

Converting a Ranch to a Story-and-a-Half

by Robert Gerloff, AIA

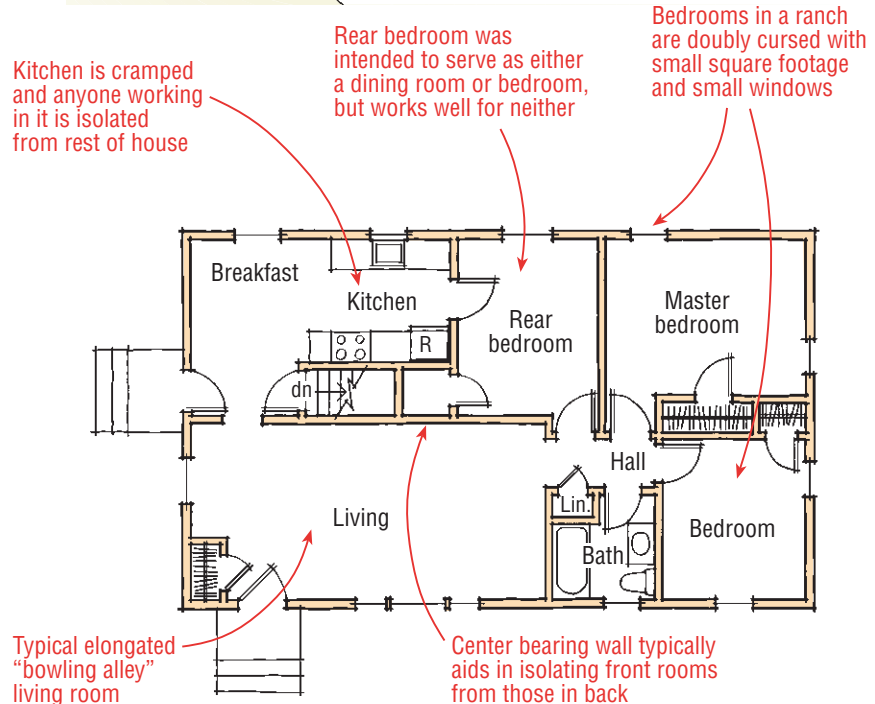
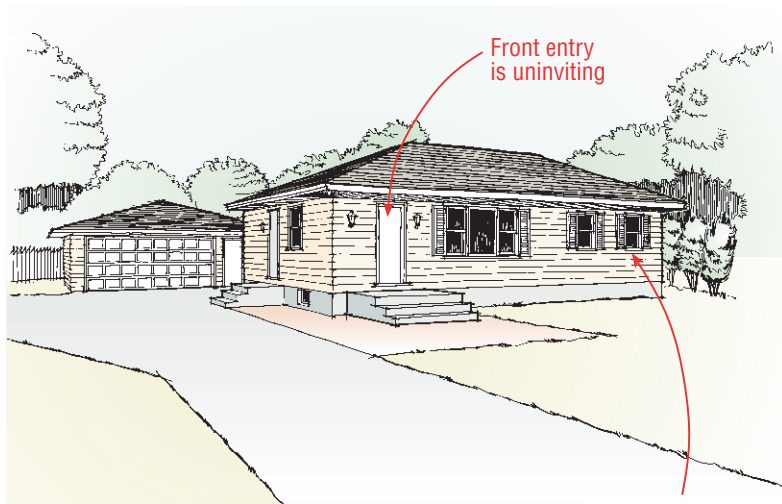
I work as a residential architect in Minneapolis, and many of the calls I'm getting these days are from the owners of post-WWII ranch houses. Few architects or builders get excited about remodeling ranch houses. Yet the reality is that while we've been busy remodeling Victorians, Cape Cods, and bungalows, the first wave of ranches built after the war recently crossed the magical 50-year mark. Ranches are officially historic now, and we need to start treating them with more respect in the coming years — when we'll be remodeling ranches by the millions.

Rethinking the Plan

Ranch owners typically have the same complaints as other owners of historic homes: The rooms are small, the kitchen is cramped, and there is no closet space. The project shown here — the addition of a second story on top of the existing footprint — is a common solution, but one that takes careful planning to do well. In the end, adding a second story can solve each of the common ranch problems, resulting in an expanded kitchen, a main-level master suite with a dedicated bath and walk-in closet, and spacious bedrooms upstairs for children or guests or as a possible conversion to home office space. In short, it's a plan well-suited to today's lifestyles.

One design challenge common to all ranch houses is the center bearing wall, which isolates the front rooms from the back rooms, making even the most spacious ranch feel small and cramped. In this remodel, I've relocated the

Typical Postwar Ranch

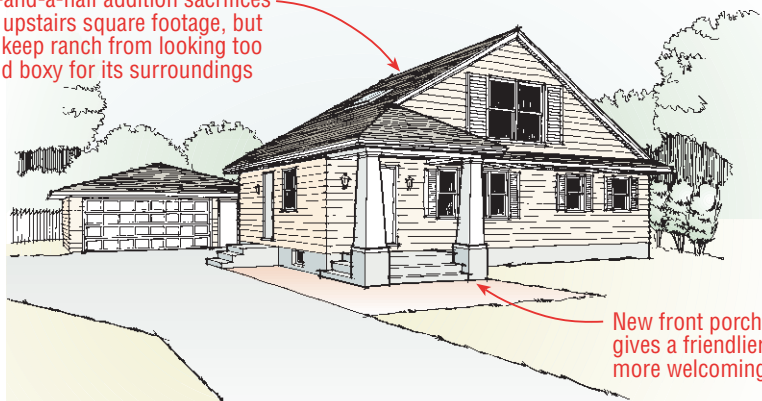


Original Ground Floor Plan

The original floor plan of this typical postwar ranch has a cramped, closed-in feeling. The main culprit is the center bearing wall, which completely separates the front rooms from those in back.

Raising the Ranch

Story-and-a-half addition sacrifices some upstairs square footage, but helps keep ranch from looking too tall and boxy for its surroundings

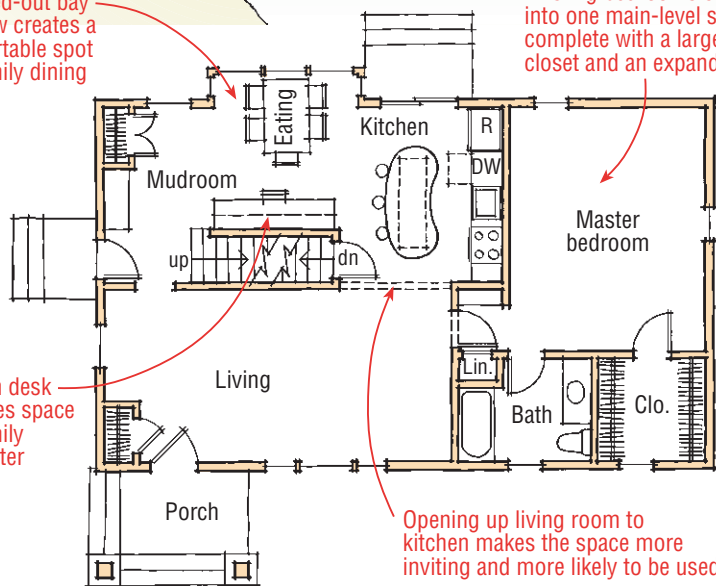


New front porch gives a friendlier, more welcoming face

Bumped-out bay window creates a comfortable spot for family dining

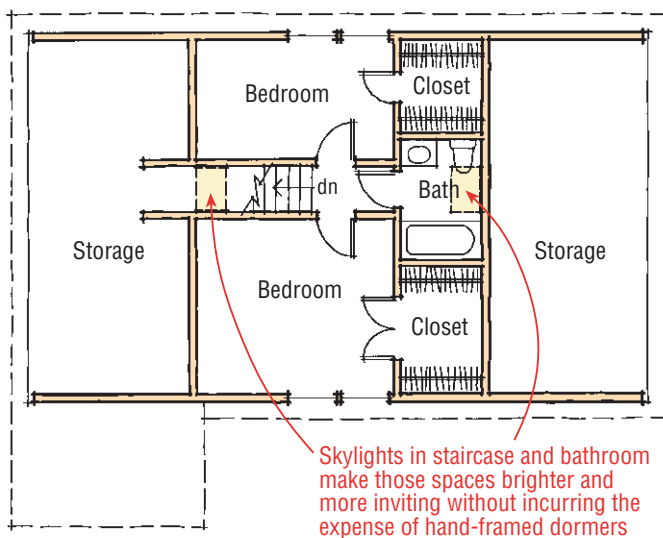
Existing bedrooms combined into one main-level suite, complete with a large walk-in closet and an expanded bath

Built-in desk provides space for family computer



Opening up living room to kitchen makes the space more inviting and more likely to be used

Redesigned Ground Floor Plan



Skylights in staircase and bathroom make those spaces brighter and more inviting without incurring the expense of hand-framed dormers

New Second Floor Plan

Relocating the kitchen to an original rear bedroom and opening up the center bearing wall improves flow and provides front-to-back views for a roomier feel. The original basement stairs have been reversed, and a stairway to the new upper level stacked directly above.

kitchen to the rear bedroom and opened up the center bearing wall between the kitchen and living room, creating views from front to back and making the house far more sociable.

I also bumped out a large bay window to create a natural and attractive spot for a kitchen table overlooking the back yard. A kidney-shaped island creates another spot for the family to gather and visit. Adding a sliding French door off the kitchen connects it to the back yard. All these moves help make an otherwise tiny house seem more spacious.

Carving out an area for a mudroom, no matter how small, makes a house more livable, especially for families with children. A mudroom in a small house needn't be more than a built-in bench (with storage below and cubbies above) and a closet. What's most important is to have floor space so that a parent lugging bags of groceries won't trip over the kid's boots.

Built-in desk areas are another little luxury that makes a small house feel larger. The desk area shown here — just off the mudroom and adjoining the area where the family will be gathering — is a natural spot for tackling the day-to-day influx of bills, school forms, catalogs, and junk mail. Creating a natural spot for this flow makes it less likely that papers will get lost and helps keep a household organized. It's also an ideal location for a family computer.

Locating the New Stairway

Where to locate the stairs is always the big question when adding a second story to a ranch. Basement stairs in a ranch typically hug the center bearing wall. In a remodel, I always try to save time and money by stacking the new stairs over the existing basement stairs. In addition to saving the considerable cost of new basement stairs, that approach also minimizes costly modifications to mechanical systems.

Note that in this remodel, I've reversed the existing stair run. Most often ranch basement stairs are raw stringers with 2-by treads, and it's quite easy to disconnect them and turn them around.

If stacking stairs won't work, I next try to run the stairs parallel to the floor joists. This minimizes the complexity of structural headers around the stair opening and keeps the main-level platform as stiff as possible, which helps keep the foundation walls square and stable.

The worst possible stair location is parallel to the main floor joists along the foundation wall. This leaves a 10-foot to 12-foot stretch of the foundation wall unbraced by the main-level platform, which can significantly weaken the overall structure.

Where possible, I try to make an architectural statement with the stairs. Here I pulled several treads out from the wall into the mudroom area, where

they're visible from the living room. It's a wonderful opportunity for an intricate newel post, some carved balusters, or other architectural detail.

Restyling the Ranch

Of course, a two-story ranch is an oxymoron, like a beige Victorian. Adding a second story to an existing ranch automatically means changing styles.

Ideally, I like to keep the remodeled roof as low as possible, because a full two-story addition will tower over any remaining ranch neighbors. The design shown here converts the ranch into a story-and-a-half cottage. While this requires more complicated framing than a two-story truss-roofed box, it

helps keep the eaves lines low, in keeping with the style of the surrounding neighborhood.

One complaint I've heard over and over from ranch house owners is that they feel isolated from their neighbors. To make this house more sociable, I've added a small front porch. While a front porch isn't historically correct on a ranch, and while this one isn't big enough to shelter a sociable sitting circle (one definition of an ideal front porch), it does create a more welcoming look, inviting neighbors to stop in for a visit.

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