

Bumping Out a Small Cape

by Gordon Tully



This month's column is taken from the author's correspondence with a young couple wishing to expand a small house for a growing family. The house is sited on a tight lot in a town with stringent zoning restrictions.

Dear Roger and Kate:

Recapping, you sent me your plans, photos, detailed program, and a first stab at a solution by another designer. His work and your constrained budget led me to my first solution, which simply added the ell on the front. Then you told me you would probably go ahead and add to the back, because you could do a lot of the work yourself to hold down the square-foot cost, so I decided to try for a complete master plan (see floor plans, next page).

We have already talked about the front ell. Because of its modest dimensions, we need a full second floor to squeeze in a master bath, closet, and decent-sized master bedroom. So the eaves have to be above window height. My first design had a low-pitch roof, keeping the ridges at the same height. Then you pointed out that we were allowed to go higher, so I tried the 12-on-12 roof shown in the drawings (see sketch, page 13). It's pretty massive, but with careful proportions it will be okay. I added a cupola to make sense out of the little gable that rides up above the main roof: You can obviously do this later.

Leave Well Enough Alone

You suggested adding a second story at the back, but after carefully examining the resulting mess, I feel strongly you should abandon this idea. You have completely finished the second-floor rear shed dormer inside, so we can't extend it; and it should sit free on the main roof, without another roof cutting off the view or creating some kind of snow pocket. So I extended a low-pitched roof off the main roof eaves to

create a simple lean-to at the back.

In the future, you plan to seek a variance to add a garage. I suggested moving it to the north, but there you have a clear view, while on the southeast you have a neighbor close by looking down into your yard from a hilltop site. So the garage goes to the southeast. To keep from blocking the desirable northeast view from the house, it makes sense to bend the garage wing about 45 degrees, parallel with the side lot line. This works with the driveway and faces the wing toward the garden.

The resulting triangular piece between the garage and the main house is on buildable land even without a variance, so it can be added even if you don't do the garage. The porch then makes sense across the front of this wing, welcoming the visitor from the northeast. This set the stage for the inside layout. We have to leave a view to the northeast; the door ends up about where it is now; and we need a mudroom.

Gracious Entry

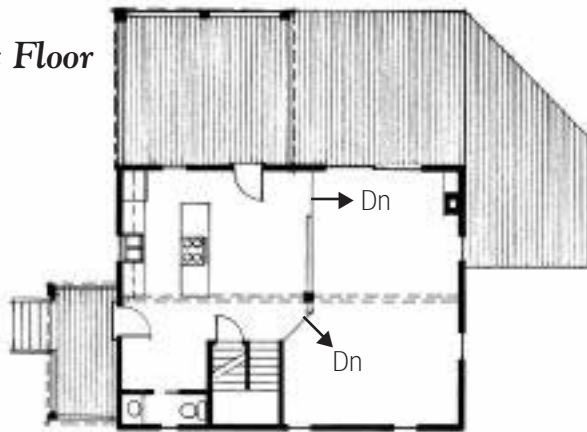
It was a no-brainer to take out the half-bath to create a gracious entry, leading into the living room. At first I wanted to open the stair onto this entry, but your idea of turning it the other way is more private, which you liked, plus you need a closet. A big window with a seat looks out onto the view and garden.

I spent some more of your money lowering the higher floor level in the present kitchen and dining area, assuming that there would be enough headroom in the basement (it will be the same as the other side). In a pinch, you could leave it, but it would play havoc with the levels.

Then I lowered the living room a step from the present lower level, giving it an 8-foot, 8-inch ceiling. The porch is at the living room level, and the rear lean-to is two steps below the kitchen and one below the porch. The garage

Floor Plan: Before

First Floor



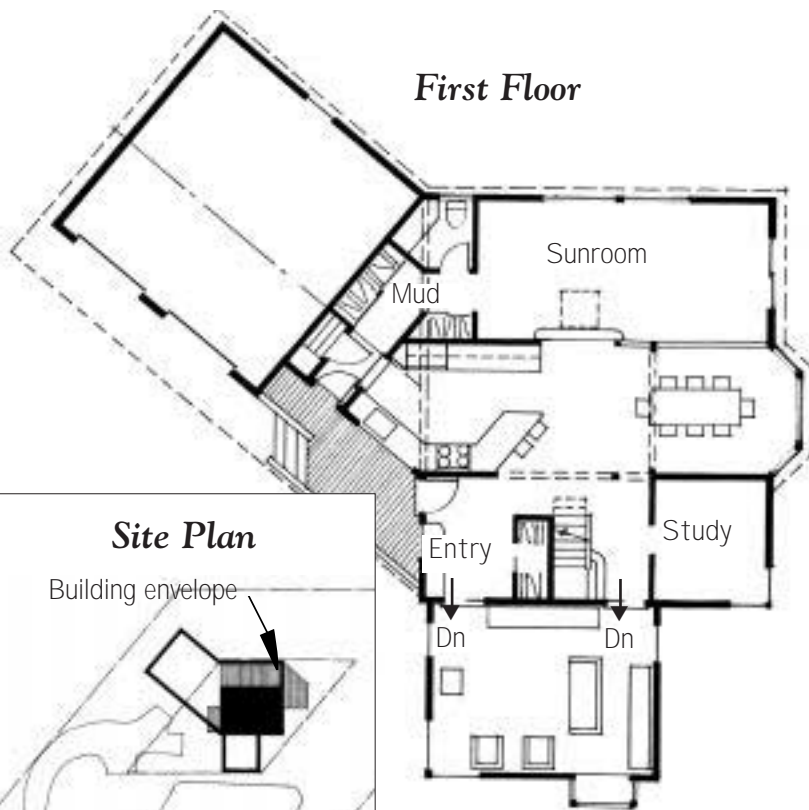
Second Floor



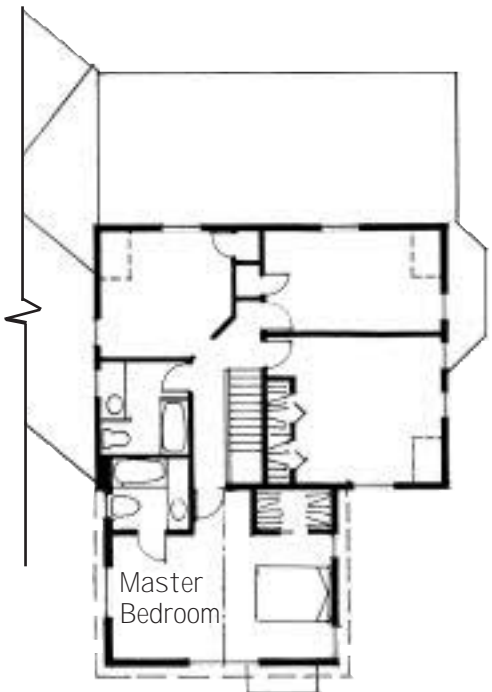
Downstairs, the undefined open floor plan of the 24x32-foot story-and-a-half created too much circulation area and not enough usable space. The two floor levels only complicated matters. Upstairs, sloping eaves in the front cramped the master bedroom. An earlier shed-dormer addition in the rear gave additional headroom, but no floor space, to two small bedrooms.

Floor Plan: After

First Floor



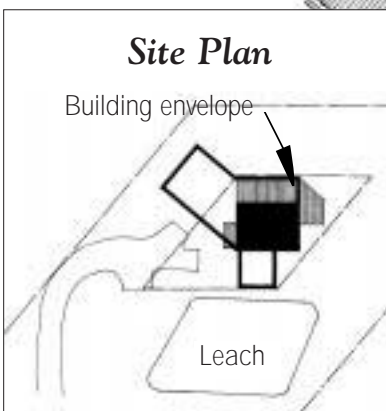
Second Floor



Site Plan

Building envelope

Leach



The front extension creates a natural living room and master suite above, but both spaces need access passages. These are created by straightening the stair, relocating the downstairs half-bath, and opening up a big entry hall. The angle of the east wing with its covered porch directs the visitor nicely to the entry and expands the northeast view from the kitchen. The services fit naturally between the garage and the kitchen, and create a perfect "entry complex" linking the porch, garage, kitchen, half-bath, mudroom, and sunroom. The rest of the downstairs area is "up for grabs;" this is one of many possible plans, tuned to the needs of this particular client.

View of Front Corner



This is how the house looks from the road and the driveway, and illustrates the problem of adding a large, economical box to a small house. The long “tail” of low elements helps balance the big form; a cupola might help deemphasize the difference in scale between the ell and the main house.

and front walk are several steps lower, but the walk up is now much more gradual.

The kitchen seems best on the east, where it controls the whole plan and gets a northeast view. This puts the dining room on the west, which is where it belongs in my opinion, since one gets together there for a big meal in the evening and can watch the sunset during the summer. There was room for a 10-foot-square study in the northwest corner.

Sunspace

The south lean-to turns into a grand, sunny craft/sun space, with the half-bath tucked in at the east end. You can go straight into the mudroom from the craft room, or come in from the outside or the garage to the mudroom and half-bath — functionally ideal. You also now have room for a study/music room in the present northwest corner. Finally, on the west, you can add a screened porch, next to the bay window I showed in the dining room.

I showed a small overhanging bay in the living room where you could put a seat for comfy reading or grow plants.

Upstairs, the plan is very much as it was in the first version: the master suite in the front ell, and the stair converted

to a dog-leg open on one side. This allows a passage into the master bedroom. The dimensions are very tight, and the stair works as shown if you can use the old rules (9-inch treads and 8¹/₄-inch risers). If you have to use the new rules (10-inch treads and 7³/₄-inch risers), you may be able to squeeze it in and still maintain a passage between the living room and hall outside the study, but it will be close.

Outside, I hipped the roofs of the garage wing, stepping the roofs down to avoid an over-tall wall at the garage doors. There is an overhang in front of the garage to keep snow and water away from the doors. It won't be fun the day after a northeaster, but that's why God created snow-blowers.

I like the results a lot, but am pretty sure we blew the budget. You could always build the ell and the triangular wedge, then add the craft/sun room later — save the best for last as an incentive! The garage can always come later.

My best to you both, and I hope to see the results one day. ■

Gordon Tully is a senior architect at Steven Winter Associates in Norwalk, Conn., and teaches a summer course at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Mass.