

This is an excerpt from the book

Creating the Not So Big House

by Sarah Susanka

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Affordable Comfort

THIS HOUSE, DESIGNED BY ARCHITECT Ross Chapin for a family of four in Amherst, Massachusetts, presents another view of the archetypal qualities that speak to us of home. Like the house in Pennsylvania designed by Jeremiah Eck

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(see p. 40), it has a steep roof with living space below, a magnificent brick chimney, a front dormer with a focal window, and a central front door under its own sheltering roof. This home, however, was constructed on a much tighter budget, proving that you can build a truly beautiful home

even if there isn't a lot of money available. You simply have to evaluate what's important to you and distribute the money accordingly. For Rene and Susan and their two teenage children, the location of the house was a high priority, and like many people, they

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ABOVE Although the form of this house is simple, the dark green trim, corner boards, and columns highlight its shape and bring out its personality. The diamond motif above the dormer window adds a playful touch that distinguishes it from a standard builder home at very little expense.

OPPOSITE The brick chimney is a dramatic feature that the owners decided to spend extra money on. The layout of the bricks in the chimney recalls the diamond motif from the front of the house. A belt line divides the gable end, separating the cedar shingles above from the lap siding below. The total composition looks both cozy and inviting. (PHOTO BY CHARLES MILLER; COURTESY FINE HOMEBUILDING MAGAZINE.)



ABOVE A wood stove at the center of the common room shares the chimney with the exterior fireplace. The detailing of the surrounding brickwork gives it the look of a real fireplace, but the wood stove offers a more controllable and efficient heat source. The door to the right of the hearth leads to the deck, which is an extension of the primary living space. (PHOTO BY CHARLES MILLER; COURTESY FINE HOMEBUILDING MAGAZINE.)

Architect:
Ross Chapin
Architects

Builder:
Bill O'Bremski

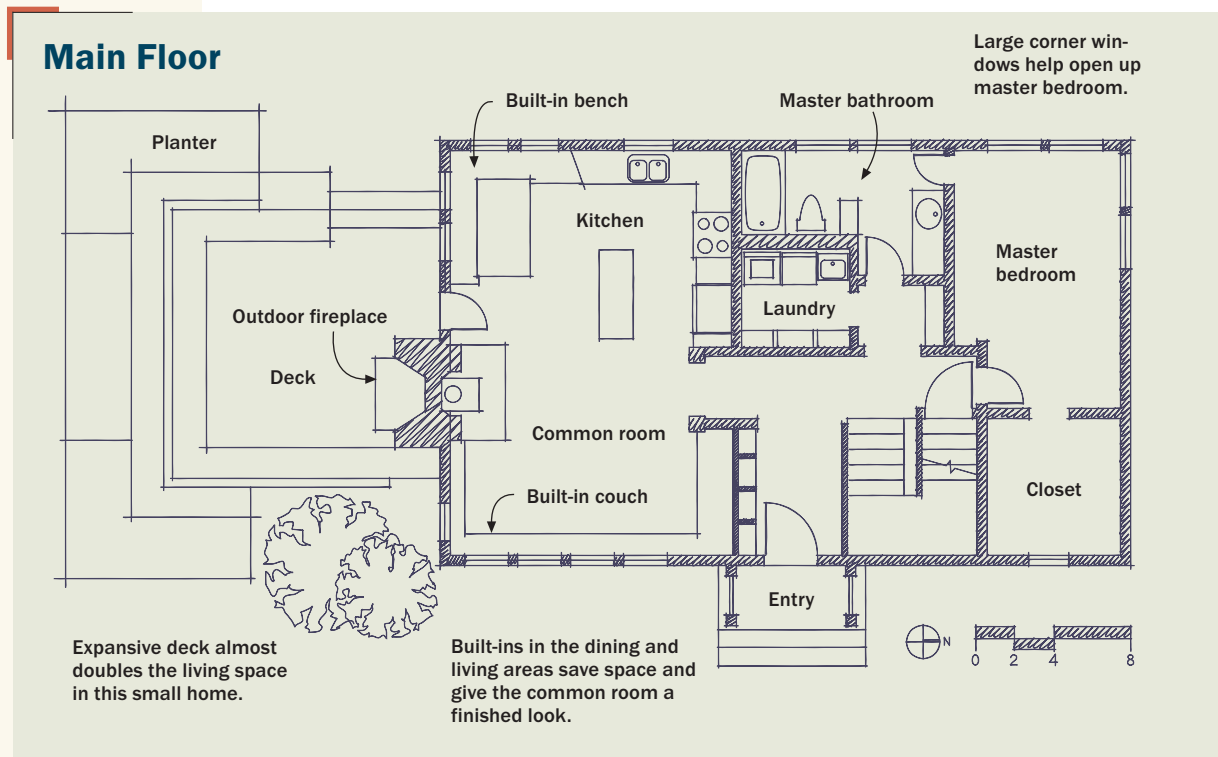
Size: 1,750 sq. ft.

Location:
Amherst, Mass.

ended up spending more of their overall budget on land than they had intended. So when it came time for the design process, they knew they'd have to make some compromises. Ross helped them identify what spaces they really needed and explained how to design them to get the most value for their money.

Common Ground

Rene and Susan's previous home had a formal living room, a dining room, and a tiny kitchen on the main level. As in many households, even though there was no family room, the living room still didn't get used much. Instead, the living happened mostly in the kitchen and adjacent dining room. So in their new home, Ross suggested making one large common room, with a



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high ceiling and lots of light, where the family could congregate to cook, eat, do homework, and socialize. It would be beautiful and filled with warm materials that encouraged both family and friends to linger.

When a house is small, it's important to have at least one area that gives a sense of spaciousness, and in this house the common room serves that function. At 16 ft. by 24 ft. with a 10-ft. ceiling, it's still not a large space for what is essentially three living areas: kitchen, dining room, and living room. But combining them into a single large space creates the illusion of being in a bigger house while using far less square footage than building a separate room for each function.



ABOVE Windows surround the built-in couches in the living room, flooding the space with light and views during the day. By night, the lighting is very simple but effective, with inexpensive wall sconces pointed both up, to bounce light off the ceiling, and down, to create warm pools of light for reading.

Built-In Benefits

Another interesting spatial trick helps the common room stretch even farther. An everyday dining table typically requires at least 3 ft. to 4 ft. between the table edge and the wall, so that there's



ABOVE The kitchen occupies one corner of the rectangle of the main room. To the right, the lowered soffit helps to give the space a sense of shelter and its own identity. To the left, a built-in bench on two sides of the table allows the eating area to occupy less space than usual because there's no need to allow for chair clearances on these sides.



room for chairs and some additional circulation space. Here, the chairs are replaced with a built-in bench, so there's no need to allow for that extra space. Built-in furniture can save a significant amount of square footage and give the room a cozy feel at the same time.

The same space-saving design is used in the living area, where the couch is built in along the window wall (see the photo on p. 107). Push-

ing standard furniture tight against a wall tends to suggest that a room is too small, as if the furniture had to be shoe-horned in. Built-in furniture lets you use a reduced amount of space but gives the opposite effect, making a room look more finished. The continuous lines of the built-in couch, together with the wide windowsill that serves as a shelf, give this room a tailored look and provide ample seating in a modest amount of space.

When you build in couches and benches like this, it's critical that they fit the people who sit in them. Not all chair shapes are comfortable for all people, so Ross arranged for a mockup to be made prior to final construction to make sure that the proportions were just right. Although this is a little extra work and expense, it's money and effort well spent. Remember, you're tailoring a house that is designed to fit *you*.

The Warmth of Wood

The common room also has some finishing details that you wouldn't normally find in an inexpensive home. The cherry cabinetry, made by a local cabinetmaker, is of exceptional quality and beauty. Spending a little extra on the cabinetry can lend the whole house an aura of quality and craftsmanship.

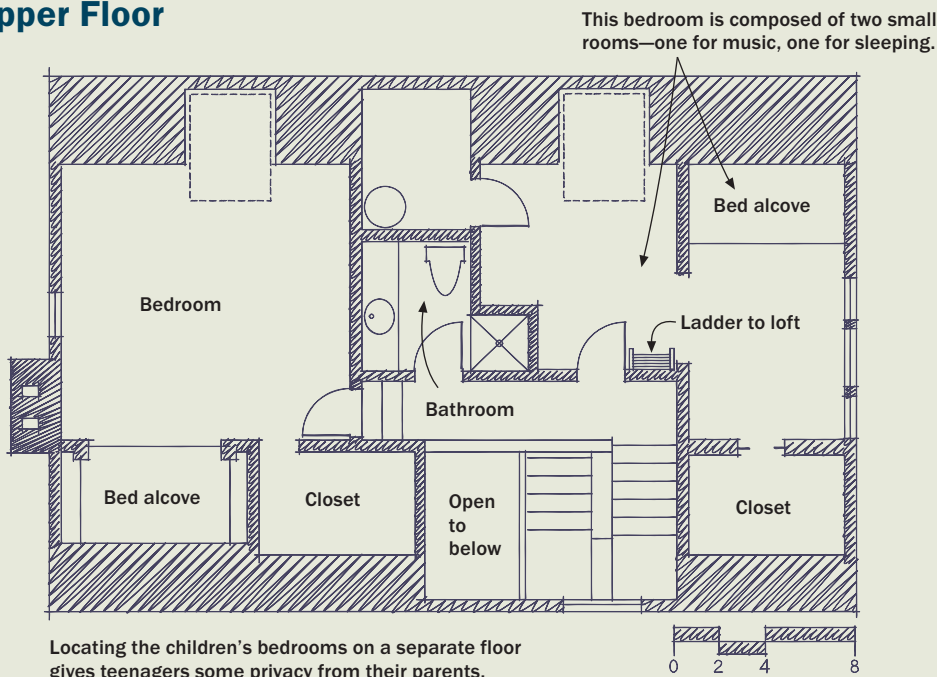
LEFT Kitchen cabinets can be designed to suit your individual needs and to create a custom look. This cabinetry includes an island that's more like a freestanding table. Narrow drawers below the upper cabinets and open shelving in the hard-to-reach areas above the refrigerator and range hood give this inventive kitchen a well-proportioned and hospitable feel.

Up Close



Granite is a beautiful and durable material for countertops and backsplashes, but its cost can be prohibitive. An alternative is to use 12-in. by 12-in. granite tiles, which have the feel and durability of solid granite at a fraction of the cost.

Upper Floor



By spending more of your budget on highly visible features like the cabinetry and doing some creative compromising elsewhere, the quality of the whole house increases.

The ceiling is another place where a little extra detailing has been added to great effect. Ross had been studying traditional Japanese architecture and was inspired in the creation of this design by the ceiling support system of beams and purlins in the famous temple at Ise. Its open structure allows light to play over the tops of the beams, giving the whole ceiling a floating, latticed quality.

The beams and purlins (the crosspieces) provide the support for the upper level and are made of construction-grade wood, complete with knots and other blemishes. This provided an opportunity to use a lower grade of trim around

the windows and doors, to echo that look and save money at the same time. It's very different from the refinement of the cabinetry, yet it works well in this eclectic space.

The trimwork in a house can be a significant expense, so if you can make a less expensive product work for you, it can add up to substantial savings. It's a common fear that choosing a lower grade for one material will ruin the whole effect of the house, but this is seldom the case. By spending more of your budget on highly visible features like the cabinetry and doing some creative compromising elsewhere, the quality of the whole house increases.



Comfort Zones

Beyond the common room, the house is basically unadorned and the spaces are small. But Ross used some interesting design concepts to help make a little go a long way. He separated the private areas of the house into different zones—a children's zone and an adults' zone. This strategy gives family

members some privacy from one another, a desirable feature for everyone during the teen years. The second floor of the house is given over to the children, and the adults have their private territory in the main-floor master bedroom. This room isn't intended for socializing, so it was kept intentionally small, with no separate sitting area or extra floor space.

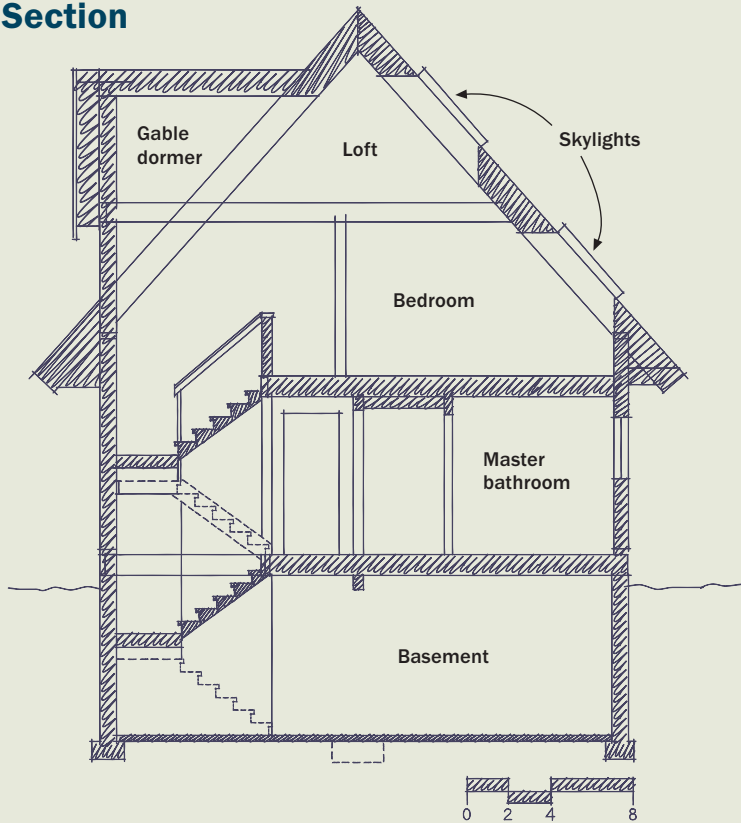
The children's rooms are somewhat larger, to give each child his or her own private realm, well away from mom and dad. Placing the beds in alcoves in the eaves leaves more usable space for everyday activities. Suzanne has a bedroom with lots of floor space, while Stephen's room is actually two small rooms with a wide doorway in between. An aspiring musician, he practices his guitar in one room and uses the other for sleeping. Since both kids' bedrooms are built into the roof form, they have sloped ceilings, which adds some personality without additional expense.

LEFT In a Not So Big House, it's important to make the most of the space that's available. This house employs a number of clever storage ideas, like these staircase bookshelves. Adding 10 in. to the width of the stairway created over 16 lineal feet of book storage, where typically there's just a wall.

BELOW The sloped ceiling of the second floor, which is tucked snugly into the roof form, makes a wonderful, tentlike place for a child's bedroom. A skylight introduces the same amount of light as an expensive dormer, at a fraction of the cost. (PHOTO BY CHARLES MILLER; COURTESY FINE HOMEBUILDING MAGAZINE.)



Section



Room at the Top

Making full use of all the available space, there's one more room at the top of the house—a loft that's accessed by a ship's ladder. The space is tiny and only 7 ft. high at the ridge, but its diminutive size doesn't mean it's not frequently used. Since the home was built a decade ago, the loft has served as both in-home office and retreat space—a place to go to meditate or simply to sit quietly and be alone. Although this function is not commonly accommodated in most American homes, its inclusion can make an enormous difference in the feeling of spaciousness. You don't need large rooms to make space for privacy. Just the knowledge that there's a getaway at the top of the stairs is all it takes.

It's thoughtful touches like these that give this simple house such a feeling of home. Standing outside, you know instinctively that you'll feel comfortable the moment you step inside.

It's not a pretentious house. It's not de-

signed to impress the neighbors. Instead, it's built to nurture and delight the people who really count—the people who live in it. It has the genuineness that comes from designing for real people and real lives, lived within the confines of a real budget. Most of us know those constraints but don't know how to transcend them. This house admirably shows how it can be done.



RIGHT A small loft accessed by a ship's ladder is a place for individual family members to be alone. Providing a retreat place can make a small house seem larger, because there is room to get away.

OPPOSITE A beautifully designed exterior fireplace extends the season for outdoor socializing and is a great attraction for friends and family alike. With its encircling wooden bench, it becomes an outdoor room—a wonderful place to congregate toward evening around the welcoming warmth of the fire.

