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THIS PHOTO | Hand-cut limestone accents and willow planters soften the look of the painted concrete cinder block.

OPPOSITE | While it looks vintage, Jeff and Pam Brown's cosmopolitan yet comfortable home is new. It was inspired by the neighborhood's 1920s homes.





Creating History

Mixing proven techniques and handsome materials from the past with the best of the present helps a Michigan family craft a new home that exudes a patina of time.

RIGHT | French doors in the living and dining rooms allow access to the long porch that stretches the length of the home's front.

P

assersby often stop Pam and Jeff Brown in front of their handsome Birmingham, Michigan, home to ask about its history. That's exactly what the Browns hoped for when they built this new house a few years ago.

A former antiques dealer, Pam prefers things that show wear and imperfections. "I'm definitely a fan of the character of older homes, but we also needed a hardworking house that would suit modern life and our busy family," she says of her quest to find the right home for she and her husband, Jeff; two children; and their rescued shar-pei mix named Lily.

The Browns searched unsuccessfully for a vintage house to renovate among the charming 1920s to 1960s Cape Cods, Colonials, and Tudors in the city's Poppleton Park area. After years of searching, the couple decided to replace an existing home on a desirable lot. Down came a sagging 1930s structure, making way for construction of a 5,000-square-foot home.

With the older home out of the way, the family faced another major decision: What type of architectural style should rise in its place?

"It was important to us that the house fit the neighborhood and that everyone, including the neighbors, be happy with the results," Jeff says.

The Browns took long walks along

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Rough-hewn ceiling beams seem even older than one might have expected to see in this house. Using such an element will convince all but the most knowledgeable detective that this house has stood for decade upon decade.









LEFT | The family room features the same beams and simple palette found throughout the rest of the house. French doors open to a small European-style courtyard and patio.

surrounding streets and studied local architecture during planning, absorbing period details, rooflines, and projections. To help them realize their dream, they brought in architect Glenda Meads and interior designers Jane and Joel Mettler.

The team studied classic English country estates and the work of local architect Wallace Frost, whose designs from the 1920s to the 1940s line nearby streets. They also absorbed ideas from the Mettlers' home, which dates to the 1920s.

"The Browns knew they wanted a new house with an old soul, but they didn't originally have a specific style in mind," Meads says. "They did have a list of priorities, however."

First, they wanted the house to be family-friendly, with a defined but not constricting open floor plan. They wanted to use all of the rooms—no fussy, formal spaces just for show. They also wanted high ceilings, a large mudroom, and a living room and dining room with access to the front porch, which would allow the family to greet neighbors walking by.

They settled on an English country house with an all-stone exterior. Because of cost, the stone was later abandoned in favor of painted concrete cinder block with limestone accents.

Instant Age

"We like homes with patina," homeowner Jeff Brown says. "We like seeing evidence of years and handcraftsmanship." Here are some of the ways the Browns added vintage character.

1

Concrete cinder block. Used locally in the 1920s, this material is simple, unpretentious, and economical. The Browns painted it a warm white, but it would take well to any color.

2

Get the grain right. The choice of oak for the flooring is common. What is uncommon was finishing it with a dark, ebonized stain that gives grain patterns a smoky glimmer.

3

Recycled wood. Harvested from a barn in Pennsylvania, the ceiling beams in the living, dining, and family rooms are more than 200 years old and weigh 400 pounds apiece.

4

Tile. The handmade tile on the matching living and dining room fireplaces were based on Arts and Crafts Era designs from Detroit's historic Pewabic Pottery, founded in 1903.





THIS PHOTO | Marble tops the 9-foot island used for food prep and as a seating area. **RIGHT** | The dining room is architect Glenda Meads' favorite room. "More people are asking for spaces that combine dining with other uses," she says.



"Many of the Frost houses were cinder block under stucco," Meads says. "But some were never stuccoed over. We liked those better because they weathered and aged beautifully, and the regularity of block creates a clean, modern line."

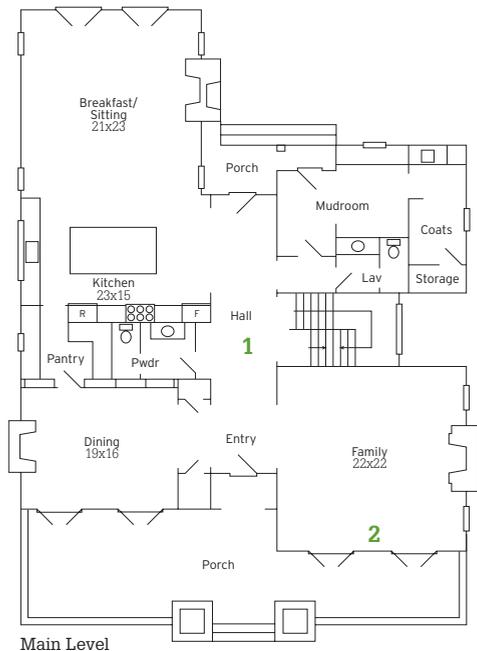
The Browns were initially skeptical about the material. "They didn't want it to look like their high school hallway," Meads says. To reassure them, she had sample blocks built. "We told the masons we wanted a handcrafted look."

The homeowners' love of handcrafted materials is reflected inside, as well. Warm white walls, ebony-stained oak floors, and a combination of period-style and contemporary lighting, furniture, and accessories tie the rooms together. Main-level spaces—including the living room, dining room, kitchen, and family room—radiate off a long hallway that serves as the home's core. The upper level features three bedrooms and a home office; a comfortable guest suite occupies the third level.

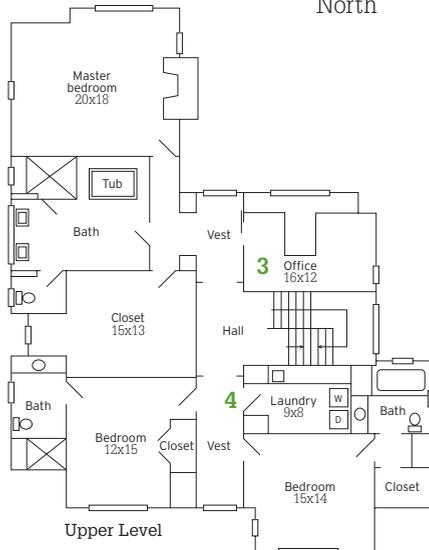
The Mettlers designed many of the home's details and worked closely with the Browns to achieve the home's simple yet sophisticated style.

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An authentically vintage home will have a mix of natural materials offering differences in color and texture. To create that feel, the kitchen has countertops of light stone and dark stone, plus a rustic wooden table.



Main Level



Upper Level



“Our main goal was to create an old-fashioned house with modern feelings of proportion and light,” says Jane Mettler. Did they achieve their goal? Neighbors seem to think so.

“I love it when people stop us to ask us what year the house dates to or which part of the house is new,” Jeff says. “It’s the ultimate compliment.” *

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About This Home

SQUARE FEET: 5,000
BEDROOMS: 4
BATHROOMS: 3 full,
 2 half

FOOTPRINT: 70×140 feet
LOCATION: Birmingham, Michigan

- 1 Central casting.** A generously sized 8-foot-wide corridor runs through the main level and acts as the home’s backbone, linking all the spaces. It allows visitors to see from the front door to the rear porch
- 2 Inside out.** French doors in the family room and dining room let in light and allow the family access to a front porch that sits behind a brick half-wall.
- 3 Pick a passage.** The upper-level office space could be used as a small bedroom or nursery.
- 4 Flexible spaces.** Bedrooms for the home’s residents are tucked into the least-trafficked area: the upper level. The laundry also is located there.

OPPOSITE | The master bedroom is another of the architect's favorites spaces. "I love the peaked ceiling and cozy fireplace," Meads says. "It's not overly large but, like the other bedrooms, is just right." The small sitting area offers Pam and Jeff a restful in-house getaway.

THIS PHOTO | In a room where wall space is limited, twin mirrors above the matching sinks reflect light and create the illusion of space. Just enough light glances off the mirrors so the room is bright but doesn't have a distracting glare.

