

Design

Creating a Sense of Shelter on a Large Lot

by Robert Gerloff

Designers sometimes use the phrase “prospect and refuge” to describe a pleasing environment that offers a good view of its surroundings while still providing a comforting sense of shelter. Our attraction to this type of setting runs deep: For most of human history, survival depended on scanning the horizon for saber-tooth tigers or raiders from an enemy tribe while staying within easy reach of a good defensive position or hiding place. The countless generations of distant ancestors who survived by doing that have passed that genetic trait down to the present day.

Or at least that’s one explanation. Whatever the reason, the prospect-and-refuge model seems to strike a chord with most people. Saber-tooth tigers or not, it’s a human trait that designers and builders need to respect.

How *Not* to Build

With that in mind, consider a typical new house on rural acreage (see Figure 1). A two-story, center-hall colonial with an attached garage floating on an acre of bluegrass lawn offers no refuge other than inside the house itself. Garage door openers allow the homeowners to drive directly into the house, and once inside, they seldom venture outside again. Why should they? They’re exposed on all sides.

In this setting, a front porch usually doesn’t work very well. Where houses are close together — in an urban neighborhood or inner suburb — a porch can be an appealing place to spend time with friends and family, and wave to or chat with passing neighbors.

But when a house is isolated from any neighbors, there’s no one to socialize with. Rather than sit out front and feel that they’re being stared at by those driving by, the owners are likely to retreat to the house, leaving the porch an unused ornament.

Adding a back deck or porch may not be much of an improvement. The back of the house may offer more privacy, but the feeling of openness and exposure remains. The result, once again, is that the owners stay inside. And what’s the point of living in the country if you never go outside?

The Farmstead Model

One solution is to extend the house into the landscape to create smaller, more human-scale spaces. Traditional farmsteads offer designers and builders a perfect model for how to create a comforting sense of shelter on wide-open land. A farmstead is always composed of many different buildings. Humans feel sheltered, protected, and psychologically comfortable in the smaller spaces created between house and barn, machine shed, granary, and other outbuildings.

In new construction, the easiest way to extend the house into the landscape and define some smaller, more human-scale outdoor spaces is by separating the house from the garage. Other possibilities include turning a detached garage at a right angle to the main house, breaking the larger house

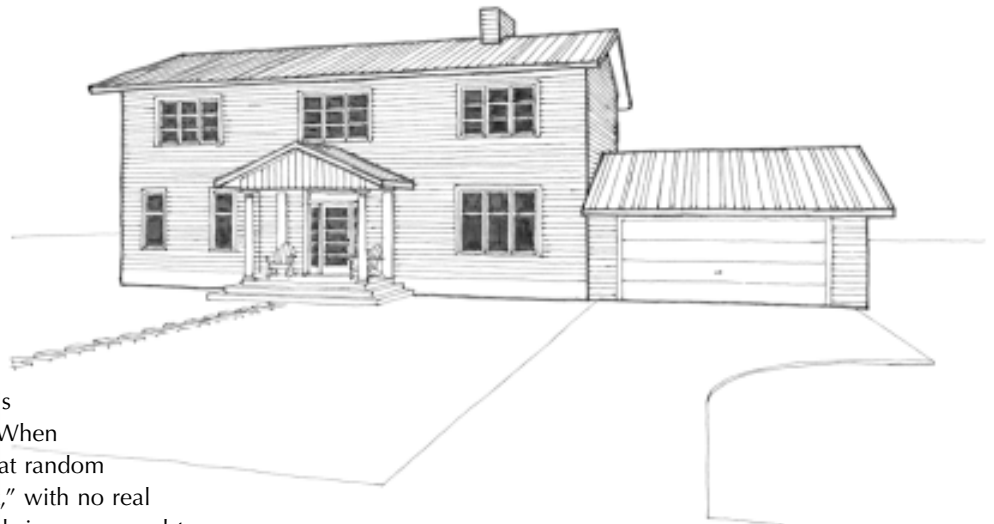


Figure 1. A typical new home today is entered through the attached garage. When that sort of structure is plunked down at random on a large rural lot, it appears to “float,” with no real connection to the land. The front porch is so exposed to passing cars that it’s unlikely to see more than occasional use.

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into wings, or building outbuildings like storage sheds, pole barns, pool houses, gazebos, or freestanding screen porches.

In the slightly modified design in Figure 2, for example, the driveway now leads into a comfortable courtyard rather than shooting straight into the garage. The result is a sheltered, hard-surface space where small children can ride bikes and teenagers can play basketball. This simple space between two buildings provides a feeling of shelter and a sense of safety. A hedge helps define the space and accentuates the feeling of shelter.

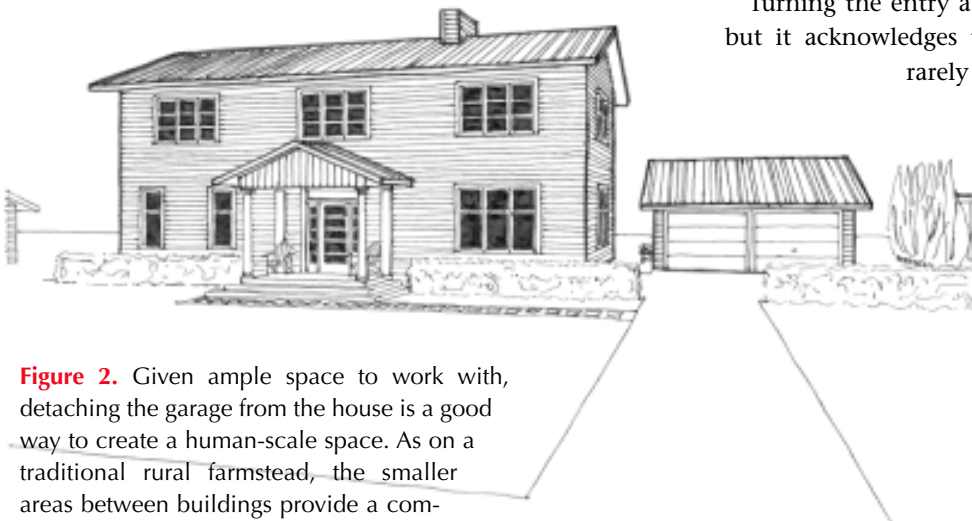


Figure 2. Given ample space to work with, detaching the garage from the house is a good way to create a human-scale space. As on a traditional rural farmstead, the smaller areas between buildings provide a comforting sense of shelter.

Changing Orientation

An easy way to enhance the farmstead effect is to orient the front entrance of the new home porch toward the courtyard rather than the road (Figure 3). Adults can comfortably lounge on the front porch, watch their children play in the courtyard, and keep an eye on who's driving by, all without feeling too exposed.

The tower included in this design cartoons the idea of prospect and refuge, creating a small space up high with a wonderful view out across the landscape. People love towers — from the Queen Anne designs of the last decades of the 1800s to more contemporary versions like this one — and the sense of safety they provide is probably why.

Turning the entry away from the road may seem radical, but it acknowledges the fact that formal front doors are rarely used today. That was also true of traditional farmsteads, where day-to-day activities centered around a side door facing the barns and outbuildings. A front entry, while usually present, was traditionally reserved for ceremonial occasions.



Figure 3. Eliminating the nonfunctional front porch shown in the previous drawings and replacing it with one oriented toward the courtyard shifts the focus away from the road. The whimsical tower above the relocated master suite affords a sense of “prospect and refuge” — a protected vantage point that offers unobstructed views.

Using Landscape Elements

Elements like fences, rows of trees, and stone walls, and simple structures like a trellis or pergola can also be used to define a more protected outdoor space (Figure 4). A homeowner or guest sitting in this backyard is going to feel comfortably sheltered and protected on three sides.

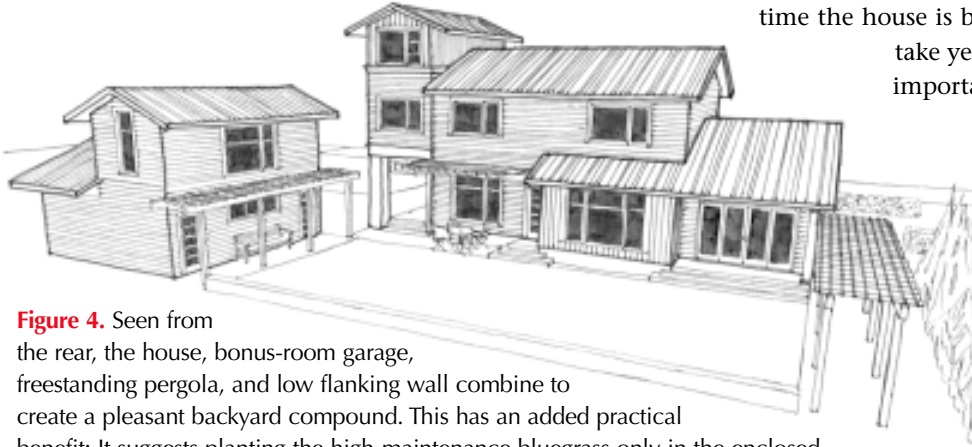



Figure 4. Seen from the rear, the house, bonus-room garage, freestanding pergola, and low flanking wall combine to create a pleasant backyard compound. This has an added practical benefit: It suggests planting the high-maintenance bluegrass only in the enclosed yard. By planting a wild seed mix across the rest of the site, the homeowners can avoid mowing and fertilizing their entire acreage.

Even more important, when you step out of this house, you always step into a protected transition space. The front door leads to a front porch, the kitchen steps out onto a patio beneath a trellis, and the master suite steps out onto a covered porch. Again, the homeowners will feel sheltered and protected, not exposed and vulnerable.

There's often little money left for landscaping by the time the house is built, so a landscape like this one may take years to complete. Still, I believe that it's important to offer the homeowners a long-

term vision. Planning ahead makes it possible to site the most permanent elements — the house and garage — in the right place to begin with, rather than trying to develop a plan around them later. 

Robert Gerloff, AIA, is an architect and writer in Minneapolis, Minn.