER A FACE-LIFT

The appearance of our houses influences our feelings about them and about ourselves. If you are unhappy with the face your house presents, there are ways to improve its looks and your outlook. Ideally, a home's curb appeal should be more than skin deep; it should express parts of what and who are within. Begin by evaluating which elements of the facade are trouble spots and which are worth keeping.

How to do it right

- **Make a dramatic impact with new windows.** If the existing windows are poorly proportioned, too few, or in the wrong places, consider new proportions, enlarged openings, or complete relocation. Changing the width of a window requires a new header, in which case a raised head height can also be considered.
- **Consider a minor change to the roof to make a big difference.** For example, framing a simple shed pop-up over a group of windows can lift an otherwise low roof. Adding dormers is another way to introduce detail and rhythm to the roof.



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ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK



AFTER

- **Make the front door easy to find.** The entry should be visible and welcoming, and in most climates, some roof cover if not a front porch is a necessity. Either way, the process of getting to and through the door should provide an interesting transition from outside to inside.
- **Modify siding, trim, and paint colors,** but beware of superficial fixes such as changing the siding on only the front of the house. Different types of siding and trim, however, can be used effectively to emphasize separate parts of the house. For color changes, always apply at least 4-ft. by 8-ft. test samples before making a decision.



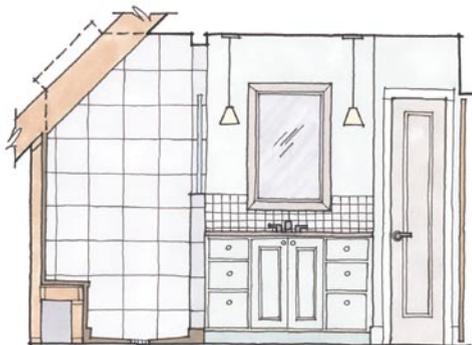
11 INCREASE STORAGE

Every home needs to have dedicated storage for the stuff of modern life, or it will overflow into living spaces and make them feel cramped. Rooms free of clutter always appear more spacious and inviting.

How to do it right

- **Add a mudroom to create a family entry** with places for shoes, coats, and backpacks. You can also include shelves for cell-phone chargers, keys, and other gadgets best left near the door. Either in the mudroom or elsewhere, include spaces for recycling bins and a place for the vacuum, broom, cleaning supplies, step stool, and flashlights.
- **Establish a command center.** This HQ (usually near the kitchen) offers a place for the phone, the family calendar, bill-paying supplies, take-out menus, and messages. It can be compact. Occasionally, a big closet can be downsized or a kitchen cabinet converted to carve out just enough space for this vital function.

Skylight solves headroom problem
A shower under a sloped roof gets positively expansive with a view of the sky.

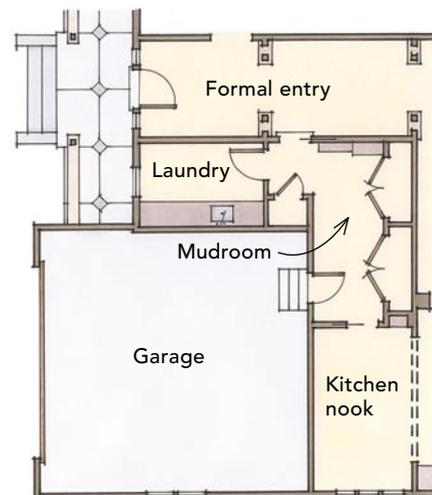


FOR EXAMPLE: Low roofs, small windows, and drab colors gave this house a brooding appearance. The roofs received a lift with the addition of two shed pop-ups atop the existing roof framing. Although ceiling heights were unchanged by these pop-ups, raised eaves allowed the head heights of the expanded windows to be raised 6 in., contributing more daylight to the interior and better proportions to the exterior. A new front walk, a projecting gable roof, and Douglas-fir door and side lites create a welcoming entry that holds its own against the more prominent garage. More trim, new siding, and better colors add greater detail and interest.

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FOR EXAMPLE: Same doorway, very different room. The door on the left leading to the garage originally opened into the kitchen, providing no transition space and meager storage for a family home. Relocating a landlocked dining room (beyond pocket door in "before" photo) and redesigning the kitchen created space for a mudroom that connects to the kitchen, the formal entry (beyond), and the garage. Two long closets keep most items organized and out of sight; a bench provides a place for putting on shoes; and open shelving and hooks accommodate everyday items such as cell phones with chargers, purses, shoes, and backpacks.



1 3 ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AT WORK