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Simple, But Not Plain



## Big Without Being Imposing

Simple planning in a large house links spaces of all sizes to each other and to the landscape

by Walter Koch

**I**t was to be a large, luxurious house on a breathtaking 84-acre parcel in the hills of western Massachusetts. And it was clear on our first visit that the trick would be to design a house that worked with the site but didn't compete with it. To understand how the house and the site would relate, Rafael Sharon and I shifted around a rickety stepladder, standing here and there at various unsteady heights until we found the center of the best view. We set a stake, got the compass orientation and went to our drawing boards.

In the long direction of the site, a tall ridge runs to the southwest. The clients had already cleared six acres, which uncovered a fine view to the Berkshire Hills and the Taconic Mountains beyond. The ridge and the parallel southwestern view were so strong that the orientation of the house in that direction seemed obvious.

Once I had a handle on the site and the orientation the house would take, I needed to put that information into the context of what the clients wanted. Their new home was to be comfortable and quirky. There would be a place to sit and watch thunderstorms roll in; a place to set up a telescope for stargazing; a quiet inglenook for reading or relaxed conversation.

The clients also wanted the main rooms of the house to be focused on the view and the central space of the house to be the great room. One of the clients had spent summers as a child with her family in a converted Vermont barn. Her strongest desire for the new house was to create a room that would evoke those warm childhood feelings (top photo, p. 85).

**It's important to find the right relationship between house and site**—The clients had drawn a bubble diagram of the layout they wanted with the great room at the center, the kitchen and the dining room on one side, and the bedrooms isolated on the other end. When good views and privacy both are important, plans tend to be lengthened. Everything I knew so far suggested a distribution of the main rooms across the site, all facing the view (floor plan p. 84).

Because the clients preferred to look at gardens rather than at cars, the design pulled the garage and parking area off to the northeastern corner and connected it to the house by a breezeway. The more public areas would be to that side.

As a whole, the house could be composed in one of two ways. I could begin the design from

the outside and adapt the interior to fit, such as would be done with a standard rectangle-shaped house. That approach in a house of this size, however, would tend to overemphasize the volume of the house and likely would undermine the harmony between house and site. Or I could treat the house as a series of additions, similar in feel to the clients' home in Princeton, New Jersey, which had been added to several times.

I decided that the clients' wishes for the house and the contours of the site itself pointed to the add-on design approach. Each "addition" would relate to the others as they spread out. I could unify the house with massing and detailing.

It's easy to get this feel with one- or two-room additions, but whether it could work on this scale was something I didn't know. The chances for success with this method seemed good, however, because the clients' comfortable old house had grown this way over time, and the slope of the site perpendicular to the view even suggested a fragmented series of rooms nestled along it.

**A series of rooms allows for variations of use, feel and view**—I began by designing rooms around the various main uses, keeping

**Offsets, dormers and rooflines break up the facade.** Designed to feel like a series of additions, this 5,800-sq. ft. house rides the crest of a ridge (photo above taken at A on floor plan). Roof-height differences help the perception that the house was added on to (photo facing page taken at B on floor plan).



the shape of each room symmetrical and focused on the settings. I varied the ceiling heights from room to room to give each its own flavor. I oriented the axes of these main rooms in line with the view to give a sense of being plugged into the distant landscape (floor plan below).

From a functional standpoint, there were many ways to connect one room to another, but it quickly became obvious that sketches couldn't adequately convey how the house would look on site. So I built an accurate 1/8-in. scale model—around 18 in. by 24 in. overall—that proved to be immensely helpful for testing ideas. As every builder has learned, something appealing in plan may look awkward when fleshed out.

The model was in three movable parts, which related to the three main sections of the house: the kitchen/dining room, the great room and the bedrooms. Using the model, I raised or lowered the sections, stretched them out, shifted them

and tried different rooflines. For instance, I went through a half-dozen variations of the great room bay-window wall and roof with dormers before settling on the final design. I never would have known which was the right one without being able to compare one after another on the model. The clients played with the model as much as I did. Rotating the model at eye level was the critical test for our ideas. In the end, the model was a wreck, but it had served an important function.

**The schedule demanded that construction begin before drawings were complete**—The owners hired Lou Boxer to build the house because they knew his work. So when the opening came in Lou's schedule, his crew was going to start whether I was ready or not.

The basic design had been nailed down by that time, but the drawings had a long way to go. The design had started in November, but Lou wanted

to pour the foundation in late March. I put the project on the fast track so the design would get figured out enough for me to do some working drawings, send them out and then go back to work on future areas of construction. Committing to the foundation plan while the rest of the design still was taking shape was tough, but I managed to catch mistakes before they were set in concrete. Working drawings took about seven months and were finished about four months into construction.

To keep tabs on costs, Lou updated estimates based on the drawings and descriptions he received from us. To give the clients additional comfort, I had my own estimator keep up with the work. Happily, the two were never far apart.

**Trim details create continuity from room to room**—From a design standpoint, composing the home as a series of additions presented a

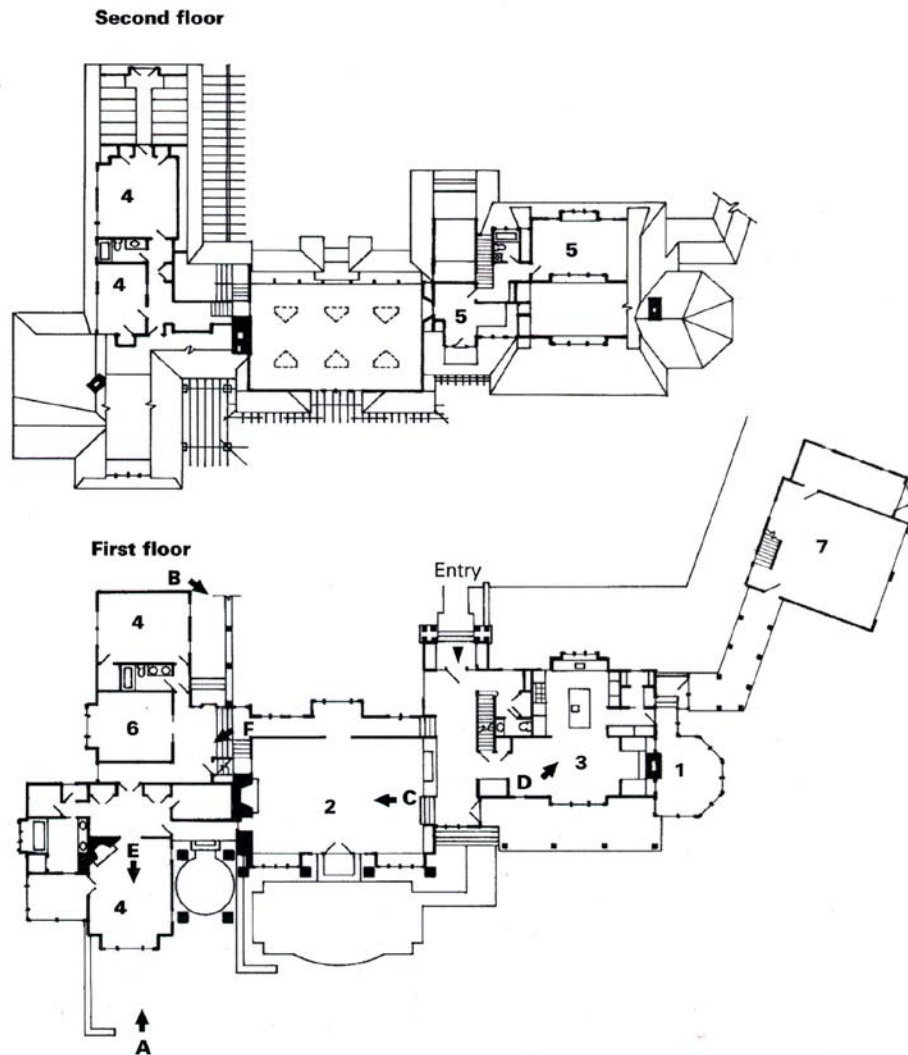
## SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 4
- Bathrooms:** 3½
- Heating system:** Hot-water boiler/panel-type radiators
- Size:** 5,800 sq. ft.
- Cost:** \$250 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 1992
- Location:** Stockbridge, Massachusetts

## Floor-plan key

- 1 Screened porch
- 2 Great room
- 3 Kitchen/dining room
- 4 Bedroom
- 5 Study
- 6 Den
- 7 Garage

Photos taken at lettered positions.



**House design revolves around series of unique rooms.** The house is roughly divided into three main sections: the kitchen/dining room, the great room and the bedrooms. The kitchen area is closest to the garage and public areas; the bedrooms are the most isolated section of the house. Differing rooflines and ceiling heights and variations in woodwork and windows from room to room give each space its own identity while maintaining an overall continuity of design.



**Oak trusses dominate the great room.** In keeping with its station as the central room in the house, the great room has the highest ceiling. The room was designed to invoke memories of the client's childhood summers spent in a converted Vermont barn. Photo taken at C on floor plan.

**A quiet space adds variety to a busy kitchen.** A cozy inglenook with a stone fireplace offers a quiet place for conversation or reading within the open bounds of the kitchen/dining area. A large island workspace contains extra storage and a secondary sink. A bay window in the kitchen and another in the dining area, combined with east-facing clerestory windows, pull in ample outside light. Photo taken at D on floor plan.





**Tall ceilings and big views make a bedroom feel spacious.** A bay window, a triangular window high in the gable and a set of clerestory windows in between open up the master bedroom to the world outside. A chamfered truss and cathedral ceiling create a feeling of luxurious spaciousness. Photo taken at E on floor plan.

**A confluence of hallways.** Rich oak trim-work courses throughout the house, unifying the overall design as subtle differences in trim detailing give each part of the house a distinctive look. A number of lighted display niches are scattered throughout the house, providing a place to show off collections of art and antiques. Photo taken at F on floor plan.



problem not normally encountered in one-room additions. Here, different rooms would be free to influence and be influenced by their neighbors because everything would be new. To make the pieces fit, I had to decide on the most important characteristics of each room and then modify them so they worked with each other. Mostly, this was a roofline exercise in which I changed overhangs and plate heights until every roof either flowed smoothly into its neighbor or had a natural ending place (photo p. 83). I would agonize over "slam joints" (areas where walls, roofs and trim converge in a way that suggests they were placed by a hurricane and not by design) until I'd figured out a way around them.

Relating the rooms on the inside was a similar challenge. My design continued elements of trim through openings from one room to another, but in each room the trim becomes part of a different way of detailing. As motifs come and go, they're not always present to the same degree in each room. For instance, the great-room trusses are unique to that room, yet it's easy to imagine the trusses as growing from the same detailing found in the kitchen/dining room (bottom photo, p. 85). The bay window in the dining room, with its high windows, is of different proportion, scale and materials than the master-bedroom bay (photo facing page), but somehow the detailing in one allows for the other.

Most new houses are designed with lots of storage behind closed doors. Here, the storage is out

in the open. Because the clients' love of antique collecting wasn't about to end, I took every opportunity to open up high platforms to display the inevitable future acquisitions. The master-bedroom, stair-hall (photo above), great-room and dining-room display areas have low-profile track-lighting systems to work with any jumble on display.

**Offset axes and hidden views create suspense inside and out**—The entrance drive follows an old, straight, birch-lined farm road. A clearing on the road allows glimpses of the gardens and south facade. Both are obscured quickly as the drive curves back to the woods and around the northeast corner. Only fragments of the view are discernable on the way to the entry portico on the north facade.

The first view from the entry hall is down the main site axis, which begins at the entrance on the northeast side of the house and shoots down the hall, across the plane of the house, through a bay window at the end of the hall and into the distance. Two offset cross axes, which stop in this entry hall, lead in opposite directions. One follows a corridor on the north side of the great room to the right, and the other leads to the dining area, which is focused on the inglenook to the left.

The main view is obscured along these cross axes, and then it is revealed again at the center of the main rooms. By showing only pieces at a

time, the layout works to build suspense and heightens the experience of arriving at the heart of the house.

**Gardens and site tie house to land**—Just as there is give and take between rooms, a house can be organized around variations in the site, which in turn can be modified by the house. So it's important to tie the house to the landscape that immediately surrounds it. For example, the house steps along the existing contours, but the slopes are terraced and contained by stone foundation walls that reach from the house and create a related outdoor space. The internal organization is extended to the garden, but the pergola attached to the facade brings the landscape back to the limits of enclosure (photo p. 83).

The final house design was one of many possibilities. A change of client or budget—or architect for that matter—might have resulted in something different but equally as successful. A review of the process, however, reveals a thread common to any approach that I would have taken, pulling all design decisions in one direction: the desire to establish places for dwelling that exalt and protect our daily routines while rooting them firmly into the landscape. □

*Walter Koch is an architect living in Earlsville, Virginia. He is a former associate in Kehrt Shatken Sharon Architects of Princeton, New Jersey. Photos by Otto Baitz except where noted.*