

BETTING THE RANCH



BEFORE

HOW ONE YOUNG FAMILY (WITH THE HELP OF A MIGHTY DESIGN DUO) TURNED A LOW-PROFILE 1950S HOME INTO A WIDE-OPEN WATERFRONT GEM

BY ELLEN MCGAULEY PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS STYLING BY ANGIE HRANOWSKY

In the great room, vein-cut travertine tiles arranged in a chevron pattern turn a floating fireplace into a soaring architectural focal point. Opposite: The Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina, home is painted Shoji White by Sherwin-Williams.



COASTAL RANCHOLOGY: THE STUDY OF AN OFTEN UNDERRATED STYLE OF ARCHITECTURE THAT PEAKED IN THE MID-20TH CENTURY AND IS MARKED BY ITS BROAD, ONE-STORY LAYOUTS, ITS LOW-PROFILE FACADES, AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR WATERFRONT GREATNESS

HOMEOWNER CYNTHIA BROWN had a gut feeling about this—the hidden promise of a house built low to the ground, with reasonable square footage and that air of simplicity that comes with single-story living. In fact, she banked on it when she and her husband, Gene, bought a modest, 1950s ranch house along the Wando River outside of Charleston, South Carolina. The lot was always the draw. It had a huge yawn of watery views and was set in an old-school neighborhood where their three kids could ride bikes under the arms of old oak trees and stretch off the ends of docks to hoist crab traps from the riverbed.

The house? Well, it needed work. The Browns liked it, but the rooms were small and without much light, the ceilings were low, and the windows offered up only narrow glimpses of that big tidal river. Plus, there was the dark brick facade that seemed to hide beneath the shadows of towering trees, like a shy schoolkid who keeps his head down in the halls.

They moved into the 3,000-square-foot house as-is, and set their sights on building a dock first. “We definitely had our priorities straight,” says Cynthia

with a laugh, recalling the parties out there that followed. Meanwhile, they made plans for renovating the little ranch house. New ideas formed, and living space expanded. These changes triggered new flood regulations, so stilts were also sketched in.

The home, on paper at least, swelled in square footage and rose higher in the air. “We had an entirely new house drawn and ready to build,” says Cynthia. “But one day Gene and I were mulling over the plans, and I said, ‘I don’t think we should build this house.’ I just knew. Deep down, I knew we didn’t need a lot of space; we just needed functional space. We didn’t need a higher view; we’d grown to love the view we had. I said, ‘The dream was always the ranch. Let’s just fix the ranch.’”

So the Browns called their architect, Beau Clowney, and switched course. With interior designer Angie Hranowsky, they adapted the midcentury classic to better accommodate life on the water, but without altering the footprint. Here, a look at how Clowney and Hranowsky debunked the style’s so-called shortcomings and sent the low-profile home to spectacular new heights.

MYTH

RANCHES ARE BIG ON BRICK, SMALL ON VIEWS

REALITY

In fact, large picture windows are a design hallmark of ranch houses—most had at least one—which was all the more reason for Clowney to glass in the water-facing side with a mix of sliding doors and floor-to-ceiling windows. (The windows and single sliding glass door were smaller on the original back wall looking out to the water.) The team knocked out the original entirely and enclosed a screened porch to create a single great room with more living space. “There’s now a continuous connection to the river from the living room and kitchen,” says Clowney.



MYTH
BRICK FACADES SWALLOW UP THE SUNSHINE

REALITY

Under a lot of shade, yes, but white is the perfect antidote. “One of the first things we agreed on was painting the house white,” notes Clowney. This did more than just brighten the exterior. With a more defined landscaping plan, it created a contrast with greenery such as fig vine and boxwood (see page 64), and also called attention to the home’s strong architectural features, like the half-wall arcade, trellis detailing, and courtyard cloister.



MYTH
RANCH HOUSES ARE DARK

REALITY

Why not debunk that right in the entryway? “We knew we wanted to do something fun in here,” recalls Cynthia. She, like Hranowsky, is pretty fearless with color, so they wallpapered the space just inside the front door with a pink handpainted wallpaper by Porter Teleo. “It’s bold and it’s a splurge, but that’s part of what makes it right for this small space,” Hranowsky says. She used white oak planks set in a herringbone pattern and stained a dark ebony on the floors, and hung a vintage Austrian chandelier. “The clear glass is perfect for this room,” she says. “It adds a little shine without competing with the color.”



MYTH
ROOMS IN RANCH HOUSES
FEEL SMALL AND CHOPPY

REALITY

Though some ranch homes do have open floor plans, this one did not. “The kitchen was along the front of the house,” says Cynthia, “but I spend the majority of my time there, and I thought, ‘I want the view!’” So the team moved the kitchen back to become part of the great room, a switch that Hranowsky says was a great opportunity to do something beautiful “because it’s now so visible to the adjacent rooms.” She covered the far wall from floor to ceiling in earthy, iridescent pewter tiles and chose a slimmer-than-subway shape “to make it more interesting.” The tiles, along with white oak cabinetry, amplify the natural light coming in off the river. The skyline marble on the waterfall island gives the dual prep/entertaining spot a sleek striped effect.



MYTH
RANCH BEDROOMS BELONG
DOWN A LONG, DIM HALL

REALITY

Not necessarily—here, the team changed the configuration so that a corridor off the kitchen now leads first to a walk-in pantry (“when you skip upper cabinetry, it’s a good idea to carve out a separate area for storage,” says Hranowsky) and then to the master suite, formerly a den. She covered the vestibule separating bedroom and bath with a geometric wallpaper, and added a black painted door for privacy.



MYTH
FORMAL DINING
ROOMS WENT OUT WITH
ROTARY PHONES

REALITY

As the saying goes: out of sight, out of mind. But here, Clowney gave the dining room prime real estate by moving it to the right of the foyer, with a view of a sunny courtyard. And it isn’t likely to be overlooked: Raspberry grasscloth walls give the space a jewelbox quality not only from the outside (along the stone colonnade approach), but also from the living room and kitchen, thanks to broad, cased openings. “We wanted it to be prominent right when you walk in the door,” Hranowsky says.



MYTH
RANCH BEDROOMS AREN'T
EXACTLY FULL OF CHARACTER

REALITY

But they can be, especially if you draw decorating inspiration from the era in which the home was built. The team kept the slate floors in the master bedroom (above, left), and added large glass doors, cinnamon grasscloth on the walls, a brass bed, and a rosewood nightstand. In the bath (above, right—once a carpenter's workshop), they introduced larger windows, Afyon marble tiles, and a soaking tub; a bamboo-and-stone colonnade ensures privacy for an outdoor shower on the patio.

MYTH
RANCH HOUSES WEREN'T
DESIGNED FOR OUTDOOR LIVING

REALITY

On the contrary: ranches rose in popularity at a time when sizeable yards were easier to come by. The Browns had plenty of room to add a deep back porch (left), and they also outfitted the gazebo at the end of the dock (opposite) with built-in benches and cushions to serve as a cocktail lounge for adults and a camping spot for the kids. "My son kayaks out to go fishing; the girls swim off the dock," Cynthia says. "It's what we envisioned when we found this lot."



WHEN THE SUN BEGINS TO
SET AND THE BOATS ARE
DRIFTING BY, IT'S HEAVEN"
—HOMEOWNER CYNTHIA BROWN