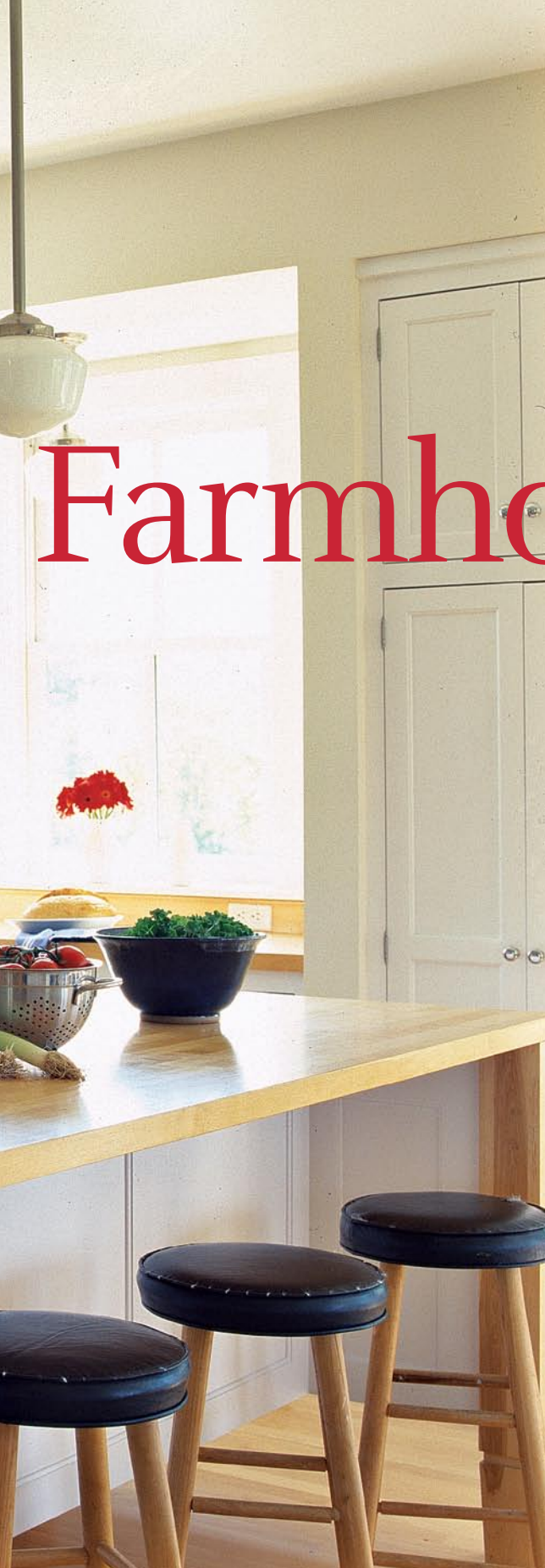




The New American

Classic in spirit, modern in style, a simple home



BY JEAN REHKAMP LARSON

Farmhouse

Like all good houses, this one started with a vision. Susan Marek had long held in her mind's eye a picturesque home in the country, surrounded by a bountiful garden brimming with vegetables and flowers. Her husband, Dave, had his eye on a vintage red tractor. The vision grew clearer a few years back when the couple found 11 acres of farmland in Chaska, Minn., a small town not far from Minneapolis. The setting was idyllic: Who could ask for more than a grove of trees, a gentle knoll, and open fields affording long, deep-sigh views of the Midwest prairie? The only thing missing was the farmhouse.

When the couple asked me to design it, I was delighted because as an architect, I have always favored the elegant and simple farmhouse style. They told me they wanted a house that was classic in spirit yet modern in style, but I needed to know more. What exactly did they like about farmhouses and how would they live in the home? After hearing them say "clean," "simple," and "classic but open" over and over again, I looked to the rural landscape for inspiration.

In Minnesota, tall white farmhouses seem to watch over the surrounding fields like beacons in a sea of green. They are carefully sited on dry "high" ground in



RETHINKING THE FAMILY FARM
Open, light, clean, and uncluttered, this new home looks as though it has sat on the Minnesota prairie forever. Inside, it feels completely fresh. Its rooms, especially the kitchen (left), were carefully designed for simple, casual living.

conforms to the way one family lives today



OLD AND NEW
The living room is furnished with a combination of reproduction pieces, antiques, and Susan's "finds." A few modern accents lend interest to the room.

a predominantly flat landscape. A grove of trees called a shelterbelt is often planted to the north and west to block prevailing winds and keep snow drifts out of the farmyard in winter. Barns are set downwind so summer's cooling breezes won't carry unpleasant smells in through open windows. And porches suit all seasons, shading the high summer sun while letting in the low light of the cold winter months.

A classic footprint is adapted over time

Farmhouses often began as simple one- or two-room structures with an unfinished attic under the eaves. One of the virtues of these modest homes was that a box with a gable roof could easily be expanded, and indeed they were. As families grew, wings, along with porches and second stories, were often added.

"Box" is the operative word here, because a classic farmhouse usually has separate, small rooms that are often dead-ends. The Mareks wanted none of that. They

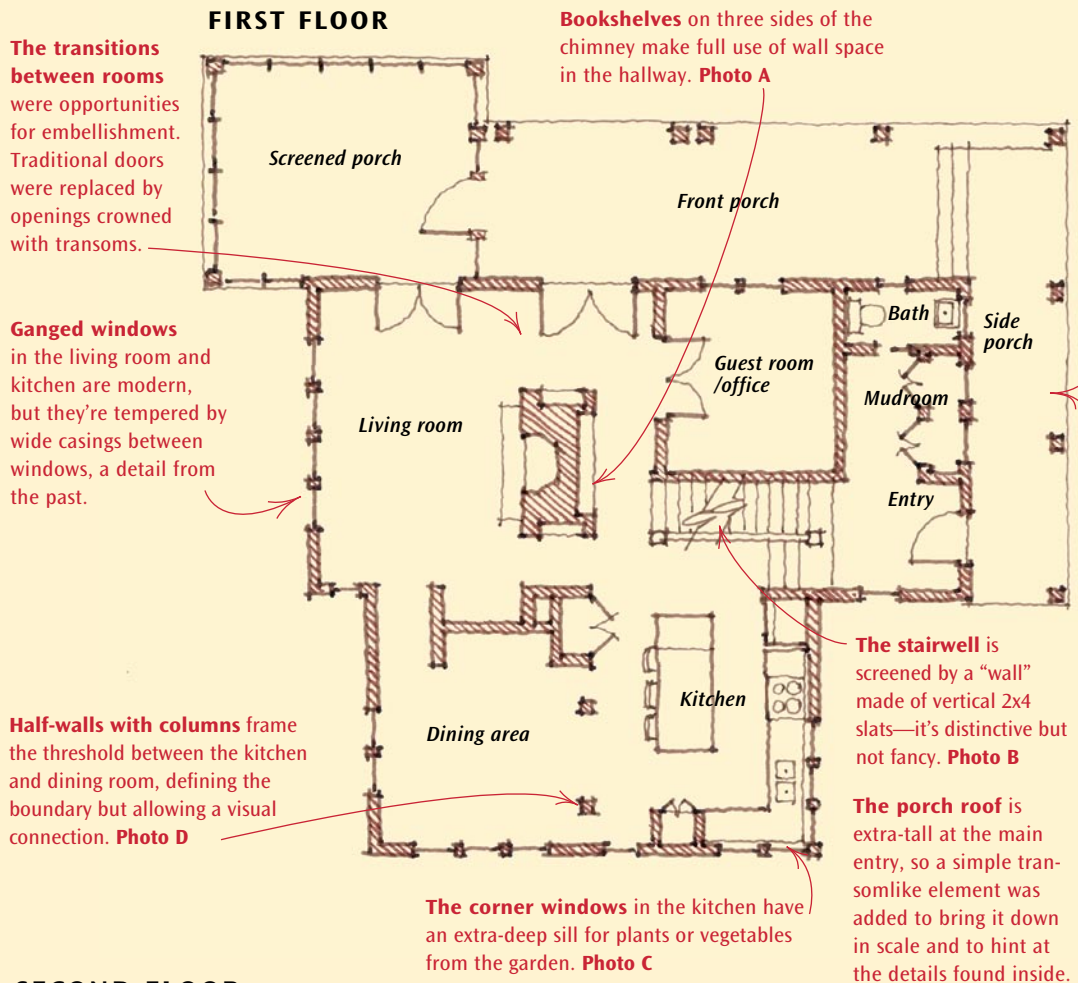
have two small children, so their house had to be open (to keep an eye on them) and kid-friendly, but they didn't want a great room either.

In this new farmhouse, the footprint is a classic T, complete with a steep gable roof and porches. Inside, the rooms have clear boundaries, but they flow into one another, taking full advantage of the light that enters through windows on all sides. It's a cross between a completely open plan—with nothing but a table to define the dining room—and the opposite extreme: An old house with disconnected rooms.

The interior is made up of simple rectangular spaces, but a few tangible design elements make this house different. While there are no traditional, narrow hallways, two major circulation paths cross the house, linking rooms along the way. One leads from the entry, between the kitchen and the second-floor stairwell, into the living room. The second path, formed in part by a wall of bookcases built into the back of the fireplace, runs perpendicular to the first. It starts at the French

HOW TO MAKE A SIMPLE HOUSE SPECIAL

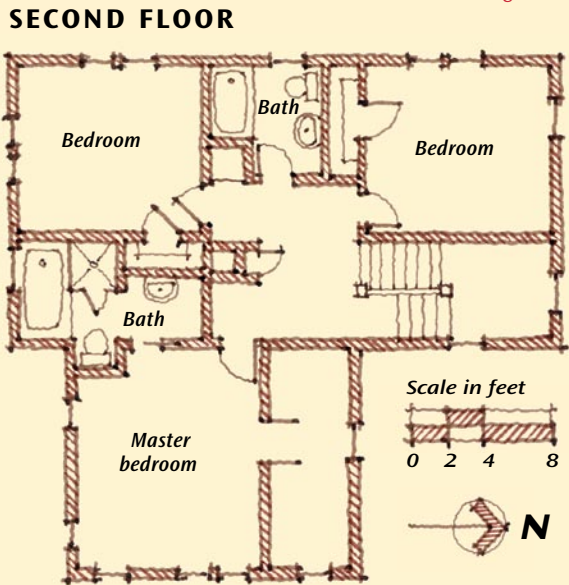
From a distance, it may look traditional, but make no mistake: The Marek farmhouse is no garden-variety home. There are unexpected contemporary touches at every turn, and interesting architectural details were added to make it even more special. Such small embellishments do not overwhelm the interior, yet they quietly tie the house together, inside and out.



A Bookcases surround chimney



B Wood slats screen stairway



D Half-walls separate spaces



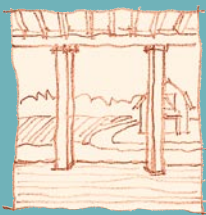
C Deep sills provide display

A HOUSE IS A FARMHOUSE WHEN...

- ▶ It looks like it belongs where it sits. It is constructed in a vernacular style, of materials that are native to its region.
- ▶ There are multiple buildings on the site—anything from a barn or a henhouse to a detached garage.
- ▶ It is shaped like a simple box and has a gable roof and clapboard siding.
- ▶ It has an open porch to ease the transition from landscape to interior space.
- ▶ Its proportions are carefully considered. Wings can't be too wide or the house will be stocky instead of tall and proud.
- ▶ It has a simple, symmetrical façade with a pleasing arrangement of windows.
- ▶ It features double-hung windows. They should be tall, with a minimum 1 to 2 ratio in width to height, and low (8 to 18 inches off the floor).
- ▶ The pitch of the main roof is steep (8/12 to 12/12), while the pitch of the porch roof is low (3/12 to 4/12).
- ▶ Part of the ceiling in the upper bedrooms slopes and the head height of windows is lower than usual.
- ▶ There's evidence that it has grown over time: wings attached, rooms bumped out, second stories added on.



Multiple buildings



An open porch



Simple & symmetrical



Different-pitched roofs



Sloped ceilings



Grown over time



ENTER HERE
The welcoming path from the garage and drive leads to the side door on the asymmetrical façade. By design, it's the only door a visitor can see, and it's intended for use by all.

doors at the front of the house, and ends with a view out a large window in the kitchen (top photo, p. 42).

Even though the first-floor office, or “away space,” can be private, its two sets of French doors allow it to open onto the porch and into the house.

Traditional doorways are replaced by wide, generous passages that frame views. The stairwell is treated with the same defined openness. A screen of wood slats extends from floor to ceiling, connecting the first and second floors (center right photo, p. 39).

No farmers live here, but it feels like a farm

The house was designed with topography, views, and orientation in mind. On the outside, there's a pleasing sequence of arrival. From a distance, the house can be seen across the fields, standing proud on the prairie landscape. Then it disappears from view, until you turn onto the road and proceed up a rise, when it is discovered again, peeking over the knoll.



Part of the charm of a farmhouse is the community created by surrounding it with outbuildings. The space enclosed by the structures—a barn, a chicken coop, or in this case, simply a detached garage—becomes a “farmyard.” Shaded by old oaks, the driveway leads to the garage, which has a hayloft door in the gable. A sitting area (photo above) next to it invites a pause, or visitors can step up between low plantings, to the house. Wrapping around two sides of the house, the porch provides a clear symbol of welcome.

Historically, a farmhouse had a formal front door that led to the parlor. But the hardworking nature of farm life meant that front door was rarely used. Everyone entered through the informal side door to the kitchen instead.

This new farmhouse is designed to acknowledge that quirky characteristic. The path from the garage and drive leads to the side door, intended for use by all. Around the corner, on the symmetrical façade, the classic front door is replaced by French doors leading out to the porch and the grassy hilltop.



**KITCHEN
DETAIL**

The sink is low and deep, while the windowed wall is wide. The sills were designed to hold plants or flowers and vegetables from Susan’s garden.



A LIVING ROOM, TOO

Minnesotans know how to appreciate summer, and the screened porch is the perfect place to kick back in good weather.



Our house is open and yet there are defined places

Because the house is nestled into the side of a knoll, the rear elevation has a partly exposed foundation and large windows that fill the basement family room with light. The dining room and living room face south, with long views to the fields. Part of the porch shelters the house from the hot, western summer sun while letting in the low light of winter (photo, facing page). The eastern orientation of the kitchen was no accident; the morning sun helps get everyone up and going for the day.

The heart of the modern home

There are spaces for rest and reflection in the Marek home, but for everything else, there's the kitchen (photo, p. 36). The traditional farmhouse kitchen was a busy

utility room, out of sight and earshot of the formal parlor and dining room. The kitchen in the Marek farmhouse, on the other hand, is at the center of everyday life. The main entry opens to the mudroom, then up two quick steps into the kitchen. The stairway to the second floor starts at the kitchen, and to get to the basement playroom, you usually have to walk through the kitchen.

It is a modest and practical room, and Susan likes it that way. There's plenty of counter space and storage. The multipurpose island provides ample room for chopping vegetables or rolling out cookie dough. In addition, there's an eating area and a low desk to give children a place to draw or write. It is both a place to prepare meals and a place to visit with friends or family over a glass of lemonade.

This kitchen is the modern "situation room." Corner windows provide the perfect vantage point from which to see who is coming up the drive, watch the kids riding bikes, survey Susan's flourishing gardens, and see Dave riding his old tractor—just the way they pictured it. **▣**

Jean Rehkamp Larson is the author of The Farmhouse (The Taunton Press, 2004).

For more information, see Resources, page 84.

A PLEASING PATH

If you enter through the front doors and walk directly through the house, you'll end up at a perfectly framed view out a large double-hung window in the kitchen.



SERENE SPACES *The Mareks' simple bedroom (left), decidedly unfussy dining room (above), and front porch (facing page) provide quiet places for rest, reflection, and conversation.*

to go if you want to get away. —Dave Marek, homeowner

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LIVE HERE

Susan and I wanted a house we could live in and not a “museum.” We have no extra rooms or areas of the home that aren’t used regularly.

Just as we use all of our rooms, we also use all of our furniture. There is no such thing as furniture used only for guests.

I love the way our house feels. It’s open; you can move easily from room to room and yet there are defined places to go if you want to get away.

We had a definite vision for our house, and we couldn’t be happier with it. We designed and built it with our family—not resale—in mind. And in the end, what we wound up with is a home.

—Dave Marek,
homeowner



TAKE A LOOK This part of the wrapping porch shelters the house from the hot summer sun and invites hours of restful contemplation.