

By Design

Adding On to a Foursquare

by Robert Gerloff, AIA

The American foursquare — a house type named for its characteristic boxy shape and four-room floor plan — was hugely popular from around 1900 into the early 1920s. Planbooks from that era, like those of Sears, Radford's, and Aladdin, published page after page of variations on the theme to suit every budget. Although foursquares were built across the country, the compact design was especially popular on tight urban lots, often with a single-stall garage off an adjacent alley.

The basic design is straightforward, but two key elements add visual interest: First, the foursquare has an appealing purity of form. It's assembled from cubes, rectangles, and triangles, giving it the clarity of a child's drawing, accentuated by punched windows on logical centers. Second, most foursquares feature truly striking millwork. Exteriors are commonly decorated with the full classical vocabulary of pilasters, decorative window trim, water tables, bed molds, brackets, balusters, and frieze boards, while interiors are enriched with decorative newel posts and built-ins, as well as extensive baseboards and crown moldings. While this millwork package seems extraordinary today, when any trim other than Princeton or Ranch is a luxury, it was all straight out of the catalog. Huge millwork factories, most of them located in Chicago, cranked out decorative trim by the carload at a price that middle-class homeowners could afford.

Problems and Limitations

While it's easy to fall in love with all that millwork — as the owners of the home shown here did — the foursquare plan is not well suited to modern lifestyles. This is especially true of the kitchen, which is commonly tucked into the cold northwest corner of the plan, isolated from the rest of the house,

Main Level Plan "Before"

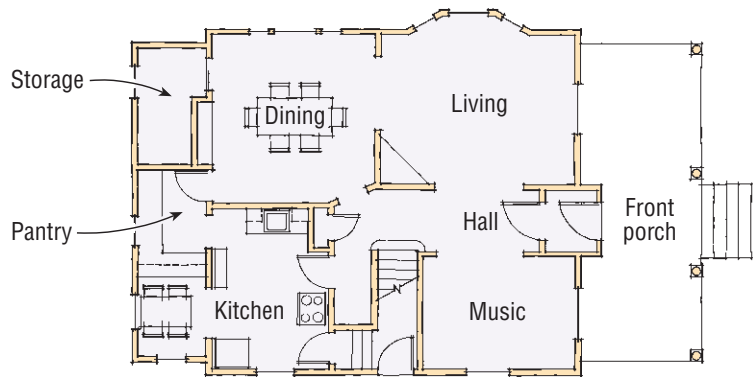


Figure 1. In the original downstairs floor plan, a generous front porch and spacious living and dining areas contrast with a cramped, cut-up kitchen. (The front parlor or music room is slightly unusual; in many houses of the type — especially smaller ones — the fourth downstairs “room” was actually the entrance hall.) Like most foursquares, this one also features a vague back porch—butter pantry at the back, completely cutting off access to the back yard.

Existing Rear Elevations



Figure 2. The blank, uninviting rear of the house is utterly disconnected from the back yard. Although most foursquare roofs were hipped — often with a central dormer in front — this one features a cross-gable roof instead. The second floor “rug-shaker door” opening onto the flat-roofed extension was considered quite a housekeeping convenience in its day.

Revised Rear Elevations

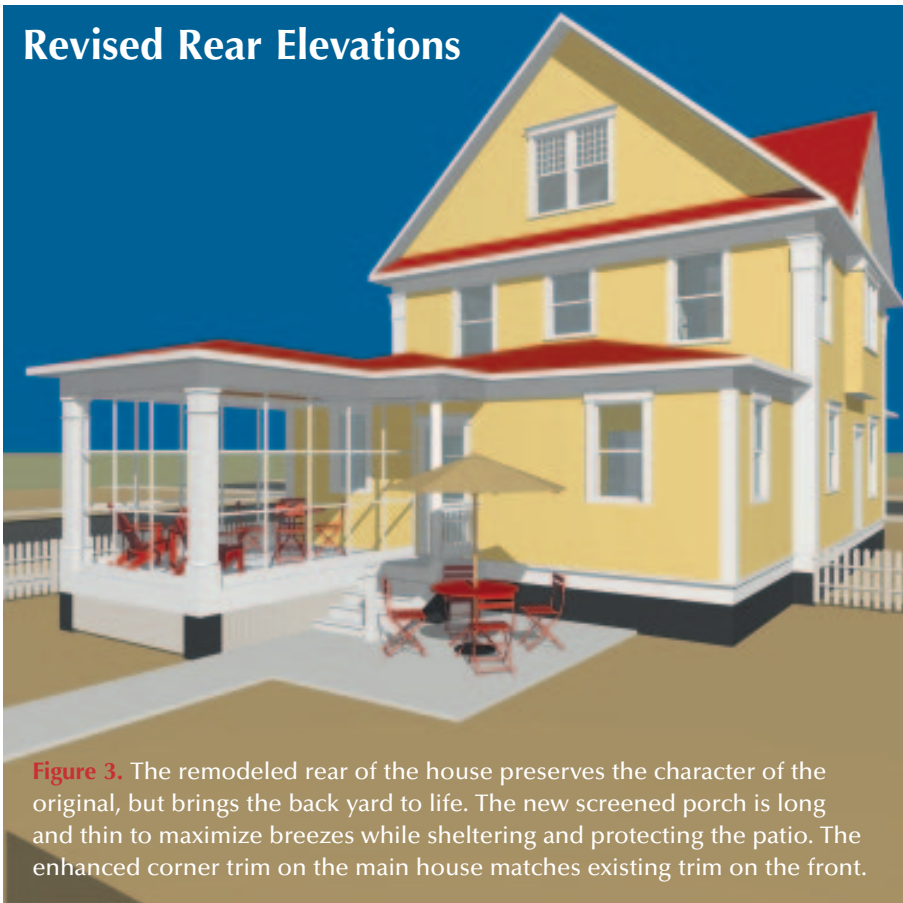


Figure 3. The remodeled rear of the house preserves the character of the original, but brings the back yard to life. The new screened porch is long and thin to maximize breezes while sheltering and protecting the patio. The enhanced corner trim on the main house matches existing trim on the front.

Main Level Plan "After"

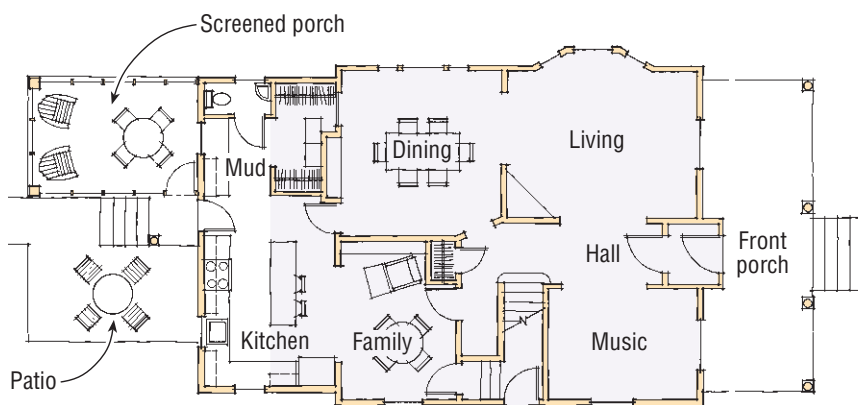


Figure 4. The addition shown here creates a larger, more social kitchen and connects the house to the back yard. The existing kitchen is converted into a family room space with a breakfast table, built-in bookcases, and a comfortable reading chair. There is generous mudroom space, a new half bath, and a new screened porch leading down to a sunny outdoor patio.

and chock full of doors (see Figure 1, previous page). There is usually no counter space, no place for kids to hang out, and no mudroom space.

Most of those limitations are difficult to resolve without adding more floor space, and that has to be done carefully. An addition that significantly changes the boxy, symmetrical aspect of the original house as seen from the front can greatly diminish its original charm. The best option, where possible, is to focus on the back of the house instead (Figure 2, previous page).

Millwork and a "Social Triangle"

In this project, we expanded the existing annex at the back of the house by 5 feet 4 inches, providing space for a modern kitchen with an island, plus a full mudroom and half bath. A new door directly connects the kitchen to the back yard, including a new outdoor patio and a new screened porch (Figure 3). The simple low-pitched roof on the addition echoes the roof on the front porch, while the trim extends the classical detailing of the main house.

We worked to preserve millwork wherever possible. For example, we left an existing door in the northeast corner of the new mudroom untouched even though it might have been more practical to replace it with a solid wall. Any minor inconvenience in the mudroom closet was more than offset by leaving the nice-looking door trim in the dining room intact.

Converting the existing kitchen into a family room made space for a breakfast table, built-in bookcases, and a comfortable visitor's chair (Figure 4). This makes it convenient for someone in the kitchen to visit with family and friends at the same time, rather than working in isolation. I believe that the "social triangle" of kitchen, breakfast table, and visitor's chair is as important as the familiar work triangle of sink, stove, and refrigerator in making a kitchen an attractive, functional space.



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