

"Hence, while Marilla and Mrs. Rachel were enjoying themselves hugely at the mass meeting, Anne and Matthew had the cheerful kitchen at Green Gables all to themselves. A bright fire was glowing in the old-fashioned Waterloo stove and blue-white frost crystals were shining on the windowpanes. Matthew nodded over a Farmer's Advocate on the sofa and Anne at the table studied her lessons with grim determination, despite sundry wistful glances at the clock shelf, where lay a new book that Jane Andrews had leant her that day."

Anne of Green Gables, Lucy Maud Montgomery

Welcome to Vintage Americana, exploring and restoring Rural American Culture. If you long to embrace the quieter rhythms of life, fill your life with fewer, better things, and make more of what you need yourself, pull up a rocking chair and join me on the front porch.

This is episode 20, "Designing a Working Farmhouse." In this week's episode, I'm going to go through some principles of good design and some examples from my own recent experience in getting it done - even if we don't have it built yet.

The trouble is that the word "farm house" has lost it's true meaning in the last decade or so. It once meant, "A house on a farm," and now has devolved into a descriptor for a decorating style that has about as much to do with actual farms as the "Cottage Core" aesthetic does with life in an actual cottage.

Which means that I'm NOT going to be discussing the process of playing room tetris in a cad program and then slapping on white board and batten and black windows, stepping back and declaring it to be a "farmhouse."

Rather, I refer to this as Modern Farmish House Suburbatopia Pastiche. I see lots of them displayed in the local Parade of homes. Here's a hint at spotting them: Often there is a sign displayed somewhere within that says "Farmhouse." It's much as Maragaret Thatcher said about being a Lady - If you have to tell people you are, you aren't.

What, then, makes a real farmhouse? It ought to be a house designed specifically to enhance the lives and the family ties of the farm family.

Now, I am not an architect. I'm not going to pretend to BE an architect. What I'm going to do is to guide you through our experience. And when we're doing, you won't be ready to design a house like ours. You'll be ready to design a house just right for your family.

I've talked on a previous episode about how we found our land, so I won't rehash that. I will talk a bit about how the land we eventually ended up with influenced the house design.

I'm also misspeaking, yet again. We didn't design our house. We participated in the process, with an actual architect.

OK, more than one architect. That part was nearly as fraught as the land search.

We arrived in the office of the first architect, asking for a Dutch Colonial, with a walk-out basement. He taught us quite a bit about the order of operations, if you will. Land first. House design second. We looked (and looked, and LOOKED) for a parcel with enough elevation for that walkout basement. Everything we found was flat.

Still, couldn't we just... move some dirt around? Put the basement 4 feet or so into the ground, then raise the rest up to the level of the front door?

Yes, Greg agreed, we could. However.... bring fill up from the site itself would result in what he described as, "A house on a dirt bubble, with a pond." And, now I can't unsee this, when we're out driving around. Every time we drive by a newer home that was built above grade, and then had the dirt brought up to fill it in, leaving a... water feature... nearby, my husband and I look at each other and say, "Dirt bubble and a pond!"

Or, Greg had further mused, you can bring in ALL kinds of fill from off-site and make the drop from the door to the regular grade much more gradual. But, this would be very expensive to do, and to quote him again, "no one is going to pull onto your property and say, 'Wow, that's a really nice grade there. I bet that was expensive.' Most people prefer to spend their money where they can enjoy it or others can see it. Or both." He asked us about our needs, and our lifestyle. I described life with two Autistic children, and the various things I would like to be able to have the new house accommodate. We also had a list of things that spoke to us, that we'd like to have - which included some sort of third story "Widow's Walk," or tower. There was a long pause, and he asked if I had a cup of patience every morning with my coffee. And then muttered about making sure the

newly designed house had something for my humble self as he scribbled some notes.

Before we got into actual house design, however, Greg had to bow out of the project for personal reasons. Which left us looking for both land AND a new architect.

Next came another local architect who also sits on a local township board. He is the nicest man, and gave us another whole basketful of good advice. BUT - he worked for a large architectural practice, and was out of our price range for the design work. Instead, he gave us all the help he could in finding a piece of land.

We finally found both a piece of land, and a new architect at about the same time. I can give you this piece of advice - if you're looking for an architect (which I recommend), but on a budget - look for one who is in solo practice. If they're not supporting an entire office, they're not bearing nearly so much expense. And so their fees are often not so high. You're also more likely to be working with someone who picks and chooses their projects - and therefore has chosen to work on yours. This will often be someone who has retired from a large practice and now works out of a home office. Years of experience, control over their own workflow, and a practice limited to their preferred projects equals someone who is going to give you a better effort.

Our third architect, then, got us as semi-educated. One of the first things he did was walk the property. Marc, in fact, is the first person who spotted a hummingbird on the meadow. That little detail spoke volumes about HIS attention to detail, as well as his perspective. I filed it away. We therefore did not fight the recommendation to design our new home on a crawlspace, even though basements are the norm in our region. Why? The land we ended up with was both flat as a pancake and had a high water table. A basement was going to both get us back into the "dirt bubble on a pond" territory and be a constant struggle to keep dry. For his part, our new architect also pointed out that, like water, sand seeks its own level - it just does it more slowly. And our property is about 12 inches of good black dirt over a sandy base.

Then we got into the fun part - actual design. When we had met with Greg, we had told him we were thinking about a Dutch Colonial. But since then, two things had happened. The first is that I had spent more time looking at floor plans and studying architectural styles. I still love a Dutch Colonial. I sigh over them regularly. But I had learned that an architectural style is not just the trim on the outside of a house. The layout and the rooms inside inform the exterior, and vice versa. (Fun fact - any "designer" who is

creating a floor plan FIRST, then slapping on exterior details - is not an architect and is not going about things in a way to create a cohesive whole. A talented designer understands that the elevations and the floorplan MUST be created simultaneously). And it is the nature of a Dutch Colonial to be a formal sort of house. Think about the usual entryway, with a beautiful staircase and carved newel post. (I still love those). Separate living rooms for entertaining are common, as are formal dining rooms.

While, yes, you can design a house to look like whatever you want, an authentic Dutch Colonial has a formal spirit.

We are not formal people. We don't entertain. My youngest child thinks all the world should be "clothing optional," and keeping her clad in SOMETHING can be a challenge. Neither of my children are terribly tolerant of noise and ruckus, nor is it a good idea to send them upstairs to their rooms to play without monitoring them closely.

The second thing that happened was a bit of serendipity. You may well be aware that Pinterest is extremely dangerous, especially when it comes to the topic of interior design. I do blame Pinterest for the ubiquity of the "farmhouse" aesthetic (and I hope you could hear the air quotes clanging, there). On the other hand, it also allows you to discover things you would not otherwise have known about. Very expensive things.

Things like the Swedish Tile Stove. I am a connoisseur of all things cozy. So when I discovered the existence of the Swedish Tile Stove, I was smitten. While there are lots of variations on the concept, I'm partial to the Swedish version. It's basically a masonry heater - you light a fire in the firebox, and a long, convoluted flue pattern absorbs much more of the heat that can then be radiated back off over time. It's much more efficient than a plain fireplace, capturing nearly all the heat and burning hotter, so as to generate much less smoke. Then, just to put the sauce on the capon, the whole thing is clad in ceramic tile. One firing of the stove can kick off heat the entire day AND the tile surface stays cool enough to touch. This, when one has Autistic children, is a ajor plus.

It comes with a major downside. Swedish Tile Stoves were a species plentiful before about 1920 or so. Therefore, most of those available today are antique specimens, disassembled into their individual tiles. In Sweden. So, acquiring one accrues three expenses: Purchase of the stove, importation into the US, and finding one of the rare people in the country who can build the internal structure from scratch and then lay the tile correctly.

Or, you know, you could just go buy a modest new car for the same price.

With a deep sigh, I set aside the idea.

(Stay with me here, I'm coming back to why this affected our design choices, I promise).

Tile stove aside, we did want to build what is sometimes called a "New Old House." Really. It's not just us. There used to be a quarterly magazine with that as a title (now reduced to an annual Special Issue put out by the publishers of Old House Journal). While building a house in the old manner - timber frames, lathe and plaster, fieldstone, and so on - is now cost prohibitive, we wanted to build it as solidly as we could and limit the use of veneers and other fakery.

It isn't likely news to anybody that they don't make things like they used to. So my husband and I also took to trolling for vintage items that we might want to incorporate into the house. Light fixtures, hardware, and so on. Plus it's fun to troll antique sales and flea markets for these types of goodies.

I talked him into visiting Pitch's Architectural Salvage one morning. They maintain a couple of fascinating buildings filled with the bric-a-brac removed from the buildings they are hired to tear down. Wear clothes you don't mind getting dirty and be prepared to dig around a little.

We wandered in and split up, the better to cover more ground. I was studying a lovely Victorian fireplace surround, made out of cherry wood with carved roses twining around it when he came back to me, pointed, and said, "Is that what I think it is?"

Laid out across quite an expanse of bench, covered in dust, was - you guessed it. A Swedish tile stove. And the short version goes something like this: it had been languishing there for at least 10 years, mostly because no one knew what it was. It even had a story behind it. Per the young clerk, it had been a gift from the Swedish Crown to Ralph Hauenstein, a local gentleman who had been an instrumental part of Project Ultra during WWII. I'll let those interested go google up those names and ponder with me just exactly what he might have done for Sweden - neutral during the War - to warrant such an unusual gift.

As we speak, the stove tiles are in the hands of a gentleman who is working with a cermaic artist to restore the chipped areas and thinks he can get it properly installed.

He estimated the size of it, complete, for us. (Nearly 10 feet, if he uses all the tiles). And so that piece of information went to Mark and the entire house design made a significant shift.

Now we were designing a Swedish Country House. This was intriguing for Mark, who'd never worked in the style before. And the more we thought it over, the more comfortable the idea became for us. Here in the great white North, the climate requires many of the same architectural concessions to nature that are made in Sweden - a reasonably steep roof pitch to shed snow, and judicious use of windows to provide lots of light while not letting out too much heat. Unlike squat, square plans designed for narrow suburban lots (and end up with huge, expensive roof designs, just looking for a place to leak) farm houses tend to be no more than 1-2 rooms deep. They flow from a central organizing spine, permitting good traffic flow and maximizing natural light. Never waste a corner on a closet! Seize every opportunity to create rooms with windows on two walls - light AND crossbreeze. Swedish or otherwise, all good vernacular architecture embraces these ideas. Cad/Cam designs where rooms are crammed together and a computer generates the truss sections, as peddled by websites and magazines, do not.

We did NOT hand Mark a stack of floorplans that we liked and ask him to create something similar. This is, to paraphrase a wise man, "like bringing a bologna sandwich to a 5 star restaurant and asking the chef to plate it for you."

Instead, we gave him some basic parameters. We told him some things about how we lived. That we wanted a walk-in pantry. And that we'd need some extra storage since there was no basement. Because we really only want to do this once, we wanted to arrange things to be accessible. Because I'm a raging introvert, I asked that the public areas and the private areas of the house have a certain degree of separation.

Other things were safety-oriented: My youngest daughter has no healthy fear of heights, so the stairwell is enclosed. Put a window within the stairwell will help light flow through it.

After a couple of iterations, we finally settled on a design. It has a vaulted great room, to

accommodate the height of that Swedish Tile Stove. This is not the mountains, so there is no huge wall of windows on either end of it. Rather, smallish windows, in keeping with the style of the house, are found in the gables at either end. Our builder already intends to set them up with a remote opening system so that we can turn a dial from the floor and let them open up to catch the breeze. The great room will also be home to a nice long trestle table for family meals.

Mark included stacked closets that will accommodate an elevator later, should it be needed. And in the meantime, they are more storage - or could even be set up as a sensory room for my youngest. He also created a master suite that has a roll-in shower. Since he knows we're not made of money, he did it by dropping the joists under the shower 2 inches, avoiding the need for a linear drain. Clever, wot?

Everywhere, there are decorative details that have a functional basis. There is a gable on the back of the garage, which seems like gingerbread. Unless you realize that it's there to provide headroom for a staircase leading to attic storage above the garage, allowing much easier access than a pull-down ladder. There is also space under that stairway in the garage to sneak in a washing machine and a boot wash - important for stripping off barn clothes before entering the house.

Other elements are there to convey the idea that the house is an old one, lovingly cared for. The great room will feature timber trusses, the shape of which will be echoed on additional trusses on the exterior, to make it feel like it's truly timber framed.

Tall baseboards and appropriate casing designs taken from real Swedish Country Houses will lend the house character, as well as custom window grids. The kitchen, while not truly an Un-kitchen, is designed to look as if most of the elements are pieces of furniture, rather than fixed cabinetry. Some painted, some stained wood, with different door styles. And very little in the way of upper cabinets. While maintaining a lot of the conveniences of modern cabinetry - drawers that can accommodate dishes and pans, and so on.

Nor does anything survive in its initial form. We haven't broken ground yet, and already a few changes have been made.

One of them happened when we were checking out the parade homes by the local builder's association. One had a wide open floor plan and vaulted ceiling. As soon as

we walked in, my youngest clapped her hands over her ears.

Hmmm. She had a point. It WAS loud. And my youngest is particularly noise-sensitive. So, where the original design had the kitchen entirely open to the great room, we've opted to drop a wall at the end of the island, and put a cased opening on either side. Closing off that section somewhat should create less of an echo chamber. Never one to let an opportunity slide, however, I've asked for a window in the wall at the end of the island. Light can flow, I can keep an eye on my children AND it reinforces the idea that it's an old house that has been added onto repeatedly. If there is a window inside, that must have been an exterior wall once...

I also dearly love Dutch doors. I rather badly wanted one off the Great Room to where our little patio will be. My builder (a good friend), disabused me of this idea. "Nope. You don't want to do that. You'll lose all your heat. We'll put one somewhere else." So now there is a Dutch door planned between the kitchen and pantry. This is actually a good solution. It lets me prevent too much deprecation of the pantry by my youngest child (or the dogs), while letting me use the small desk area inside the pantry for my eldest to spend time surfing the web with a certain degree of supervision.

Some of the alterations happened as we all discussed things together. Mark had drawn the gable ends with what looks like rafter tails. This confused my builder, Brian, just a bit. Mostly because the plan for the roof did not involve rafter tails, and he was concerned about wrapping the fascia around the ends as shown on the plans. Mark said, "Well I was thinking that if your siding guy is a bit of an artist,"

"Yeah, he's not," Brian responded. (Pro tip: an excellent builder is well aware of both the skills and the limitations of his subs).

Then I threw a monkeywrench into the whole discussion by pointing out that I wanted gutters and a rainwater collection system anyway. Making the point moot. As adorable as I find rafter tails to be.

Function. Form. Collaboration.

I may have indicated once or twice that I am a firm advocate of story. Everything and everyone has a story. We were drawn to the Swedish tile stove in part, because it has a story.

We want our house to have a story. Every detail included helps tell that story. The same floor plan, built with standard flat 1 x 6 trim, standard white kitchen cabinets, quartz countertops, LVP flooring and grey walls, a white exterior and black gridded windows would not have the same sense of depth and character.

Pinterest is dangerous not only for the lovely, unobtainable things it shows us, but also for the insidious effect of displaying the trends with such frequency we start to think that's what a house should BE.

Think it through - if you live in Maine, SHOULD you have a tobacco basket hanging on your wall? Should anybody at all have a ceiling fan that looks like it was made from a metal windmill? Is corrugated metal wainscoting actually attractive anywhere?

Instead, think about who you and your family are. How do you really live? What makes sense? And what helps tell your story.

Then, don't be afraid to buck the trends to have it. Colored trim is out of fashion. We intend to use it anyway. My father is advocating strongly for picture rail. I have mixed feelings. Wallpaper is also often derided. But I love a good vintage-looking pattern. The Scandinavians have long had a habit of using soft blues and greens as neutrals, and I intend to steal a leaf from that book, too.

We've been delayed repeatedly, first by issues with comps and appraisal issues, and then with the "Covid Tax" 40% increase in cost to build. So, in the meantime, we continue to shop for things like refurbished vintage fixtures and hardware. And we've sent the plans out to an engineer to generate specs for real timber trusses at least for the great room. For the moment, dimensional lumber is up about 400%, where timber framing and SIPs is only up by about 20%.

I've decided it's another attempt by the Good Lord to teach me patience. So I've even taken the time to write a fictional story for the house itself. With sketches. I'll put it up on the blog.

Go against the trend for poorly designed, trend-driven, cheaply built new houses. If you are fortunate enough to have land to build on, give a serious look at having one designed for you. It's not really that much more expensive, especially if you factor in all

the changes you will probably make. I've had people ask me what an architect can give them that a canned plan can't. Very simply - something you didn't even know to ask for. So many of the little things Mark worked into our plan are just so clever, I can't wait to enjoy them.

Study the design of real farm houses. Not the HGTV kind, but the genuine articles. Look at American farm houses. French farm houses. English farm houses. Swedish farm houses. See how they function. Look how they are arranged to take best advantage of their specific site.

Less than 2% of homes in the US are designed by architects. This is largely because people fail to understand what value there is in using one. I see this trend starting to change, at least locally. Builders not only are using architects to design their models, they are promoting the architects they partner with. Be aware that large firms are not the only game in town. Ask around, make phone calls, discuss with other professionals like kitchen designers who they like to work with.

Me, I'm still dreaming of my "imaginary house," as we've come to call it. And I'm practicing my patience. I think I'll go inventory how many milk glass doorknobs I've collected and see how many more I need to look for this Summer.

Are you coming?