

Reinventing The Ranch

Informal floor plans and spacious lots make these 1950s' designs ideal for '90s remodels

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The most popular postwar housing style in the United States was the ranch house. Every city in America boasts entire neighborhoods of 1950s ranches that are ripe for remodeling — one story big picture windows, no (old-fashioned) porches and broad roof overhangs that were in their time as dramatic as the tail fins on the owners' cars. And speaking of the perhaps the most defining feature of the ranch was the accommodation of the automobile. Garages for the first time were brought up front and proudly faced to the street. Usually the square footage of the garage is greater than any other single room in the house.

Floor plans, too, were new and different. The living room is



deliberate, and important, often deliberately placed on the front with a huge plate glass window to better display the owners' material success. Hallways were discouraged; instead, rooms open into one another. Often the dining room on smaller ranches is just an "L" off the living room. Family rooms first started to make their appearance in the '50s, although they tended to be small, and always on the back. For the first time, too, small private bathrooms for mom and dad made their appearance in the mass market.



When adding up, it's important not to over whelm the original house. Stepping back the addition softens the effect.

Advantages of the Ranch

One of the best features of the ranch is that they are typically on spacious lots. The landscaping is mature in these 40-year-old neighborhoods, and the location is prime, close to the city but with a sense of space that is positively suburban.

Visually, ranches are long and low — a comforting aesthetic. The scale is under standable. Windows are wide and horizontal. The roofs project 2 to 3 feet out from the walls, and the roofs themselves are very prominent, albeit at a fairly low (4/12 to 6/12) pitch. The only vertical emphasis is often one broad chimney expressed as a strong upright plane either parallel or perpendicular to the facade.

Inside, the informality of the plan can be a benefit, since informal is a pretty accurate description of family life today. Often with a few strategic changes, the floor plan can work in a surprisingly contemporary way. And lastly, the connection from the garage to the house is convenient.

On the downside, as a rule the houses built after World War II weren't built as well as those built before. Materials were lighter and simpler. Those materials that

were done well — bathroom tile set in concrete, for instance — were of trendy colors like pink and gray. There was fascination with modern materials, such as aluminum used for single-pane windows, that has proven problematic in the long term.

Adding On to the Ranch

The first place to look to add on to a ranch is the backyard. Most ranches were built to the minimum side setbacks, so adding onto the sides is usually not possible. And the back is usually where the plan "wants" more space, for a family room or perhaps a new master suite. Adding to the front, if setbacks allow, is trickier architecturally. You'd better do it right, or not at all.

Adding up. Sometimes, however, the space requested by the homeowner is too large to be accommodated with an on-grade addition, or the yard and landscape too precious to take. In those cases, you look at adding on top. There are a number of advantages to this: Views from up there are better than those below, you've got a lot of room to design nice oversized spaces above, and

a second story makes a home so much more substantial.

Most frequently, clients ask us to design a three-bedroom second story, although two- and one-bedroom second stories are also common. If it's only the master suite going on top, you're probably looking at 500 to 1,000 square feet. If three bedrooms are planned, it's probably going to run 1,000 to 1,500 square feet. With most of the bedrooms up, the downstairs bedrooms are available for guest, den, kitchen, or family room use as part of the overall remodel.

The architectural challenge in adding up on a ranch is to not overwhelm the original ranch with too large an addition, nor to add too little, so it looks like a cupola (see photos above). Ranches with big second stories, where the outside walls were just extruded upwards, often come out looking like warehouses.

Our rule of thumb, to make them look right, is to add between a half and two-thirds the ground floor square footage up top. This results, by design, in second stories that are stepped in and continue to show the original first-floor roof line, emphasizing the horizontal.



The broad chimney on the front of this second-story addition gives some vertical lift to the otherwise monotonous horizontal roof lines.



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This stepped technique leads the eye gently upward. Another design technique we use is to include a strong vertical emphasis by means of a chimney somewhere towards the front (photos, above).

Adding Under

Finally, don't overlook adding or remodeling space below. If there is a basement already, chances are it is poorly done and the only daylight is by way of those tiny high steel "hopper" windows. Yet, in many ways, basement space is more comfortable than on-grade space. We've done over many basements into first-class space, always including large window wells that bring in much-wanted daylight (photos, at right). It is hard to justify the expense of digging out a basement where none exists, because of the complexity of shoring and underpinning, but we have done a couple.

A better use of money is to consider digging out at least a storage basement under any addition you are planning, since the incremental cost is not great. We've even done several where we



Adding a deepened window well dramatically improved the "livability" of this ranch's basement rec room.



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In this remodel, the foundation of the existing ranch was shored and a full basement added under the adjacent garage addition.

poured a tall crawlspace with a concrete slab that serves for storage, thereby freeing up floor space in the basement for other uses. On two ranch remodels, the only on-grade space we added was a garage. We created basement living space under these with a sturdy structure of steel beams and a poured garage floor, adding deep window wells for daylight (photo, left).

Rules for Ranch Roofs

As with just about any style of home, be sure to match the roof pitch, material, and overhangs on a ranch house addition. If the ranch has a gable roof, design a gable roof addition. More common because ranch houses tend to ramble in plan, they were built with hipped roofs. From a design standpoint, it's easier to make a hipped roof work than a gable, though they're harder to frame. Sometimes on a hipped roof house you

might introduce one gabled roof, perhaps to emphasize an entry or patio.

Creating a Sense of Entry

With the overwhelming design intent of the ranch to express the horizontal, usually, there is nothing vertical going on except one chimney. The roof dominates the composition, and has the same overhang all around. Generally there is nothing to signal the front door, except the sidewalk leading up to it. Without that sidewalk, you'd spend a couple minutes trying to figure out where to enter the place.

One of the simplest things we do in updating ranches is to emphasize the entry (photos, below left). Not with the overscale two-story tunnels that are seen on semi-customs of the '90s; just some gesture that says, "This is the front door." This could be a small entry addition, a front porch, a simple roof articulation, some wall pilasters or columns, or a landscape feature.

The entry need not be grand; in fact, it's more appropriate to the style if it's not. But the entry generally needs to be a bit stronger. Done well, few things improve the outside of a ranch more.

Patios and Porches

An on-grade back patio with a barbecue was almost obligatory on a ranch. Sometimes, those patios were covered. But since ranch house roofs were so low, with eaves you could reach up and touch, the patio roof had to be either flat or a low slope. Although they provide shelter from hot summer sun and rain, these patio covers also tend to darken the spaces inside. The simplest remodel is to add skylights in the patio cover corresponding to windows looking out to it, but we prefer to take down these covers altogether and rebuild them (photos).

The conventional low patio cover blocks out all the sky. Looking out under it, it's as if you're wearing a baseball cap pulled low. We will design a much taller roof, usually a cross-gable coming out from the house. This allows a view of the sky of perhaps 12 to 14 feet at the outside gable end.



It's hard to find the front door on the original ranch. The gable peak on the addition helps direct the eye to the entry below.



Patio covers on ranches are usually low and flat, blocking the daylight into adjacent rooms. This cross-gable addition provides a spacious patio outside (far left), while still allowing light to reach the interior (left). The light inside is enhanced by the addition of two skylights.

In addition, we usually provide at least a couple of fixed skylights. We treat the covered patio as the outdoor room it is, with stereo speakers built into the ceiling, sometimes paddle fans, and always high-quality built-in dimmable lighting.

Gracious Garages

Most ranches include a 20-foot-wide double garage on the front. This is almost impossible to conceal, being the largest thing happening on that facade. Luckily, some of them are stepped back, which helps downplay the mass and keeps primary emphasis on the house.

Because they're connected to the kitchen, original ranch garages have great appeal for the family looking to enlarge the kitchen or add a family room. This leads to the question of where to put the new garage. Adding to the front usually makes a bad thing worse. If you must add a garage in front, try to carry your roof lines out, or perhaps add a porch to minimize the overhead door (see photos). The best solution, if there is an alley behind, is to consider adding a new garage out back.

Ranches in the Landscape

One of the most bankrupt planning ideas from the '50s was the tendency to push houses back on their lots in order

to show off the impressive, manicured front lawn. Impressive, but fairly useless. With no front porch, all the family activity takes place out in the backyard — if there is one. (I know of several ranches in Denver where the homes are pushed back to within 5 feet of the neighbor's lot.) Out front, the only things going on are mowing the lawn or washing the cars.

Since it's not economically feasible to move the house, we try to do the next best thing: Create a sense of privacy and

enclosure in front by means of low landscape walls 36 to 48 inches high, built of the same materials as the house (photo, below). Architecturally, these add another low horizontal line in the foreground, which provides perspective. The obligatory lawn remains in front of the wall, but inside, clients have created elaborate gardens and large paved patios for entertaining. ■

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For lots with no backyard, a low landscape wall can create a private space out front.