



A first-floor master suite maintains the scale of the house and creates a courtyard out back

BY LYNN HOPKINS

# Make the Most of a Small Addition



**More in back, less in front.** The L-shaped addition encloses a section of the backyard that has become an intimate patio with plantings and rock walls that improve the view from the new master suite's bay window. Photo facing page taken at A on floor plan. As viewed from the street, the unobtrusive addition blends seamlessly with the house's shape and detail, and fits easily into the neighborhood's scale. Photo above taken at B on floor plan.

It's unusual for anyone to buy a house and not have a renovation lurking in the back of their mind. After all, it's the potential in a house that attracts many of us. In our case, my husband and I started with a little Cape in a nice neighborhood. Because we're both architects, we assumed (perhaps a bit arrogantly) that we could fix anything about the house except its location. During the past nine years, we've expanded and improved our home as our needs have changed and our budget has allowed. Recently, we decided to add a master suite.

## How much space do you really need?

Clients with Capes or single-story houses often come to me convinced they must add an entire second floor onto their home to accommodate their growing families. Building up can be a reasonable solution for those needing more space, if the children are young or if site restrictions demand it. However, a much smaller (and less expensive) first-floor addition often can satisfy these requirements. Additions at grade tend to be much less disruptive to the functioning of the original house as well because construction can be isolated in the new wing.

For the four of us, two small bedrooms and a three-quarter bath upstairs were quickly becoming too cramped. Each of our girls wanted her own room, and my husband and I wanted our own bath. The girls were older now and didn't need to sleep in the room next to us anymore, so we decided to give them the second floor and to create a new master wing on the first floor (floor plan, p. 87). As the girls have entered adolescence, the wisdom of this strategy has become even more apparent.

Once we mentally moved from upstairs to the first floor, we realized we could create spaces that would meet a number of other pressing needs. My husband wanted a quiet reading spot with a view of the garden, and I wanted a home office with a computer. Of course, we needed a bedroom and closet space as well as a bathroom.

But there was an added benefit to placing these rooms on the first floor. The master suite no longer needed to be exclusively the realm of the "masters" but easily could be shared with the family. Semiprivate spaces like the computer area and reading alcove on the first floor could become semipublic areas available to the entire family and be enjoyed much more frequently. This idea is similar to



**Hallways can multitask, too.** Locating the home office in the master suite's hallway was a good way of economizing space that all family members can use. At the junction of the main house and addition, the former playroom (photo right) was transformed with a band of continuous trim into a cabinet-like walk-through dressing room. Photos taken at C on floor plan.



the concept of *hoteling*, or the sequential sharing of space. The same areas are shared by several people but at different times. Hotels use this concept of space efficiency, and it's gaining popularity in office and home design.

### **The addition shouldn't look out of place**

Some additions are simple extrusions of the existing house form. But if overall proportions are not considered, the house looks as if it were squeezed out like toothpaste until the desired amount of square footage was obtained. Instead, I enclosed the additional space in a simple gable form, similar in proportion to the original house. Both buildings are linked together by a pitched roof that runs perpendicular to the two structures, making a mini-compound. This big house-little house strategy preserves the scale of the original building and, consequently, of the neighborhood. Considering the context of existing houses is especially important in our neighborhood, which has seen its share of unfortunate teardowns replaced by McMansions.

### **Dress up the windowless space in the L-intersection**

For many people, the hardest part of adding on is deciding where and how to connect to the existing house. The best place for our master suite was off the back of the house. I connected the new addition at the former playroom, turning a window into a doorway. This location was private and would leave the south side of the house for the most-public functions: the living room, dining room, and kitchen. The more-public rooms of the new addition, the computer area and reading alcove, also would face south. My big house-little house arrangement resulted in an L-shaped plan.

The challenge with an L-configuration is dealing with the absence of natural light at its inside corner. Because this room would have no windows, it became an ideal candidate for the dressing area. I like to separate clothing storage from the master bedroom so that an early riser can get dressed without disturbing the person still sleeping.

But I didn't want to feel as if I were walking through a closet, so I put all the new hanging space along the longest wall. Closet

**A quiet place for the books.** Outside the bedroom, a small reading area profits from a good rocking chair and a bay window that looks out onto the backyard. Photo taken at D on floor plan.

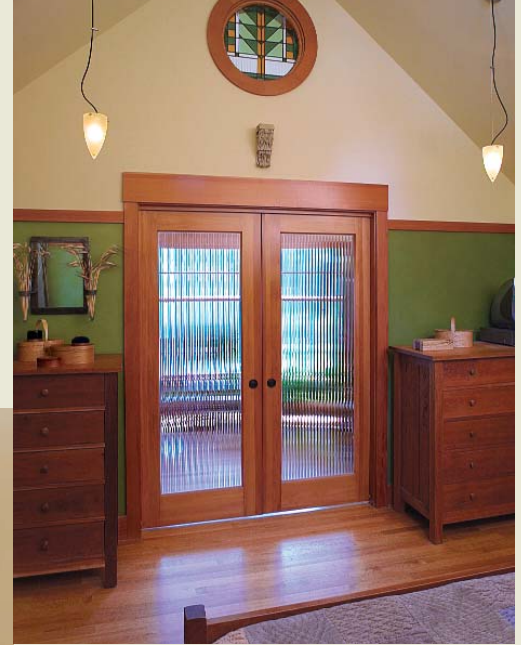


An L-addition  
defines the  
indoor and  
outdoor space.

## SIMPLE PAINT AND TRIM DETAILS ADD HISTORIC CHARACTER



**A private bedroom with lots of light.** Under a cathedral ceiling, the bedroom's gable wall is solid behind the bed; high circular windows at each end help light the room. Pocket doors with reeded glass allow light to penetrate without sacrificing privacy. Photos taken at E and F on floor plan.



In the new wing, I switched from painted trim to clear vertical-grain fir, which is less expensive than stain-grade hardwoods such as cherry and oak. Stock fir doors are readily available and reasonably priced as well. I find that the lighter color of the fir complements the truer red color of our cherry furniture quite nicely. The casings are simple 1x4 verticals with 5/4x6 heads.

I also ran a 2-in.-wide, 1/2-in.-thick strip of wood around the room about 78 in. above the floor. I usually like to paint the wall below this dado, or picture-rail line, a strong color; in this case, I chose green. The upper wall and ceiling are painted a much lighter color, so the green anchors the walls to the floor and the furnishings. The dado, just above head height, gives a human scale to the room, which is especially important with high ceilings.

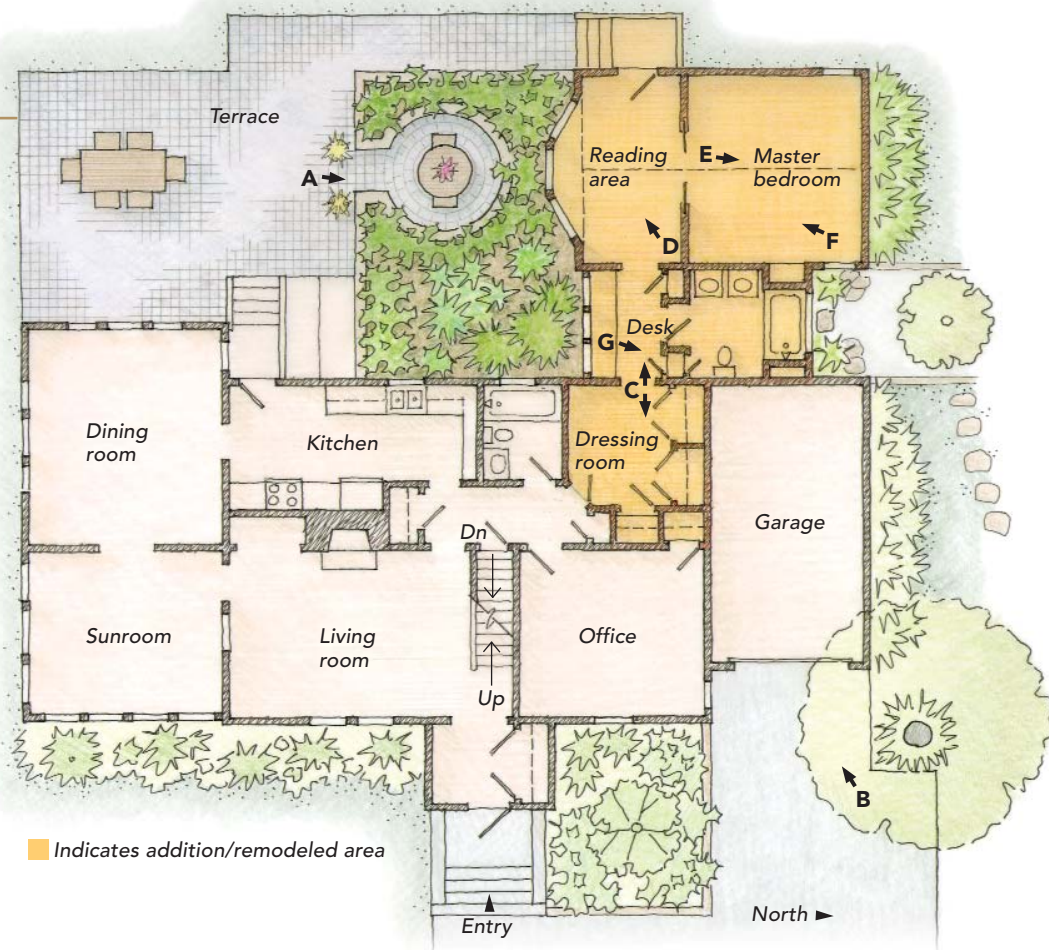
Wrapping the same paint color up and over visually diffuses the juncture between wall and ceiling. Paint softens the corner, easing the transition between vertical and horizontal, and performs the same function as crown molding. These color and material banding ideas were used frequently by Frank Lloyd Wright, as well as by Gustave Stickley and the Greene brothers.

## A master suite with no fuss

The author designed this addition to supplement the house's first-floor space. She solved the problem of a windowless transition between old and new by turning a former playroom into a walk-through dressing room. The hallway beyond is large enough for a computer workstation just outside the bathroom. Enlarged by a bay window, the reading area becomes a bright anteroom for the master bedroom.

Photos taken at lettered positions.

0 2 4 8 ft.



**Smart and efficient storage.** Open to both the bathroom interior and the hallway outside, a double-sided closet is used to store linens and supplies that might otherwise take up space in the small bathroom. Photo taken at G on floor plan.

doors run the full width of that wall, providing optimal access. The door trim runs right to the corners of the room, so the bank of doors now resembles a wall of paneling and is an attractive architectural feature. The room is wide enough for a chest of drawers and a chair on the opposite side, so it doesn't feel claustrophobic.

The next space is less of a room and more of a hall, but I made it wide enough for a long desk, where I placed the family computer. This space is not only my home office but also the computer center for the kids. Placing the computer on a circulation path makes it possible to monitor the girls' homework and Internet activity unobtrusively without being mistaken for Big Mother.

### Separate the public from the private

The gabled part of the addition is divided into two spaces: the bay-windowed reading area and the more cloistered sleeping room. The bay faces south toward the garden and fills the two rooms with light.

The sleeping room is more private. The back wall is nearly solid, except for a circular window, and provides a nice backdrop for the bed, which faces the bay window and the garden. A second circular window is set into the wall that divides the sleeping room from the reading area. Below the window is a pair of pocket doors glazed with tempered reeded glass that provides complete privacy in the sleeping room without blocking the light and makes drapery for the bay window unnecessary.

A glass door from the reading area connects this wing of the house with the patio and garden. Although I loved the light and view this door provided, I realized after we moved in that we were too visible to the outside world from back in the dressing room. So I took a cue from the screens used on houses in Japan and designed wooden latticework that fits over the glass and gives us more privacy. □

Lynn Hopkins practices architecture at her office in Lexington, Mass. Photos by Charles Bickford.