Looking Old, Living New

Maintaining historical proportions and details makes a big, modern house look like a traditional New England colonial

BY STEVE HEFFNER



When Eric and Jennifer Rose bought a rural 6-acre lot in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, they knew they wanted a traditional house that evoked the American past. The Roses' lot had been cut from a farm that dated back to the days when South Kingstown was literally that: the southern part of the town named for its absentee owner, the king of England. The site was perfect for a center-chimney colonial.

Venerable and enduring

Jennifer had seen a photo of an early 18th-century house in Essex, Connecticut, which she showed to Matt Davitt, the president of our design/build firm, as an example of the style they wanted. The Essex house was a well-preserved example of a typical five-bay, center-chimney colonial with 12-over-12 windows on the first floor and 8-over-12s on the second. We took that basic design as a starting point and gave the Roses a new house that looks as if it has been part of the farm for 200 years (photo above).



Getting the scale right



A typical 18th-century colonial

This design has classic lines and proportions that have inspired generations of houses.

- The original houses usually had small rooms and low ceilings.



A modern colonial

- Today's houses copy the original style, but on the bigger house, the same-size windows, doors and moldings as above look too small.
- The tall concrete foundation also marks the house as modern.
- This design is bigger and has higher ceilings.



Bigger windows fit a bigger house

- Enlarging the windows and doors does the most to preserve the original scale. These and other techniques are listed below.
- Windows grow by 30% to offset the size difference between the new house and the old.
- Extra-wide casings, frieze board and cornice enlarge the entry.
- The graduated clapboard exposure on bottom courses adds a period detail.
- Siding hugs the ground to imitate an older house.

The Roses loved the colonial style, but as an active, professional couple with growing children, they also had contemporary ideas of how a house should function—ideas that were at odds to a significant extent with the style they wanted.

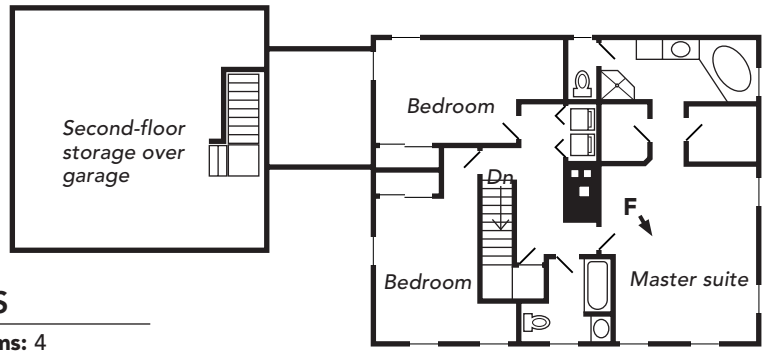
Traditional colonial designs could be dark and cramped, with small, separate rooms, low ceilings and doorways so short that tall people had to duck to avoid cracking their heads. Too often, that combination of characteristics produced dim, confined spaces that feel claustrophobic today.

Clearly, the inside of the Roses' house would require a lot of redesign to meet their need for an open, airy interior, unimpeded by partitions and flooded with natural light (floor plan, p. 74). In particular, the Roses wanted 9-ft. ceilings on the first floor and an uninterrupted flow of space between the kitchen, family room, dining room and living room (top photo, p. 75). High ceilings and open spaces are easy, but to accomplish that and still be consistent with the colonial style—and, in

Drawings: Steven N. Patricia

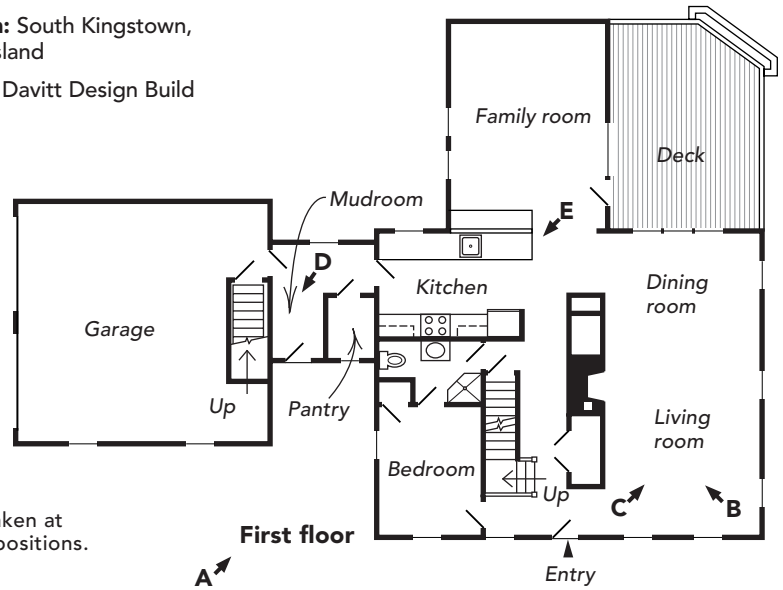
A colonial exterior belies an open, modern plan

An open plan, with bigger rooms and fewer partitions on the first floor, makes the interior feel modern even though the details are colonial.



Second floor





First floor

Photos taken at lettered positions.

A

SPECS

Bedrooms: 4

Bathrooms: 3

Size: 2840 sq. ft.

Cost: N/A

Completed: 1997

Location: South Kingstown, Rhode Island

Builder: Davitt Design Build



particular, with the house in Essex—posed a design challenge.

Preserve the scale of the exterior elements

The high ceilings on the first floor of the Roses' house meant that the entire house had to grow taller. Had we simply kept the windows the same size that they were in the Essex house, they would have looked unnaturally small (drawings p. 73). So we had Pozzi Wood Windows (www.pozzi.com; 800-877-9482) build larger custom windows for an upcharge of about 25% over the nearest standard size.

At the Roses' house, we expanded the Essex house's windows about 30%. The traditional 8-over-12 windows in the second floors of each house were the same widths as those on the first floors, but shorter by about 4 in. (the height of the missing row of panes).

While upsizing the windows seemed as if it were an essential expenditure, we did find other ways to maintain the scale without spending a lot of extra money. To avoid the expense of a custom front door, for example, we wrapped a standard wooden door (3 ft. wide by 6 ft. 8 in. tall) with wide vertical casings and put a wide frieze board and heavy cornice over the transom windows—all of which combined to complement the bigger windows without making it necessary to enlarge the door itself.

The overall height of the house also contributes to the scale. We easily could have gotten away with an 8-in-12 pitch roof, which is typical on a lot of today's colonials. But we went to a 9-in-12 pitch, which gave us more height and a better proportion. As a bonus, the increased roof pitch yielded an increased ceiling height in the attic. The Roses turned this space into a playroom for their kids.

Typically, contemporary houses sit much higher above grade than their colonial forebears, but Matt suggested setting the founda-

Floor-plan drawings: Ron Carboni



An open floor plan mixes with colonial design. *Free passage from the entry hall into the living/dining rooms and around to the kitchen/family room suits a modern family. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*

Windows look normal outside, big inside. *The oversize 12-over-12 windows allow plenty of light and look big even with 9-ft. ceilings. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

tion sill as close to the ground as possible. Our local code requires an 8-in. minimum. The gutters guard against excessive splashback that could harm wood installed close to the ground.

To a viewer approaching the house, the exterior does not seem out of the ordinary in any particular way, which is exactly the point. The correctly scaled facade gives no immediate visual clue other than the attached garage that this is anything but a literal reproduction of an old architectural style.

Interiors balance old and new more freely

Inside, the increased size of the windows becomes immediately and cheerfully apparent as they flood the house with sunlight. Because

> The owners loved the colonial style but had modern ideas about how a house should function.

of the 8-ft. ceilings upstairs, the 8-over-12 windows on the second floor (photo bottom left, facing page) seem just as big, relative to the rooms, as the 12-over-12s downstairs.

Joining the living and dining rooms as a single, uninterrupted space beneath the 9-ft. ceiling and leaving open passage from there into the kitchen and entryway lets natural light brighten the first floor. The open plan also makes the spaces seem far larger than their dimensions.

A kitchen with all the modern amenities and a family room follow a more modern trend by being separated by the half-wall of an informal eating counter (photo top left, facing page). Using cherry for the cabinets may seem like a modern choice. But hiding the refrigerator and dishwasher behind a plain cherry veneer that matches the cabinets makes the kitchen look older. Pairing all that plain wood with countertops that match the color of the painted woodwork elsewhere makes a hard-working space look less busy.

While the house uses a modern floor plan and kitchen, it also includes spaces that many modern houses have forgotten. The kitchen area is buffered from the garage by a breezeway that includes a large pantry closet and mudroom (photo above). The pantry provides valuable storage, and the mudroom acts as an informal foyer, catching all the boots and coats as the family comes in from school, work or the garden.



The mudroom *with coat hooks and a spot for boots offers another entry from the front yard and occupies the breezeway to the garage. Photo taken at D on floor plan.*

Historical detailing completes the picture

The Roses insisted on numerous elements that reflected their appreciation for things old-fashioned. Besides antique and reproduction furniture and the muted paints on interior woodwork, they chose rough-finished plaster for the walls, yellow pine floors and several board-and-batten doors. Outside, historic details include bull's-eye glass in the front-door transom, a rough granite front step and graduated exterior clapboards near ground level. The bottom clapboard has a 1-in. exposure, which increases gradually over several courses until it reveals the full 3½ in.



Plain cabinets and simple colors tie the kitchen to the rest of the house. *Countertops match the color of the pantry door in the adjoining mudroom and the woodwork elsewhere, and the plain cherry cabinets and matching refrigerator door keep the design simple. Photo taken at E on floor plan.*



Window size matches ceiling height. *Upstairs, 8-over-12 windows work well with the 8-ft. ceilings, still looking large for the space. Photo taken at F on floor plan.*

We built the Rumford-style fireplace with brick that had been salvaged from a nearby factory that was facing demolition. The stairwell easily could have been built wider than it is, a feature that most homeowners would have found attractive. But Jennifer wanted to keep the stairs narrow to reflect the stairs that she had seen in old houses. We kept the stairs just an inch larger than the code-minimum width of 36 in.

In the end, the house seems to have been a success on several levels: as a handsome complement to its rural setting, as a worthy nod to its historical antecedent and as a lovely, highly functional home to a contemporary American family. □

Steve Heffner works at Davitt Design Build in West Kingston, RI. Photos by David Ericson.

Common mistakes in modern colonial style houses

Most modern colonials don't pretend to be true replicas of the original style, so balancing old and new is not a constant issue. But some common choices make a big impact on the feel of the house.

For example, older houses sat close to grade instead of perching on tall concrete foundations (photo above).

Old fireplaces featured a stout chimney that was the heart of the structure. Today's skinny chimneys (photo center) just don't look the same.

Original windows were often 8-over-12s or 12-over-12s. Now people try to get away with 6-over-6 at best. And leaving a gable wall windowless simply makes no sense (photo below).

Vinyl and aluminum siding and plastic trim destroy any sense of a true colonial. And as interior-ceiling heights and square footage increase, windows, doors and trim should grow to keep the original scale.
—S. H.



Tall foundation



Skinny chimney



Too few windows