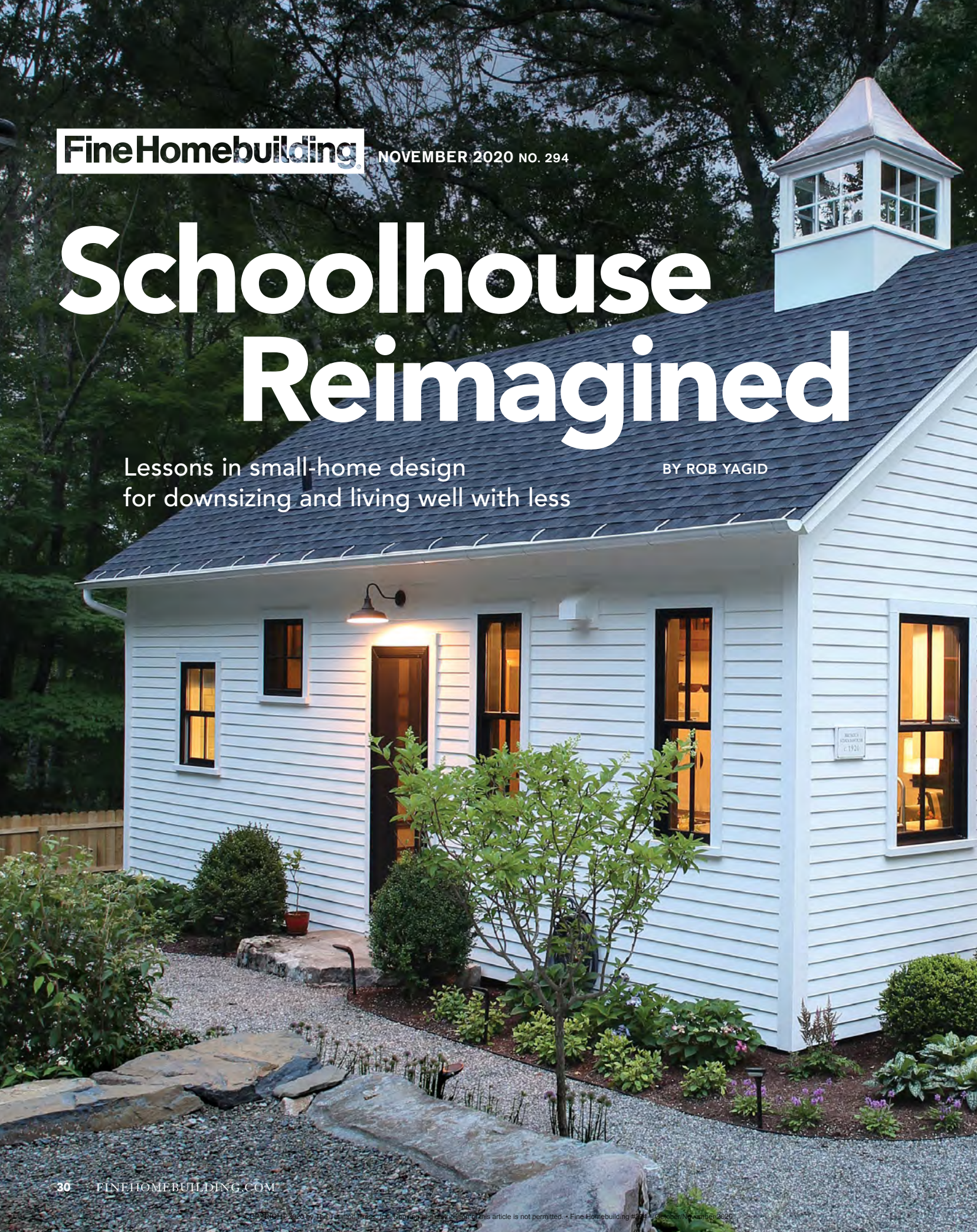


Schoolhouse Reimagined

Lessons in small-home design
for downsizing and living well with less

BY ROB YAGID





The Bromica School House sits at the corner of intersecting dirt roads in Kent, a small town along the Housatonic River in northwestern Connecticut. Constructed in 1920, it was among 14 one-room schoolhouses in service to the region. By 1950, the school, along with only a handful of others left in the area's more remote hills, had closed its doors for good. It since served as a single-family home, but fell into severe disrepair by the late 1990s. By the time a local carpenter and his wife—my parents—purchased the property in 2019, there had been multiple attempts to restore it. The latest, initiated by a local architect who had the building gutted, left them with a blank slate to create a comfortable, functional, and fun home where they could enjoy retirement.

The rebuilding of this home was an exercise in imaginative small-home design, where core living spaces are creatively arranged to make the most of the home's footprint on the nonconforming lot. The upgrades in both performance and aesthetics were based on comfort and a real-world bud-



DEFINED SPACES

The floor plan organizes public, private, and flexible spaces amidst the open plan to bring order and functionality to the design. A large patio steps away from the kitchen provides an open area for entertaining friends and family.

SPECS

Bedrooms: 1

Bathrooms: 1

Size: 850 sq. ft.

Location: Kent, Conn.

Designer/builder:
Paul and Angela Yagid

Landscape: Richard Schipul,
designingeden.com



SEPARATE, TOGETHER

Many homeowners associate comfort with volume. The larger the space, they think, the better it must feel. Often, the most uncomfortable spaces are those that tend to meander on, where there is no order or definitive area to occupy. Even in a small home, you can create a definitive delineation of “rooms” through choices in finish materials, furnishing, and even lighting.



A VIEW WITH NO END IN SIGHT The living room is defined by a wall of built-in cabinetry adjacent to the kitchen, and the natural timbered ceiling in the main hall guides you to the private areas of the home. A window strategically placed at the end of the hall allows your view from the front door to be carried straight through the house and into the trees.

get, with the intention of giving the home a more modern look and feel without erasing all semblance of its rich history—a practical approach that can be replicated in any project, whether new or extensively remodeled.

A few years ago, my parents found themselves living in a home they loved but that no longer fit their lifestyle. At 3400 sq. ft., the traditional colonial that my father built

many years prior had become much too large for their needs and for how they wanted to spend their time. When most people consider downsizing, they don't quite envision living in a home that's a quarter of the size of their former residence. But the schoolhouse was too charming to pass up. And while small-home living has its challenges, they were more than willing to take them

on. A truly small home demands letting go of a lot of material items, keeping what matters most, and adjusting your living patterns. When designed well, however, a small home affords a certain level of comfort that can't as easily be found in larger houses.

Because the house is on a nonconforming lot, no additions would be approved by zoning. There would be no easy outs in develop-



A CORNER KITCHEN Granite-topped counters set flush with the windowsills reduce the visual barriers between the kitchen and the outside patio. Hidden in the beams above, spotlights illuminate the island and in the evening help set the kitchen apart from the other spaces.



WINDOWS MAKE THE SPACE The three tall windows in the main living room flood the space with light and offer abundant views. Their tall head height, combined with the vaulted ceiling, helps enhance the perception of space. The coffee table transforms the room into a dining area that can seat up to ten (see p. 37).



AN AWAY SPACE Every home, no matter its size, needs a space for personal retreat. The loft is that space in this home, and it serves as a home office, a reading lounge, and even sleeping quarters for visiting grandchildren and guests. As much space as possible beneath the eaves has been captured for seasonal storage.

ing the floor plan. Fortunately, the existing structure had a few key elements that were retained and enhanced to make it all work. The first was the vaulted ceiling. The second was a small existing loft at the back of the structure, and the third was a trio of tall beautiful windows that undoubtedly once drew the attention of daydreaming students who could gaze up at the tops of the nearby

maple trees. It only made sense to anchor the main living area adjacent to these windows—updated with double-hung Marvin Integrity units in the same proportion as the originals—in order to take full advantage of the light and views they provide. With the living room and kitchen placement positioned at the front of the house, the bedroom and bathroom were located in the opposing

rear corners, compressed beneath a rebuilt loft that now serves as a flex space.

The idea of “compression and release” in the context of spatial planning is a hallmark of Frank Lloyd Wright’s approach to design. Even in a home as small as this, you can still achieve some of the experience this strategy yields by being mindful of the scale of rooms. Private spaces like the bathroom

LET THE DETAILS SHINE

In a small house, a few quality items can really stand out and establish the style of the home. Here, particular attention was given to the things used and experienced most often, which were budgeted for accordingly. It's a good lesson: The things you use and touch on a daily basis should be of the best quality you can afford.



MARBLE, GLASS, AND WOOD The subway-tiled shower, glass rolling door, and marble-topped vanity provide a clean, contemporary look. The ceiling is clad with original random-width boards above existing beams, adding richness and warmth.



A SIMPLE, SUBTLE SOLUTION The nickel-gap cladding, placement of windows, and lack of upper cabinets at the range wall made conventional tile-backsplash options problematic. The solution was to choose a backsplash that virtually disappeared. It is made of glass that was custom-cut locally and back-painted by ColorKote of Stratford, Conn., to match the Benjamin Moore white on the walls.

and bedroom don't need to be large, and certainly don't need vaulted ceilings. Rebuilding the loft to lower the ceiling height in these spaces, and the small hallway bridging the two, helped create a dynamic floor plan. It has the feel of an open plan, but with the functionality of a well-organized and compartmentalized design.

With the core spaces defined within the existing footprint, light and views became the focus when discussing how to make the

small spaces as inviting and attractive as possible. In a small home, subtle moves have major impact. For instance, a window with a tall head height will always make a room feel larger than it is. Glazed exterior doors or a window placed at the end of a hallway allows your view to extend beyond the walls to the outdoors and makes a space feel expansive. Even a small window in a stairwell landing can create a major impression. Its scale and placement is fun in that it's somewhat unex-



MORE THAN JUST A SET OF STAIRS The stairs to the loft serve as a focal point as much as functional access. A small window and sconce in the landing illuminate the stairwell and a built-in bookcase gives additional utility. The railing by View Rail adds a slightly modern touch. The handrail is made of salvaged chestnut from parts of the original interior framing. Every time you ascend to the loft, you're grasping at history.

SMALL-HOME SOLUTIONS

There are a few key elements in this home that increase the flexibility of spaces and offer problem-solving solutions for designing and constructing tight, sometimes constricting, areas. These are products you might consider for your next small-home project.



A TIGHT-FITTING FRIDGE Due to their size, refrigerators are notoriously problematic when designing small kitchens. Fortunately, Liebherr has several options to consider. This unit is only 30 in. wide, 24 in. deep, and 80 in. high and has a robust amount of storage.



STACK EFFECT The Miele Stackable Compact washer and dryer easily tucks into the master-bedroom closet. The dryer is a condensing unit, so traditional venting isn't necessary, which makes placement within a small home much easier.

pected, and the light it provides brings life to an otherwise dark corner. In combination, all these design moves have helped create a home that belies its diminutive size.

It's borderline inaccurate to refer to this project as a remodel. The only original elements are the stone foundation, the frame-and-board sheathing, and the fir flooring. Everything else was replaced or added, including a new well and septic. But whenever walls and ceilings are exposed—or siding is removed—there's an opportunity to improve the efficiency of a home. In this

instance, there was the potential to reduce the operating cost of the house, make it far more comfortable than at any other time in its hundred-year history, and reduce its resource consumption without an over-the-top insulation and mechanical package.

The true 2x4 walls were sprayed with open-cell spray foam and enough rigid foam was added to the exterior to move the dew point outside the wall cavity. While the board sheathing has a much better buffer capacity than modern sheathing when wetting and drying, the walls were still designed

to be able to dry to the interior. The ceiling was addressed exclusively from the interior in order to avoid changing the home's aesthetics and to make the most of a finite budget. Polyiso rigid foam was cut to fit between framing members and air-sealed in place to create a hot roof that would yield as much insulating value as possible. Below, the crawl-space was detailed with heavy-duty poly sheeting to reduce moisture migration into the basement and insulated with a combination of closed-cell spray foam and high-density fiberglass batts. A new forced-air system,



A COFFEE TABLE THAT SEATS TEN The coffee table in the living room is built by Expand Furniture in Vancouver. It lifts and separates to become a table when entertaining guests. Extension leaves are stowed inside when not in use. Here, it's set for eight with Nano padded folding chairs, also by Expand Furniture, that take up a mere 13 in. of depth when stacked together.



an on-demand water heater, and an HRV keep the house comfortable and supplied with fresh air. While the home has not been tested or certified by any third-party energy programs, it has been retrofitted to perform well above what the local code demands, providing resiliency and economy.

When people see this home, or experience others like it, they tend to make associations with moments or experiences in either their own lives or in our collective history. They think of a simple life or of a simpler time. They're appropriate thoughts, because a

small home forces you to streamline the things in your life. By distilling its design, a small home—and the lifestyle it reinforces—gives you the room for experiences that are more spiritual in nature than they are tangible, and that ultimately tends to feel more fulfilling. Within the frenetic world we live, it's alluring.

William Henry Channing, a philosopher and friend to Henry David Thoreau—whose cabin at Walden is among the most influential small homes in our history—has a quote that describes the ethos of the transcen-

dentalists of the time: “To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion.” While my parents are not transcendentalists, this very sentiment is realized in the completion of their new home. It's all that they need at this point in their lives, and it's all that they could want. □

Rob Yagid is former editorial director of *Fine Homebuilding* and Green Building Advisor, and founding director of Keep Craft Alive. Photos by the author.