



# Rethinking the Ranch

A POST-WAR SHOEBOX GETS A STUNNING MAKEOVER

BY GLADYS MONTGOMERY // PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT BARROW AND STEPHEN G. DONALDSON

**On Route 23**, as Great Barrington segues into Egremont, be prepared to stop, either because you are momentarily frozen in a double-take, or because the driver in front of you is. You don't need an "I Brake for Architecture" bumpersticker to be captivated by the sight of a strikingly linear, modernist gem clad in natural cedar shingles, accented with trellis and lattice details, and punctuated by a row of floor-to-ceiling windows and doors edged in high-contrast black. Another reason for a double-take is the memory of what once was on this site: a dinky, blue, three-bedroom, 1955 ranch house with white trim, picture window, and attached one-car garage, which had been converted to living space long ago. Thanks, most of us would say to that one, but no thanks.

Architect Bruce Moore and designer Michael Alper, partners in Red House Design, had a different reaction. The tired, tatty ranch in its highly visible location was exactly what they wanted as a showcase for what their company can achieve. Given a modern-day makeover, they point out, an outmoded ranch house can be spun in almost any stylistic direction, whether contemporary or traditional. Think about it: efficient single-level living, plenty of light, an open plan, sparkling new finishes, even central air. With all that, what about a post-war ranch house is not to like?

In Berkshire County, more than 200 ranch homes are now on the market, starting at under \$70,000. With a budget for renovation, these existing homes present ample opportunities. "Because a ranch is a single level, the interior bearing walls are not supporting a lot of

#### TRANSFORMING THEN INTO NOW

Red House Design's fresh, modern take on a dated ranch was the brainchild of architect Bruce Moore (L) and designer Michael Alper (R), shown in their home office. Their live/work home's exterior makeover included new cedar-shingle siding, eye-catching trellis and lattice details, and a new two-car garage. Inside, the palette is neutral and graphic popped with red. On a living room wall, a photo shows what the old ranch looked like when they bought it.



weight, so it's easy to create an open plan. People are often scared off by cosmetics, but that's easy to fix. And using an existing structure, rather than building new, is one of the greenest things you can do," Moore notes.

"Look for good bones, a structure that's sound, setting, and location," Alper advises. "You can change the house, but you can't change where the house is."

Moore, formerly with Gensler, one of the world's largest architectural firms, and Alper, a retail-space and display designer, each brought more than 20 years of New York and international career experience to Red House Design, which they founded in 2000. Looking to downsize from a five-bedroom, 1830s farmhouse in Hancock, New York, they moved to the Berkshires in 2011, drawn by this area's cultural, ecological, and aesthetic sensibility, and by its proximity to New York and Boston.

The duo's renovation of their home, which sits on 1.6 acres surrounded by conservation land, took nine months and expanded the original 1,600-square-foot living space by about 500 square feet. In the living room, contractor Brian O'Rourke raised the ceiling to the rafters—a lofty ten feet at the peak—toe down interior walls, devised a new front entry with coat closet, and removed front and rear exterior walls to extend the room by eight feet on each side. The result is a bright and airy living/dining area totaling 1,000 square feet. So generous is this space that it allows for dedicated dining and seating areas, ample storage, a grand piano, cocktail parties of 30 people or more, and Alper's artful displays of objects, which range from artifacts that Moore traces to his expatriate upbringing, to the mercury glass and ceramics that Alper collected as a designer working internationally.

A graphic, high-contrast, neutral color palette, new bamboo flooring, transformation of the original fireplace with a new bluestone



hearth and fireplace surround in a sculptural relief, and crisp edges create an up-to-the-minute contemporary vibe. Two walls of floor-to-ceiling windows capture one essential expression of post-war modernism—the seamless flow of indoor and outdoor space. As suited to entertaining as it is to daily living for two, the ranch now also boasts a rear deck that opens from the main living area, and offers views of greenery in the form of woods, lawn, and cornfield from every window.

Looking for all the world like a piece of modern art but with the practical advantage of keeping cooking messes out of sight during dinner parties, a raw-steel barn slider can be pulled shut to separate the dining area from the kitchen. Here, the makeover included marble countertops, a butler's pantry, new top-of-the-line appliances, and sleek cabinetry from Ikea. The architect and designer, who believe in leveraging a budget to its greatest practical and aesthetic effect, deployed the same cost-conscious measure in the den, living room, and bathrooms, where new fixtures and terrazzo tile lend an upscale look. They configured the original attached garage's 500 square feet into a work/design space with a den and full bath, which could eventually become a master suite. They also built a new, freestanding two-bay garage.

With all of this, plus new roof, siding, windows, blown-in insulation, and heating, cooling, plumbing, and electrical systems, the renovation project added about \$300,000 to the duo's \$170,000 purchase price. That's about \$470,000—or \$224 per square foot—for a razzle-dazzle, essentially new, three-bedroom contemporary home. True, the current master bedroom measures in at just 15 by 13 feet, but a large closet, new clerestory window, and taupe-and-white color scheme imbue it with functionality and style—and, after all, it is a room to sleep in.

"We could have opted for more of a trophy treatment in our bedroom and bath," Moore says. "But that's not how we live or how we want to live. We're pretty simple, really." ■

**SPACE, LIGHT, AND STYLE ABOUND**  
Moore and Alper (at right) expanded the living room area by 500 square feet, raised the ceiling, and installed walls of windows. Accommodating seating, dining, storage and a grand piano, the room still feels spacious. A new blue-stone treatment on the fireplace and a raw-steel barn slider between dining area and kitchen add visual oomph, while sleek Ikea cabinetry and marble countertops brighten the kitchen.

