

Designing the Best Last House

Two New Houses challenge common notions about how to build retirement homes for baby boomers

BY BRIAN PONTOLILO

Bob and Sharon O'Brien's new three-story home sits high atop a steep rural lot outside Ithaca, N.Y. A long driveway winds up the 10-acre hillside, curving gently around an area that someday will be a small pond. Next to a two-car garage, a tall bluestone stairway leads up to the front entry. The 3937-sq.-ft. open floor plan is full of west-facing windows that capture striking views of the rolling countryside and the spectacular sunsets.

Bob is an architect, Sharon is a Realtor, and this isn't a first home for either. They're baby boomers approaching retirement, and this house is where they plan to spend the rest of their lives. If you're wondering why the house is so big, why it has three floors and tall stairways, and whether it's expensive to maintain, then you're asking the same questions I did. As it turns out, Bob and Sharon have interesting answers. And they're not alone.

Architect Carol Crandall took an approach similar to the O'Briens' when designing a new house in Grand Rapids, Mich., for her widowed 80-year-old mother, who also prefers a rural setting to a condo or a retirement village. A look at these two houses shows how designers are accommodating the changing needs of older owners while creating homes where people of any age would be thrilled to live.

Accessibility is the first must-have

The O'Briens identified four must-have characteristics for their home: accessibility, low maintenance, energy efficiency, and easy day-to-day living (designated spaces for hobbies and other activities). Their first design was a sprawling, 1½-story modern house with a flat roof. The foundation and the roof turned out to be too expensive to build, and the low profile limited views; so Bob and Sharon changed the design to a Craftsman-style



HOUSE 1

SPECS

Bedrooms: 2

Bathrooms: 2½

Size: 3937 sq. ft.

Cost: N/A

Completed: 2005

Location: Ithaca, N.Y.

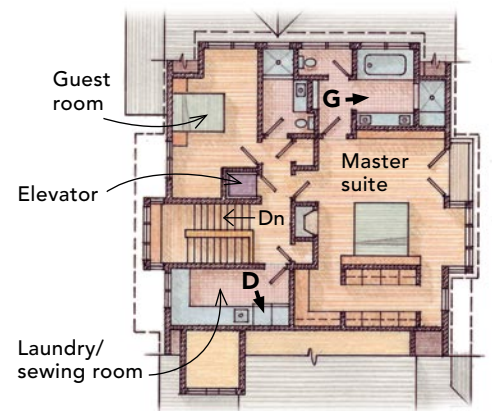
Architect: Robert O'Brien, AIA; principal, HOLT Architects

Builder: R.A. Jump Construction



THREE FLOORS AND NO NEED TO CLIMB A SINGLE STEP

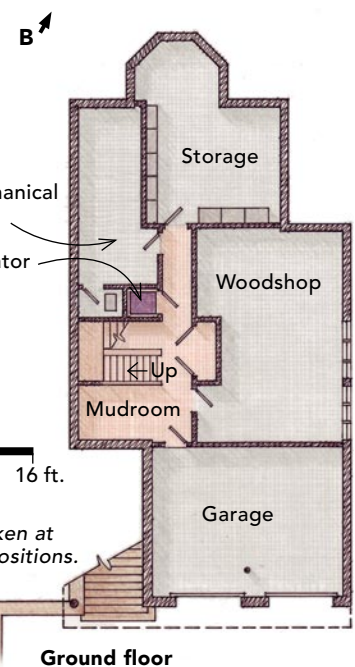
To accommodate the necessary spaces and to capture views of the rolling countryside, Bob and Sharon O'Brien's house is three stories tall with an elevator to connect them. Although their home is designed for accessibility, many spaces—including a woodshop, a home office, a sewing room, and a large deck—are meant to allow the baby-boomer homeowners to start playing more as they begin working less. Finished with stone veneer, cedar shingles, and a durable composite roof, the exterior requires little care. Photos taken at A and B (inset) on floor plan (right).



Second floor



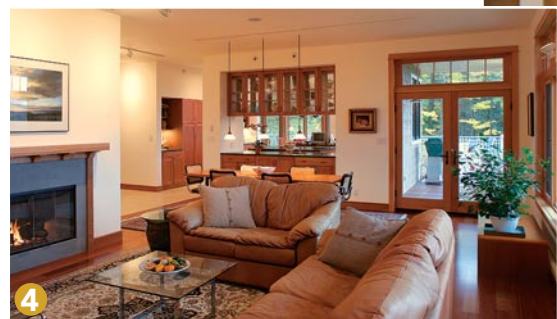
First floor



Ground floor

Photos taken at lettered positions.

Designed for easy day-to-day living, the O'Briens' house is accessible, low maintenance, and energy efficient.



Going up? An elevator makes all three floors of the O'Briens' house accessible if someday they can't climb stairs 1. For now, the elevator comes in handy as a dumbwaiter when they arrive home with cumbersome items. In the laundry/sewing room 2, an energy-efficient, front-loading washer and dryer are raised off the floor so that no one has to bend over to load or unload laundry. For the dog-loving homeowners, the pantry doubles as a dog room with an exterior pet door and rollout food bins 3. A fenced-in backyard lets the dogs come and go as they please. Open floor plans 4 not only complement today's lifestyle, but with wide hallways and door openings they're also a natural fit with accessible design. In the master bath 5, the shower is outfitted with a bench and a handheld faucet. The whirlpool tub's surround is low and wide enough to sit on and swing your legs into the bath. Photos 1–5 taken at C, D, E, F, and G, respectively, on floor plan, p. 91.



house with an open floor plan (p. 91). As the footprint shrank and the house grew taller, the O'Briens realized they would need an elevator to improve accessibility. "We don't need the elevator now," Sharon says, "but it does come in handy as a dumbwaiter."

All the hallways and doorways in the O'Briens' house are wide enough for easy wheelchair and walker access (4 ft. and 3 ft., respectively), and the master bathroom can accommodate people with limited mobility. A walk-in shower includes a comfortable bench and a handheld showerhead, and the whirl-

pool bath has a wide surround where you can sit down to swing your legs into the tub.

While there might be no easy way to get into the Japanese soaking tub in the bathroom that Carol Crandall designed for her mother's house, it is one of the few aspects of the room that isn't planned for accessibility (photo p. 95). "She's a nimble 80-year-old woman," Carol says, "and she wanted a soaking tub to use now."

The bathroom also includes a wall-hung toilet that allows the seat to be anywhere from 17 in. to 19 in. above the floor for maximum comfort. The open area beneath the

vanity allows the homeowner to sit at the mirror; all the fixtures have easy-to-operate single-lever controls; blocking is installed in the walls where grab bars might be needed someday; and the barrier-free shower stall has a bench and an easy-to-reach handheld showerhead similar to the O'Briens'.

Unlike the O'Briens, Carol did not include an elevator in her mother's two-story home. Instead, she made sure that everything her mom needs is on the 1613-sq.-ft. main floor. The lower level is for guests and for future live-in help. Carol limited the accessible features of the house, such as wide hallways and unobtrusive pocket doors, to the main living areas, particularly the master suite (floor plan p. 94).

Deep eaves for low maintenance

On both homes, exterior details were designed to make life easier for the owners. Clad mostly in native stone and red cedar, the O'Briens' house is durable and low maintenance. Only the window casings, rake boards, and water table are painted. The steep composite roof is designed to stay clean, and the broad overhangs protect exterior finishes.

Carol Crandall also used deep eaves on her mother's house and says that the benefits are more numerous than she first realized. Beyond extending the life of exterior finishes, the overhangs protect the exterior doors' low-rise thresholds, which have a tendency to leak but are necessary for wheelchair and walker access. The deep eaves also shade the interior during the summer and extend over the cantilevered bays without adding the expense of complicated rooflines.

Unfortunately, the house's exterior is not as care-free as Carol would have liked. Land covenants restricted siding choices to wood, stone, and brick, eliminating durable, lower-cost alternatives like fiber cement or vinyl. Cedar

HOUSE 2



EVERYTHING THE HOMEOWNER NEEDS IS ON ONE FLOOR

Wrapped around a courtyard, the main floor of this house designed by architect Carol Crandall has all the spaces that the homeowner needs, including a master suite, a kitchen, a living room, a home office, and a workroom. The lower level offers extra storage space and guest quarters that someday could accommodate live-in help. Deep eaves help to protect exterior finishes, and for a care-free landscape, the house is surrounded by bark and stone paths and native plantings. Photos taken at A and B (inset) on floor plan, p. 94.

Carol used her mother's daily routine as a guide to design the

SPECS

Bedrooms: 2

Baths: 2½

Size: 2543 sq. ft. total
(1613-sq.-ft. main floor)

Cost: \$140 per sq. ft.

Completed: 2004

Location: Grand Rapids, Mich.

Architect: Carol Crandall;
Crandall Ritzu Architects

Builder: Frank Hoebeke
Builder Inc.

clapboards were the best choice for the budget, so Carol's mother faces the occasional expense of restaining.

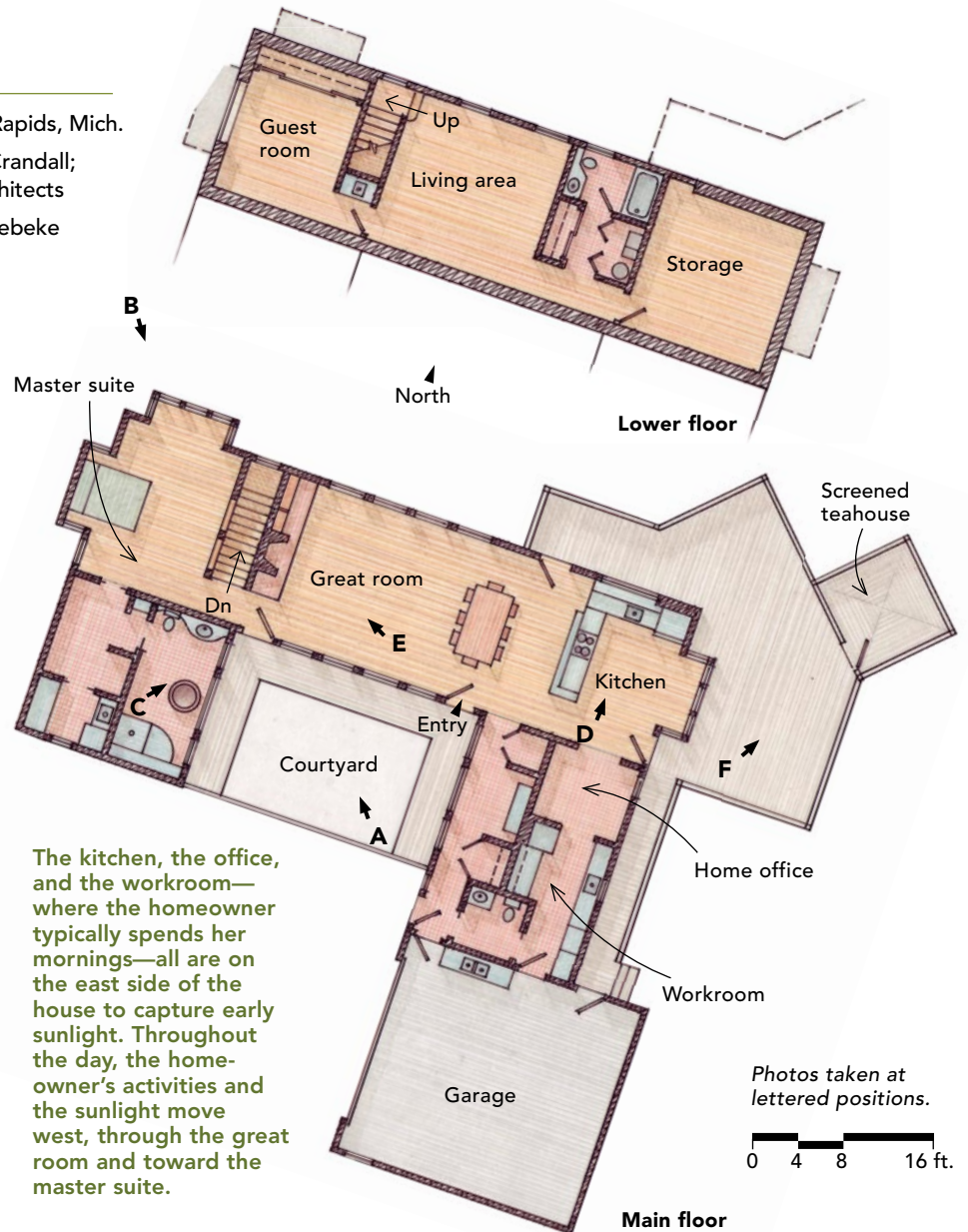
As for landscaping, the O'Briens cultivated their large lot with native plantings that don't require fussy maintenance. Carol's mother's property also is landscaped with native and low-maintenance materials. Prairie grasses and bark and stone paths, instead of lawn, encircle the house. "Even the courtyard garden is surprisingly easy to take care of," Carol says. "My mom does some periodic thinning, basically just to get her hands in the dirt."

Energy-efficient for low-cost living

A large house can be expensive to live in, so Bob and Sharon O'Brien paid special attention to energy efficiency, starting with the building envelope. The 12-in.-thick ICF (insulating concrete form) foundation walls and the Icynene-insulated 2x6 stud walls have an R-value near 20. The stud walls also have an additional ½ in. of rigid-foam insulation (R-3) beneath the siding.

Without sacrificing comfort, the mechanical systems are designed for efficiency and security. An ultrahigh-efficiency boiler uses propane fuel for home heating via a combination of underfloor radiant heat, radiant baseboard heaters, and hydronic towel warmers in the kitchen and the bathrooms. A high-efficiency air-conditioning system consists of an exterior condenser that runs to an air handler in the attic. A heat-recovery ventilator exhausts the laundry and the bathrooms, and introduces fresh air. The O'Briens' 200-amp main electrical panel feeds two subpanels: One services the second floor as its own electrical zone; the other incorporates a generator during power outages.

Carol Crandall admits that her mother's home isn't on the cutting edge when it comes to



building technology or energy efficiency. She focused more on building an affordable house than on anything else. The land was reasonably priced, and the house is as small as possible, designed with cost-effective construction in mind; it also contains many energy- and water-saving appliances. Carol met her goal of designing and building a house that would cost less to own and operate than the expense of living in a retirement facility.

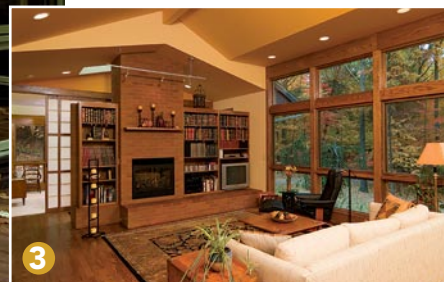
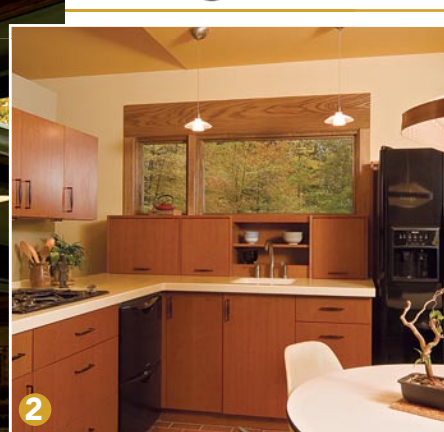
Designated spaces for easy day-to-day living

Nearing 60, neither Bob nor Sharon O'Brien has immediate plans to retire. But when

they look forward to life after work, they both think more about enjoying hobbies than about slowing down. In the short term, a home office will allow them to transition into retirement slowly with a comfortable place to work. In the long term, Bob plans to set up a woodshop, and Sharon dreams of spending time sewing, cooking, and entertaining friends. All these activities are accommodated in the design of their house. Even pets were considered. Complete with a through-the-wall pet door, the pantry's design simplifies owning two big dogs (photo p. 92).

Carol Crandall's mother is a retired English professor and is more routine in her

floor plan, mindful of morning and afternoon sunlight.



daily life. Carol used her mother's routine as a guide to design the home's floor plan. In the morning, her mother spends time in the kitchen, the workroom, and the home office. Their location on the east side of the house takes advantage of morning sunlight. The workroom is a multipurpose space for crafts, sewing projects, and houseplant care. With an extra refrigerator and lots of counter space, the workroom also doubles as a spill-over kitchen for making preserves, baking, and preparing for parties.

In the afternoon, Carol's mother spends most of her time reading in the great room, which has lots of north- and south-facing

windows. In the evening, she retreats to her bedroom on the west side of the house to relax and write.

Although summers in Michigan might be short, they are beautiful, and Carol's mother enjoys spending time outside. Like the O'Briens, Carol included a large deck on the house, complete with a screened teahouse for a sheltered place to relax (photo above). "My mom's house is designed for small pleasures," Carol says. "It's nice to see her rejuvenated late in her life." □

Brian Pontolilo is an associate editor at *Fine Homebuilding*.

Practical and personalized. Most of the master bath **1**, including the open space under the vanity, is designed with accessibility in mind. The Japanese-style soaking tub, however, is a luxury that the homeowner always wanted. In the kitchen **2**, cabinets on the counter make commonly used items easy to reach. For sunlight and views, the great room **3** has two walls of windows. For accessibility, the master suite beyond has wide, sliding shoji-screen doors. Outside, a screened teahouse **4** provides a sheltered place to relax. Photos 1-4 taken at C, D, E, and F, respectively, on floor plan (facing page).