

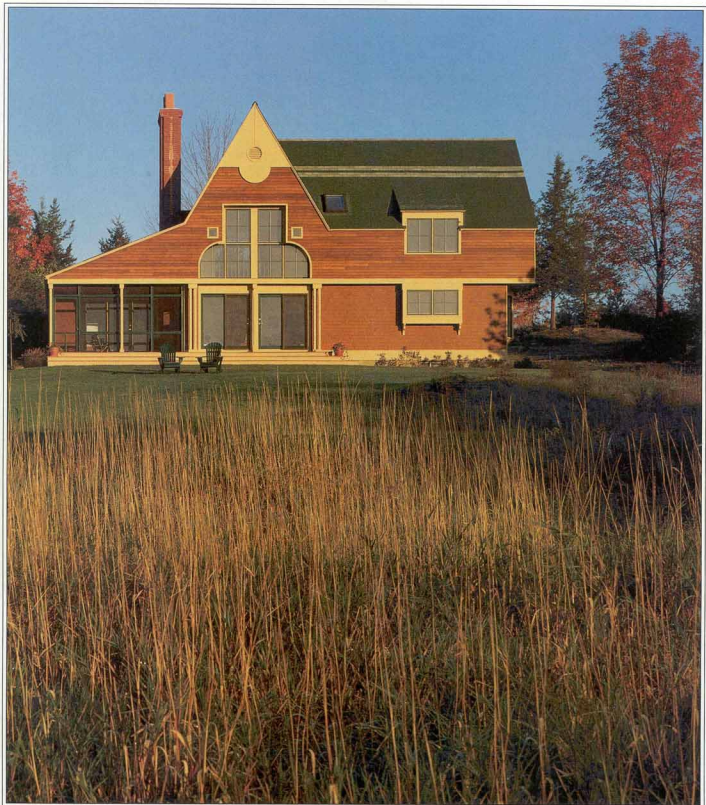
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A Romantic House



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A Romantic House

In this hectic, high-tech age, playful detailing and asymmetrical plans make a more comfortable home

by Jeremiah Eck



Combining old and new details. Although the steep roof and the wood siding are traditional details, on the southern elevation they're combined with a contemporary arrangement of windows that lets in light and adds some playful detailing. Photo taken from A on floor plan.

We live in an age of hyperrationality, where reason rules over intuition. Nowhere is this more evident than in the computerization of almost every aspect of our lives. Computers tell us what the weather will be, how much we have in our bank accounts and even suggest to many that the design of a house is a fully analytic process.

Our lives sometimes seem like a series of things to do on a list—and do quickly. I think there's an antidote, though, to our overregulated and hectic lives: a return to romanticism in our houses.

A few years ago I entered a competition for an ideal house of 1,500 sq. ft. Although this house was never built, recently I was able to design a slightly modified, enlarged version for Peter and Kathy Neely in Salisbury, Connecticut. The house, built by Jack Grant of Winsted, Connecticut, is a good example of how the plan and the details of a house can, in fact, be romantic.

Relating to the past—To begin with, the design of the Neely house makes reference to the architecture of the past but does not attempt to copy it. This is important because romantic houses are about the relation of the present to the past. This is not to say that the Neely house is nostalgic. That's what Disneyland is all about.

I was confounded to hear recently that a retirement community is being built in Florida in the "image" of a New England village. The experience and the product of three centuries of regional living in New England was to be built instantaneously in a region 2,000 miles to the south. Certainly our technology allows us to do that, but to what end? This is a false, technology-dependent romanticism and an example of sentimentality.

Arched windows with rectangular sash. The arched windows so prominent on the southern elevation (above) are actually an arched facade in front of rectangular sash, which cost considerably less than curved sash would have.





Colors inspired by the hills. The steep roof, the green shingles and the brown siding of this home were suggested by and designed to blend with the rolling Connecticut hills that surround it. Photo taken from B on floor plan.

The steep roof, the dominant chimney, the scaled-down windows and the traditional materials of the Neely house all suggest classic images of home, inspired by everything from 18th-century saltboxes to 19th-century Gothic-Revival farmhouses. But the open floor plan (drawing right), the extensive use of natural light and the configuration of windows and trim on the south elevation (top photo, facing page) all are contemporary.

Inspired by nature—The ultimate source of inspiration for romanticism is nature. In architecture, this inspiration often means that the shape of a house and its colors are compatible with its surroundings. Each side of the Neely house responds differently to the site. From the entry side on the north (photo above), the steep roofs and their green color blend with the low hills beyond, particularly between spring and fall.

The south side of the house is another matter. The house sits not quite at the top of a low, rolling hill and at the edge of a gently sloping meadow to the south. On the south side the house stands more erect (photo facing page), with the wall of what I call the living hall extending a full two stories. Unlike the north side, where the roof dominates to protect the house from the wind, the desire for sun and views across the meadow predominate on the south elevation. This large expanse of wall gives the Neelys a full 180° view and year-round exposure to the southern sky.

Because they are inspired by nature, the colors of romantic houses are seldom white, and the textures are seldom perfectly smooth. The Neely house has three exterior colors and three distinct textures. The roof is green, the cedar clapboards and the cedar sidewall shingles are natural brown, and the trim and the casings are beige. The green and the brown can be found in the surroundings, and the beige mediates the two.

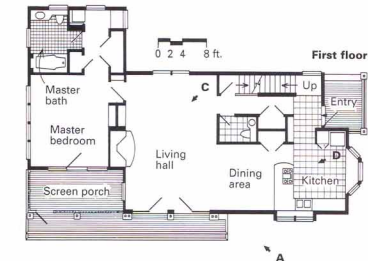
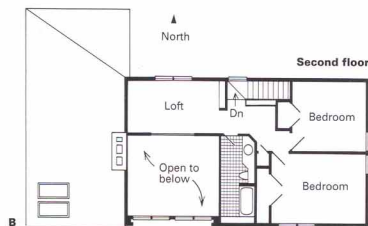
As for textures, rough wood shingles are used next to the ground, defining the first floor of the house as coming from the ground. Clapboards, with their somewhat more refined texture, delineate the second floor, and the even flatter trim and the smooth medium-density overlay (MDO) plywood define the gable peaks against the sky.

Romanticism in plan and elevation—Romantic houses tend to have irregular plans as contrasted with formally centered geometric plans. Order is achieved through a balancing of irregular elements or space, not through strict symmetry. For instance, the Neely house is dominated by the tall living hall (top photo, p. 88). But that room is balanced by the length of the kitchen/dining/entry area that flows into it with only a partial visual and physical separation (bottom photo, p. 88).

This balance of irregular shapes can be achieved in other ways as well. The small, cozy loft of the Neely house (photo p. 89) balances the larger, open living hall.

Romantic houses can be small, too, because each activity or function need not have a distinct room or position in the plan. One of the problems

An open plan. By consolidating the formal living room, the dining room and the family room into one central space—the living hall—the architect not only eliminated rooms, but he also reduced circulation space. The result is a small house (1,800 sq. ft.) that works well for a family.



SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 3
- Bathrooms:** 2½
- Heating system:** Oil-fired, forced air
- Size:** 1,800 sq. ft.
- Cost:** \$100 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 1993
- Location:** Connecticut

Photos taken from lettered positions.



A high ceiling signifies an important space. A two-story room, which the architect calls the living hall, dominates the interior of this house. The Rumford fireplace is surrounded by a board-and-batten wall composed of MDO plywood and pine astragals. Note the square windows: The arched shape so prominent on the exterior was created with an exterior wall that overhangs the windows. Photo taken from C on floor plan.



Long views make a small house feel bigger. The two-story height of the living hall (at the far end of the photo) is balanced visually by the expanse of kitchen and dining area that flows into it. Photo taken from D on floor plan.

of suburban houses today is that they are larger than necessary. Too often their formality or imagery requires spaces that are not used. The formal living room, for example, is an architectural relic. Even when I was growing up, children were banned from this room, and the furniture often was covered with plastic—almost as a precursor of the room's eventual demise.

Romantic houses tend to synthesize the use of many rooms into a few rooms. In the Neely house, the living room and the family room become the living hall. This also means less circulation space (hallways, doorways, etc.), which means a house can be smaller.

Romantic houses demonstrate the same balance or resolution of tensions in their elevations as they do in their plans. The dominant themes of the Neely house's exterior are the steeply pitched roofs and the large, almost theatrical, living-hall window. But those elements are balanced on one side by the lower pitch of the master-bedroom wing and on the other by small bay windows, one over the other.

By the way, if you look closely at the living-hall window, you will notice that the arched shape of the window is created by the exterior walls (bottom photo, p. 86). The windows are conventional rectangles. There also is a 2-ft. space between the exterior arch and the interior windows. This recession of windows behind the arched exterior wall helps shade the living hall from the southern sun. It also provides a transition between inside and outside and makes the window more interesting than it would otherwise be. And finally, creating the arches this way cost considerably less than buying custom-made, curved windows.

Such projections and recesses are common in romantic houses. Besides the living-hall window, many other examples occur in the Neely house. The entry porch, protecting one's arrival from rain, snow or wind, is carved out of the northeast corner. The window bay at the kitchen sink seems to reach out for light during those times of the day when you are most likely to be eating, sitting or working in the kitchen. The south- and west-facing screen porch off the master bedroom also is a recess in the overall mass of the house, providing both protection from the sun and privacy. Even the dormers offer interesting projections to a roof, but they occur only where necessary for headroom at the top of the stair or in a bedroom. All of these variations in the exterior facade enliven the house and give it a romantic playfulness, a sense of surprise not normally felt in flat-facade houses. Such unpredictability would go a long way toward relieving the dullness of the present suburban houses.

Playful detailing—Finally, romantic houses have details that evoke feelings, such as playfulness, warmth, softness and surprise. These are elusive notions, but what distinguishes romantic details is the personal nature of the feeling they seek to evoke. Such details are natural outgrowths of the other aspects of the plans and the elevations or of the projections and the recesses I discussed earlier.

For example, the chimney on the Neely house is not a simple straight run, single color, but it is made up of two colors with bricks set in at the corners. Such chimney details are not cheaper to execute than a simple chimney. If they were, we all would see them more often in new houses. But these details are not as expensive as you might think. Admittedly, recessing the corners of the chimney mass requires more time—and thought—on the part of the mason. But changing the color of some of the bricks to form a stripe certainly doesn't cost any more.

On the roof, two stripes, made up of a white and green blend shingle, cross a field of solid green. Both colors are standard three-tab shingles, so their compatibility wasn't a problem. Again this is not a more-expensive detail; it requires only some additional thought and some care in aligning the stripe with the gable detailing. This decorative detailing at the gable peaks has a half-circle shape that plays off the arch in the living-hall window. The detail is constructed of ½-in. MDO plywood and pine edging.

On the interior, there are other details I consider to be romantic. The two that appeal to me the most are the Rumford fireplace in the living hall and the board-and-batten wall around it. A Rumford fireplace is based on the formulas devised by Count Rumford in the late 18th century. You can find all you need to know about these fireplaces in a little reference book called *The Forgotten Art of Building a Good Fireplace* by Vest Orton (Yankee Books). By its sheer size, the Neely's fireplace lends an air of warmth to the living hall. The board-and-batten wall surrounding the fireplace is made up of MDO plywood with 1½-in. stock-pine astragals applied as battens.



A dormer adds light and headroom. From inside the house, a shed dormer adds light and headroom at the top of the stairs. (Outside, the dormer adds interest to the facade.) In the background, the loft overlooks the living hall and serves as a music room for the Neelys. Photo taken from E on floor plan.

Does a romantic house work?—Does this romantic house really provide the Neelys with emotional sustenance and serve as an anecdote to these hectic, high-tech times? It seems to. The Neelys spend a great deal of time in their home now. It has become the hub for all of their family and holiday gatherings. Perhaps the greatest testimony to the house's success is that the Neelys haven't yet hooked up cable television.

Perhaps, just perhaps, our romantic intuitions are not all that bad in sustaining our lives. Of course, it would be silly to pretend that a building is merely a product of emotion; intellect too plays an important role. But when designing and building houses, we might want to consider our hearts before our heads, or at the very least, allow our instincts and intuitions to guide our intellects. □

Jeremiah Eck practices architecture in Boston, Mass., and is a lecturer in architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Paul MacNeely was associate architect on the project. Photos by Anton Grassel except where noted.