

Making Room in the Modern Cape

by Gordon Tully

A problem I often face, along with many builders, is how to design a house that works for modern living while maintaining a link with the past. My usual approach is to work within traditional styles — such as the Bungalow, Shingle, Bay Area, or Prairie School — which naturally yield plans we can live with.

However, what if you want to work within the much-loved Cape Cod Colonial style, which does not readily lend itself to a good modern floor plan? Another approach is needed.

Defining Cape Style

First we need to identify what makes a building look like a Cape Cod Colonial. The key elements are:

- small-scale elements
- a prominent front door under low eaves
- a gabled roof with close to a 12/12 pitch
- rafters which spring from the first-floor plate
- horizontal siding or shingles
- a chimney mass near the center

Here's the problem: When you start with the standard symmetrical Cape facade with the door in the middle, you end up with a formal front entry that's hardly ever used and a rear entry near the garage that's used all the time — but is cluttered and unattractive. You give up what I think is an essential element of a good modern plan: one main entry linked to the garage and mudroom.

The design shown here explores one solution to this problem. Start with the traditional "Half Cape" style, in which the door is to one side of the facade (see Drawing A). Then attach small-scale wings, as if the house had been added on to over time, a familiar sight throughout the Northeast.

The crucial next step is to develop a passage from the front door to the middle of the house, in order to let

the "Half Cape" element stand off visually from the other wings (Drawing B). This creates a room at the front, next to the front entry, which in my plan is a bedroom. It could be an office, a study, a library, a parlor, a playroom, a living room — your choice. I have added a bath large enough to accommodate a disabled person using the downstairs bedroom, an increasingly useful feature given our aging population.

One attractive option for the traditional family is to use the front room as a downstairs living/playroom when the kids are little; when the kids leave, it is a bedroom for a live-in parent.

With the standard Cape, you have a formal front entry that's hardly ever used and a rear entry that's used all the time — but is cluttered and unattractive

Another option is to add a separate outdoor entry, making this front room a professional office. To accomplish this, I might eliminate the outer front door and the walls enclosing the wind lobby to create a cut-in front porch, off which both entry doors would open. The downside of this scheme is that the entry door on the front facade would disappear, leaving only the portal frame. This might violate an essential element of "Capeness" for some.

Chimney Placement

Locating the chimney is the next critical step. The easy solution is to put it on the outside wall to the right of the sitting area. But this violates a basic design principle of the Cape, and

makes the fireplace less useful as a heating appliance. In this Half Cape, the chimney belongs near the ridge, more or less in line with the front door. I moved it to the right just far enough to make room for the main circulation into the living areas, but not so far that it cuts up the usable space on the second floor.

Frank Lloyd Wright often placed a fireplace mass at the center of his plans, where it is a powerful element. But this would force traffic to pass between the fireplace and any seating areas, a situation I and most of my clients try to avoid. If you substitute a wood stove for the fireplace, this problem goes away, since a wood stove works best out in the center of things.

To stay with the traditional theme, I included a fireplace set straight to the wall in this plan, and accepted the compromised traffic pattern. Another option is to angle the fireplace to face upper right in the plan, which would create more intimacy in the sitting area, while still making the fire visible from the dining room. I chose the more traditional approach, which also makes the fire visible from the kitchen.

Making Stairs Fit

The stair is the next big element to settle. As usual, I had to try out many schemes before I got a stair to work on both floors without it feeling trapped. This one stands next to the outside wall, with a corridor on the other side, so there will be plenty of light and openness. The corridor on the ground floor leads to the garage and mudroom; the one on the upper floor links all rooms (Drawing C). Both halls will be filled with daylight.

Open Design

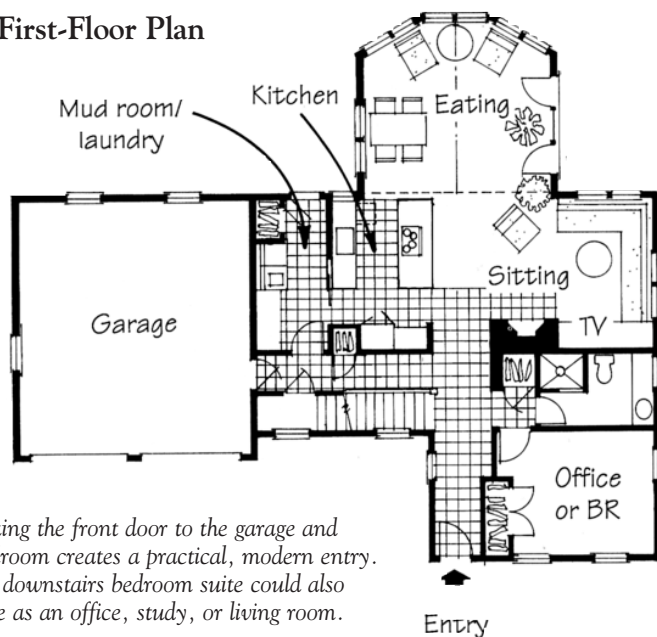
At this point I designed an open plan, but a more traditional plan would also work. There is only one eating area — no formal dining and

A. Front Elevation



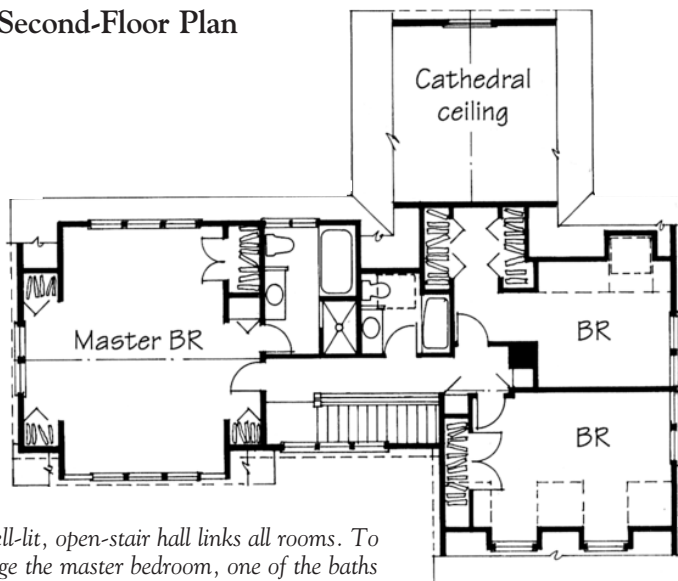
The front elevation has the familiar look of a traditional Half Cape added on to over time.

B. First-Floor Plan



Linking the front door to the garage and mudroom creates a practical, modern entry. The downstairs bedroom suite could also serve as an office, study, or living room.

C. Second-Floor Plan



A well-lit, open-stair hall links all rooms. To enlarge the master bedroom, one of the baths could be tubless, or the two baths combined.

no separate breakfast room. The eating space is the focus of the house, close to but separate from the kitchen. When you have company, you won't be looking at pots and pans, but the cook can still be part of the conversation while torching the peach flambé. I deliberately put the eating space in a separate wing, so it could have a cathedral ceiling, a nice relief from the usual 8-foot ceiling monotony.

The intimate center of the plan is a sitting area reminiscent of the 19th century inglenook, adjacent to the fireplace, with the audio-video center along one wall. A big TV would be visible from the dining area.

Upstairs, there are three bedrooms and two baths, an extravagance since there is a bath downstairs. The shower in the downstairs bath could be postponed until the front room actually became a bedroom, and one of the upstairs baths could be tubless. Or, the two baths could be combined into one large divided bath. Naturally, either of the small bedrooms upstairs could be a study or playroom.

Outside, it is appropriate to use irregular, even awkward forms, since added-to houses often have a refreshingly naive appearance. Don't overdo it, however, since deliberately naive design can look cutesy.

This is a big house, which I think reflects the problem of adapting a somewhat rigid form to complex modern demands. The easiest way to cut down its size without destroying its essence is to eliminate the downstairs bedroom, make the front room into a sitting room, move the dining/great room into the former living room, and squeeze a half bath in at the end of the stair or into part of the mudroom. This cuts out the entire dining/great room wing at the back, which might save \$20,000.

While this design can pass for Cape Cod Colonial, I couldn't have developed a modern plan if I had started from the formal, symmetrical model so often used by builders, and neither can you. You can't have your cake and eat it too, but if you settle for apple turnover, you might just make it. ■

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