

21st-Century

Traditional shapes house a modern family of telecommuting parents

BY MICHAEL HOPWOOD

Three years ago, our family moved from California to Vermont. We were lucky to find a nice home, but like a borrowed pair of shoes, it never felt like ours. My wife, Beth, and I decided to build a house if we could satisfy a number of conditions: It had to be in the same school district so that our three sons wouldn't have to change schools again; it had to have privacy and space for the boys to enjoy the outdoors; it had to have views of the Green Mountains; and it had to be wired for

high-speed Internet access so that I could continue to telecommute from my home office.

A perfect site, after a little work

We were worried that the search for a buildable lot within the school district would be a real challenge. But one day, while driving my favorite road in town, I saw a "Land for Sale" sign nailed to a maple tree. The land looked like it would be challenging to develop: Old logging roads and mountain-biking trails crisscrossed the 22 acres of steep, rocky, wooded hillside. Although the trails were interesting, what really grabbed me was the filtered view of Mount Mansfield through

the trees. A flat area about 150 ft. above the road seemed like the natural spot for a house, but could we build a driveway up the rocky hill and install a septic system and a well?

After many hours spent walking potential paths with an excavator and calculating acceptable grades and turning radii, we concluded that a driveway could be built. A civil engineer determined that despite the rocky soil, we could install a septic system if we used an aerobic treatment system.

With this information in hand, Beth and I bought the land and began taming our wild lot. Although it wasn't the Panama Canal, the site did pose some challenges. To put



Farmhouse

and three energetic kids

in a 1500-ft.-long driveway and the house site, the crew had to cut through countless trees and bushes and endless ledge, and also endure swarms of mosquitoes, blackflies, and a very wet summer. Clearing and construction of the driveway alone took four months.

One crisp October day, the last trees finally were removed from the site, and suddenly we could see a stunning view of the valley and the mountains. In that instant, we knew this was going to be a special place.

A house for work and play

While the excavators were carving a road up the hill, we were working with Brian Mac of

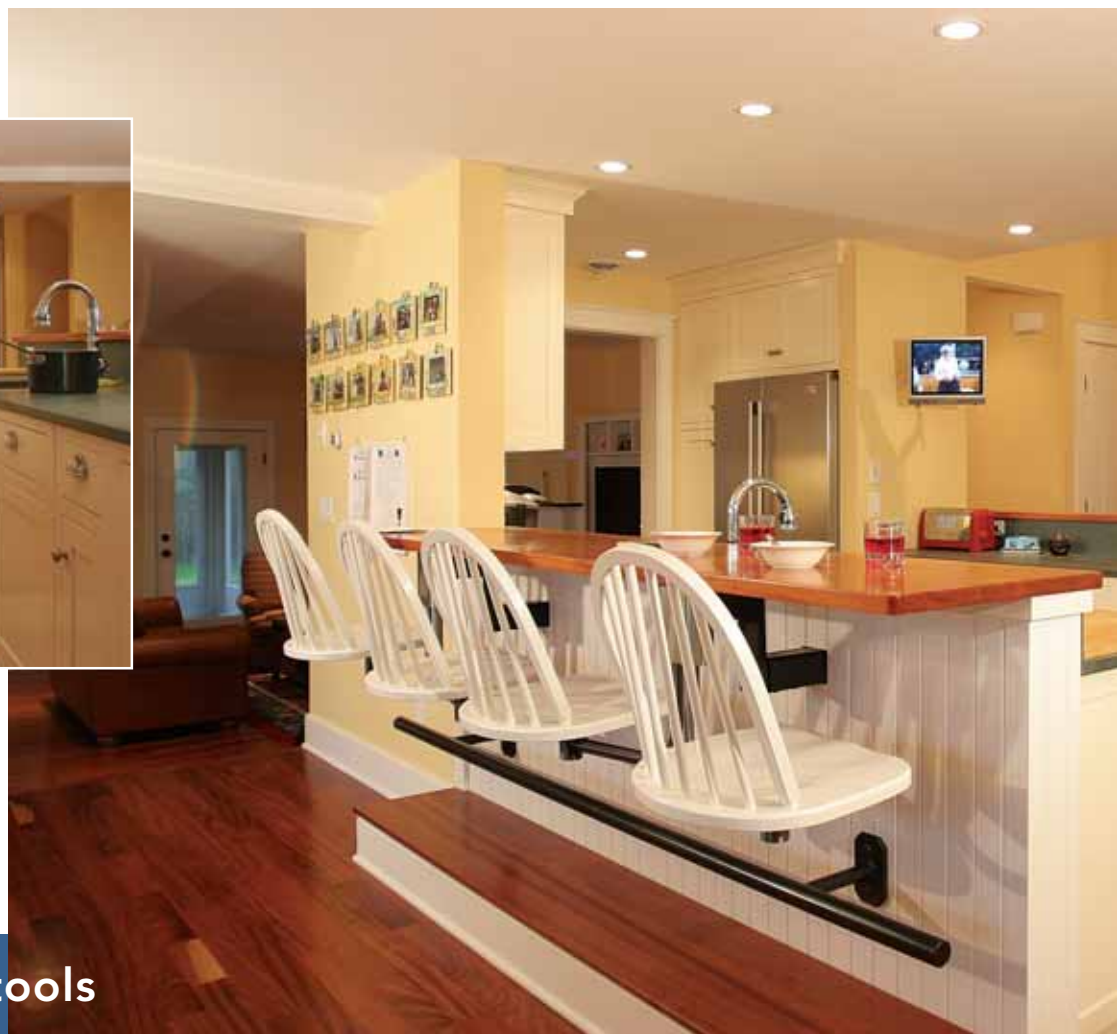


Cooperative design.

The breezeway is one of several areas where the details of the design were left up to the carpenters, Red House Builders. This small co-op's craftsmen suggested the rough post-and-beam structure as a fitting transition between the plain barn and the refined house. Photo above taken at A on floor plan; inset taken at B.



Galley kitchen for efficiency. The narrow, rectangular layout creates compact work triangles that keep appliances and storage within easy reach. The open plan makes the space feel anything but small. Photo right taken at C on floor plan; inset taken at D.



Floor-saving barstools

Although we designed the breakfast bar to accommodate our three sons for breakfast or an after-school snack, we were concerned that traditional barstools would not be a good fit for them. We envisioned the stools tipping over, scratching the floor, or breaking.

Then we found Seating Innovations barstools, which hang from a steel support under the countertop. Not only do they rotate left and right like standard barstools, but the whole assembly also pivots away from the bar to make getting into the seats easy, for adults as well as for kids.

► **Seating Innovations**
445 W. 1260 North
Orem, UT 84057
888-864-3463
www.seating-innovations.com
Prices start at \$235 per chair, complete with hardware.

Birdseye Architectural Studio in Richmond, Vt., to design the house. Brian has a diverse portfolio, a ton of energy, and a home and office close by. His proximity allowed him to see how our family (and our two Labs) works.

Brian observed that the kitchen, the family room, and the mudroom were where we interacted as a family. Beth and I liked an open floor plan for its easy access to each of these areas. However, we had lived in houses with open plans before and knew that we also needed private areas to escape the volume of family life.

Some of these private spaces would be for work, and others for play. My wife and I both work from home, so we needed comfortable and efficient home offices. We also wanted to create a space where we could read with the kids and work together on homework. Because our sons love to build forts, we also asked Brian to design a private loft in the attic space above each boy's bedroom.

The kitchen at the heart of it all

Brian had the challenge of merging our modern family's functional requirements

with the traditional Vermont farmhouse style we liked. At first we questioned his unconventional solution of placing the kitchen right in the center of the house (floor plan, facing page). But the more we considered it, the more excited we became. The kitchen is the hub of activity for our family, and Brian's design put the hub in the middle of the wheel, adjacent to the dining area, the family room, and the mudroom hallway.

Our daily life literally revolves around the kitchen. The room's design is intentionally compact so that everything is close at hand. When the kids pop up on the barstools (sidebar left) at the counter before school, breakfast is a simple matter of preparing cereal and toast and handing it across to them. After breakfast, they dash down the hall to the mudroom to dress for the hike to the bus stop at the bottom of the driveway. As my wife and I clean up the kitchen, we can keep an eye out the front door for the Federal Express van.

The wall of windows in the adjoining dining area brings light and views into the whole

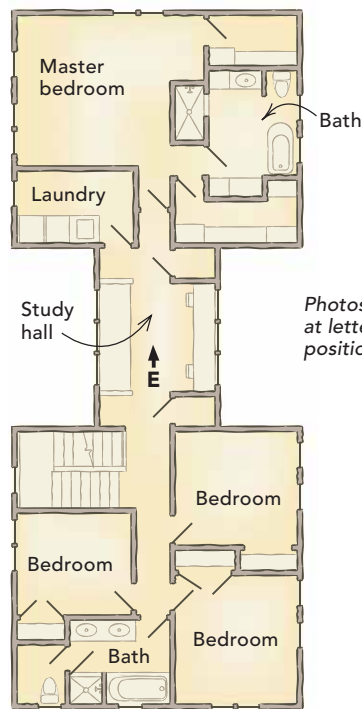


FAMILY LIFE REVOLVES AROUND THE KITCHEN

The kitchen is the heart of any household, but few floor plans place it there. Despite this home's traditional farmhouse appearance, the kitchen is literally its hub. The front door opens directly into the kitchen, which is connected to all the rooms on the first floor. The hub concept is carried over to the second-floor space above the kitchen, where the long hallway connecting the two bedroom wings serves as a gathering spot for reading and homework.

SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 4
- Bathrooms:** 2½
- Size:** 3000 sq. ft. (excluding barn)
- Cost:** \$200 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** October 2005
- Location:** Jericho, Vt.
- Architect:** Brian Mac, Birdseye Architectural Studio
- Builder:** Red House Builders

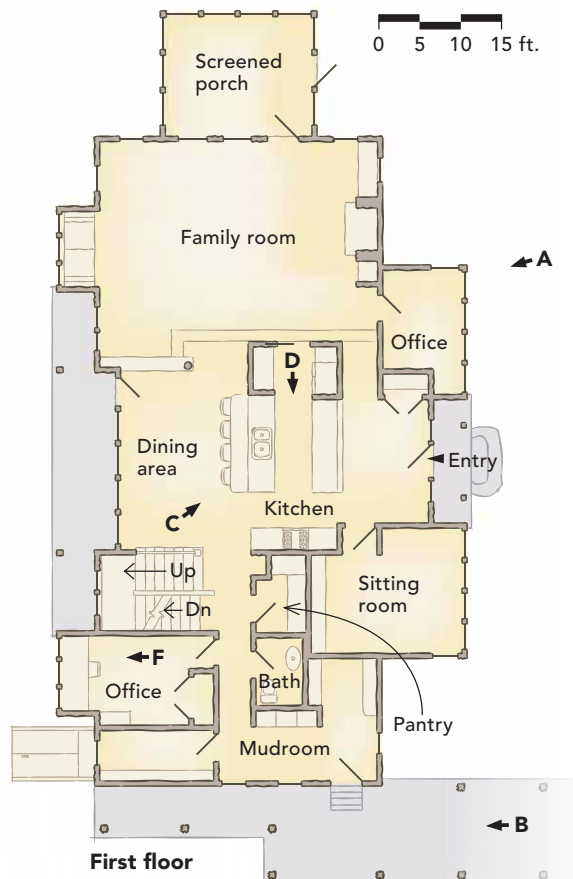


Photos taken at lettered positions.

Second floor



A family study hall under the cupola. The long desk in the second-floor hallway is for homework free of the distractions of toys and games and under a parent's watchful eye. At bedtime the family climbs onto the built-in seat for the latest adventures in the Magic Treehouse series. Photo taken at E on floor plan.



First floor

dining and kitchen space. If the weather is nice, I can grab some reading material for work and walk through the dining area to the chairs on the back porch.

When the boys come home from school, they grab a snack at the breakfast bar and watch a few minutes of TV on the wall-mounted LCD television. Dinner sees the sun set on the mountains, and the family once again gathered in the kitchen.

Brian also incorporated private spaces for quieter activities. Downstairs, a small sitting room off the kitchen allows for reading or watching TV behind a closed door. Upstairs, each bedroom has a wall-mounted ladder leading to a private loft. The second floor also houses a “study hall.” This broad



“Our home offices must be comfortable and efficient so that we can be productive while spending long hours behind a desk.”

hallway connecting the two bedroom wings serves as both a family reading room and the kids’ study. On one side of the hall is a long, tall window seat where our family gathers most nights to read a story. The height of the window seat allows for book storage underneath and, during the day, views of the mountains. Directly across from the window seat is a 12-ft.-long desktop that the kids use for their computer, projects, and homework.

Commuting to work without leaving home

The most important private rooms in the house are our offices. Before building this house, my wife and I both worked from home for a couple of years without dedicated home offices. This experience taught us that we needed comfortable, purpose-built office space and that we had to choose communication technology carefully. There’s nothing worse than losing phone or email contact with your coworkers and clients.

A wireless network for broadband Internet access offers the convenience and flexibility of moving around the house with a laptop. However, the steel I-beams that frame the core of our house and the sound-deadening insulation in interior walls limit the range of the network, so we installed both wired and wireless ethernet. This setup ensures reliable

With this view, who needs a corner office?

The built-in desk holds the author’s computer and videoconferencing monitor. A flip-down door provides access to the high-tech nerve center. Photo taken at F on floor plan.



and fast performance when we’re plugged in, along with the ability to move around the house with a laptop when we’re not.

For voice communications, my wife and I use wireless headsets. While we’re on long phone calls, we can keep our hands free to do things around the house. Also, my office is set up for videoconferencing, so I can join business meetings face-to-face with colleagues and clients.

To back up these systems, we added whole-house surge protection and a generator, which protect our equipment and enable us to work even when the power is out.

Although working at home lets us live in a beautiful location 3000 miles from my employer, our offices must be comfortable and efficient so that we can be productive while spending long hours behind a desk.

Beth and I didn’t want to be isolated in a corner of the house. Given the three-hour time difference with my employer, though, I’m often working in the afternoon and evening,

when the kids are home, and I need a quiet space. Both offices are located near the kitchen so that we can interact with the boys, but they’re equipped with solid doors and insulated interior walls to shut out noise.

The final key to an efficient home office is storage to contain the clutter. In my office we designed a wide built-in desk that accommodates my computer and videoconferencing unit, with room to spare.

In addition, the office closet has dedicated storage areas for the printer, the shredder, and office supplies. A flip-down door under my desk reveals a shelf where the power adapters, the firewall, the external hard drive, and all the accompanying wires are located. This handy feature keeps the floor free of dust-gathering clutter. □

Michael Hopwood enjoys lunchtime runs on the trails right outside the door of his Jericho, Vt., home. Photos by Sean Groom.