



Reforming a Planbook Colonial

by Gordon Tully

One of the ironies of the home-building industry is that despite its being the most fragmented industry in the country, populated by small builders, its products are standardized and unimaginative rather than customized and site-specific.

A recent job illustrates my point. A

young friend, soon to be married, called me to help her and her fiancé with their new home. They were buying a three-bedroom builder's Colonial in a new development outside Boston, and they asked me to look over the plans.

I did, and we made some changes

that added about \$10,000 to the \$190,000 purchase price (houses are beastly expensive in these parts). Plus, they added a \$10,000 "farmer's porch." Now married, they are slowly accumulating furniture to fill up their new pride and joy.

Good Builder, Bad Plan

The builder had an excellent reputation, and in fact built carefully and thoughtfully. He was cooperative and gave reasonable prices for the changes I suggested. But why would he build the house as originally planned?

The house faces west, looking across the street toward two or three other new houses in the subdivision, with a close neighbor to the north. My friends had chosen this lot because it is surrounded on the south and east by conservation land with handsome, mature trees.

The builder proposed a standard plan, with the upstairs master bedroom on the opposite side from the living room (see illustration, left). The house had practically no windows on either the north or south. And, aside from the front porch, the only outdoor space contemplated was the north-facing backyard, reached by a steep flight of back stairs.

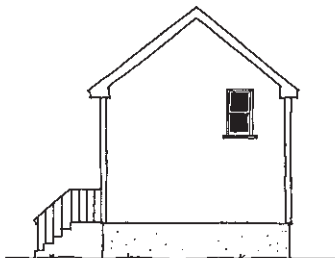
Reversing the Plan

I flipped the upstairs plan to put the master bedroom on the south, a change easily made. We added big windows upstairs to bring in the sun and to open the view to the woodland.

Downstairs, the plan change had few consequences. The basement door now occupies what was once a useful inside wall in the kitchen, but the cabinet next to the range got a foot wider. The couple requested that the living and dining room be thrown together, which was easy enough to do by adding a beam. I suggested a big deck on the south, which all agreed to readily, and then added sliding glass doors

Improving the Plan

Before



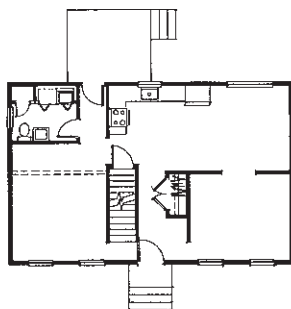
South Elevation

After

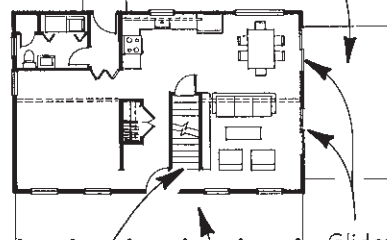


Back stoop

10' x 20' deck



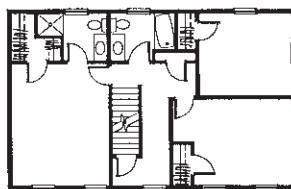
First Floor Plan



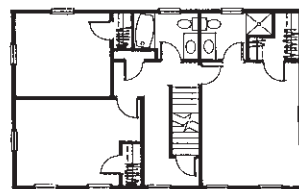
Reverse stair

Farmer's porch

Slider patio doors



Second Floor Plan



Reverse plan

Double window

Before: This planbook Colonial has five symmetrically placed windows across the front, as "required" by the style. But unbelievably, there is only one window each in the north and south walls. **After:** The author first reversed the upstairs plan to put the master bedroom on the south wall of the house. He also added windows in the end walls, including two sliding glass doors that lead out onto a deck.

onto the deck off the living and the dining rooms.

I reversed the front door, insisting that the builder move the whole stair back just a bit to clear the door swing. To ameliorate the confinement of a straight-run stair, we opened up the triangular walls at the top and bottom of the stair run with balusters.

Bottom Line

At the end of the process, and for \$10,000 added to the budget, our friends got a house they could enjoy. Some of this cost was for the deck, which could have been added later. Most of it was for south-facing windows beyond the code minimum. An additional \$10,000 for the big front porch was a real luxury, but it completely transformed the appearance of the house, converting the hostility of the typical flat “Colonial” front into a gesture of welcome.

These changes are so routine as to border on boring. So why did my client have to pay extra to get what should have been a baseline house? The answer is simple: What the “market” considers amenities do not correspond with what people need and in the long run will value. The “market” is out to lunch.

The house as originally planned comes close to providing code-minimum window area in each room. Attracting first-time buyers in a competitive market means holding down the price, so the builder felt obligated to minimize windows, a notable expense. He then had to distribute these precious windows around the house. And since today’s neo-neo-

Colonial house has to have five symmetrical windows on the front facade, with the door in the exact center, that’s where the lion’s share of the windows ended up. Everything else in the plan follows from this constraint, with the unfortunate consequences that I partially corrected for my clients.

My friends were fortunate enough to know that there are options available. Most low-end buyers simply accept things as they are presented: either this house or that house or no house. (Even high-end buyers think they are getting options when they can choose either this or that pretentious house from a planbook service.) Designing a house suited to the needs of a specific buyer or a specific site seems to be beyond the imagination of most builders and their customers. Yet it is exactly the individuality of unique sites and unique owners that makes communities worth living in.

The public is increasingly displeased with the mindless and pretentious developments despoiling what remains of the U.S. countryside. It will not be long before companies delivering economical site- and client-specific computerized designs will eat the market for lunch.

We need a dialogue on ideas that will help small builders share in this meal. Otherwise, you can bet that homes in 2020 will be highly customized, courtesy of your friendly neighborhood branch of a national franchise. ■

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