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A basic box  
embellished  
in just the right  
places saves  
an architect  
money on her  
first home

# Balancing COST and style

BY ERICA BROBERG

**BEAUTY ON A BUDGET** Erica Broberg designed a simple building, took a few clever shortcuts, and splurged on things that mattered. At right, modern furnishings complement the traditional details in her cozy and comfortable living room.



I built my house out of foolish desperation. It happened nearly five years ago, when I was a young architect drawn to a place where I could stretch my design wings: the East End of Long Island, where the clients have sophisticated ideas about design.

I wasn't sure, though, that I could afford to live there. But I got lucky. I inherited just enough money for a down payment on some land, and I found a small lot I could afford. I had no clue what to expect from the loan and construction process, but I knew how to design a house, so I did.

## Design details

My design decisions were based on two things: my practical experience as an architect and my personal wish list. Both were tempered by my budget. I knew if I kept the design straightforward and easy to build it would be cheaper. I thought about the houses I'd lived in over the years and what I could do to make this house feel like home. I gave careful consideration to every wall, window, trim, finish, and detail.

In the end, the simple shape of my small house combined with my choices of materials (see sidebar, p. 45) enabled me to complete





# A compact house with room to move

Growing up in a modern house with an open floor plan greatly influenced my view of circulation within a house. I didn't realize the impact it had on my design principles until I sat down to think hard about the way traffic would move through my house.

I knew that spaces with multiple entrances and exits prevented bottlenecks and allowed for an ever-changing pattern of circulation. I also knew that I favored a traditional aesthetic of keeping rooms separate.

Combining the two concepts and adding the ability to loop around hallways from space to space created a wonderful energy in my house. It's especially great when summer arrives and the house reaches maximum capacity with family and friends.

Any house can benefit from a variety of traffic patterns—houses with kids, summer houses, or houses that simply hold a lot of people at certain times. Even if a house is quite compact, a generous movement of traffic can make it seem much larger.

A house with good circulation reminds me of a fish tank. Fish swim around, creating curves and loops, going this way and that, swimming around rocks and plants—there's constant energy flow and no dead ends. —E.B.

The house is small—only 1,800 square feet—but it feels much larger. There are at least two ways in and out of every public room, and the house extends seamlessly into the outdoors.



A long dormer on the north side adds headroom to the bedrooms and baths under the cape's steep gable roof.





my home for about a third of the cost of more elaborate homes in my area. Here are my thoughts on building an affordable house with architectural integrity and how they translated into the house I love and live in today.

**Keep the box plain and simple** I chose a flat lot because sloping properties can add to the site work and require a more complex foundation. I didn't agonize over the style of the house because there was only one choice, given my budget: a Cape Cod. This house is a rectangle, allowing for a relatively inexpensive foundation pour and a second floor situated within the roof structure. Headroom can be an issue in capes, so I added a shed-style dormer, which was economical to build.

The exterior of the house is straightforward and symmetrical. Wood rather than vinyl or aluminum-clad windows were used to lower costs and allow me to change the color eventually. I ordered them primed, then painted them green before they were installed.

**Think curb appeal** I knew it made sense to spend money on the side of the house that peo-



**A WARM, ENVELOPING KITCHEN** The short cherry cabinets over the windows add storage space without sacrificing the view, but they also lend a sense of shelter to the space. The hardworking island on wheels has a sturdy stainless-steel top and lots of storage underneath. Erica found it in a thrift store and restored it with a little elbow grease.





The gabled ceiling adds to the warm and comfortable feel of the master bedroom, creating a safe haven.



## Erica's cost-saving design ideas

ple would see, so I added more detail, including flower boxes, to the front. The less visible sides are plainer, with limited detail.

One feature I had always dreamed about was a romantic covered porch with a swing on it. A porch adds curb appeal because it's evocative of summer and leisurely evenings. So I designed the house with a porch to one side (photo, p. 40), found an oak swing at auction, refinished it, and realized that dream.

**Make a good first impression** As my plans took shape, I decided to loosen things up by creating a two-story entry hall and painting the walls a brilliant red (bottom left photo, p. 46). Everyone who walks in immediately looks up and says they like the intense color.

### Let your personality shine

**Be comfortable** I love planning kitchens, so mine was easy to design. Most clients in the Hamptons want a light and beachy kitchen done in shades of white and sand, but my house would be a year-round residence, so I didn't want it to feel like a summer house. Instead, it's outfitted with simple Shaker-style cherry cabinets and green marble counters. I found the kitchen island at a thrift shop and decided that after a bit of sanding and cleaning up, it looked beautiful.

I wanted my living room to be a comfortable place for quiet activities like reading by the fire. Since practicing yoga and camping are two of my favorite hobbies, I decided to lower the fireplace to floor level instead of designing a raised hearth (photo, p. 41). Now it feels like I'm sitting and stretching in front of a campfire, right in my own home.

A flush hearth also allows more circulation space in the small room. And although the bluestone slab fireplace with a mahogany mantel was based on economy more than anything, it appears quite modern in design.

**Make the master suite a haven** Growing up in an open floor-plan 1970s house, I was always bothered by a lack of privacy. I was determined that my house would have separate rooms.

I had also grown up with a bedroom on the lower level of the house, and I disliked everything about it: the noise from above, cold from

If you're building, and budget is a concern, there are ways to keep costs down. Here are a few things architect/homeowner Erica Broberg recommends:

> Find a level building lot. Slopes and rock outcroppings add considerably to site work and foundation costs.

> Keep the overall shape of the house simple.

● Build your chimney within the house. An exposed exterior brick chimney is more expensive than one built of concrete blocks inside the walls of the house.

● Create a pantry. This allows you to spend less money on cabinetry, which can be pricey.

● Use plain 1x4 interior trim and baseboards. You can always add decorative moldings later.

> Tile costs vary greatly. Use expensive tile sparingly as accents on a field of cheaper industrial tiles.

> Keep the mantel simple. An elaborate mantel will make the rest of the woodwork look underdressed.

● Keep the stair system simple. Elaborate balustrades cost money.

> Leave out crown molding altogether. It is an easy thing to add down the road.

> Ask your building supply yard for windows or doors with dings or dents. A scratch could save you thousands.

> Add dimmers. They're a low-cost way to change the look of a room instantly.

> Downgrade decking material, since you can always update it later with concrete-set stone or a better wood.

**WORTH THE MONEY** Erica splurged on a brushed-nickel faucet because this is the sink her guests use.



**EVERYTHING IN MODERATION** The green accent tiles were pricey but affordable when used sparingly around simpler flooring in the master bath.



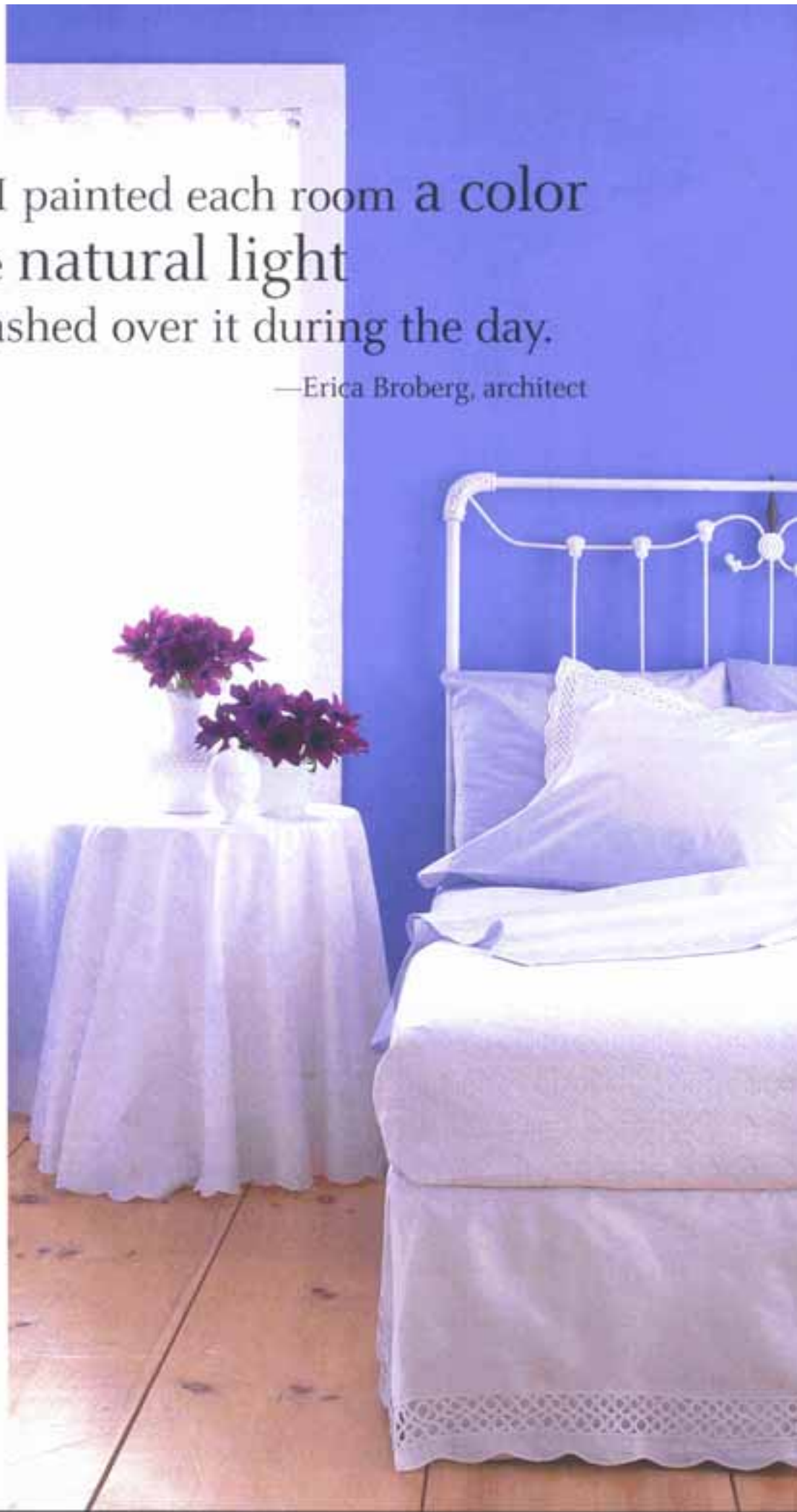


I painted each room a color  
that suited the natural light  
that washed over it during the day.

—Erica Broberg, architect



**USING EVERY INCH OF SPACE**  
Visitors always comment on the red walls in the foyer, but Erica loves the coat closets more. She recommends planning for more closets than you think you'll need.





#### NARROW TRIM, WIDE FLOOR BOARDS

Saving money on inexpensive 1x4 window and door trim allowed the architect to splurge on wide-board, white-pine flooring.

the crawl space below, and the ground-level windows. I knew my master suite would be upstairs, along with a second bedroom, and that only the guest room would be on the ground floor.

Beyond that, I had two motives in designing the master bedroom. Thinking ahead, I wanted to be able to easily rent my house in the summer if I had to. Knowing that most renters dwell in New York City apartments with flat ceilings, I decided that a dramatic gabled ceiling would be especially appealing. The gabled ceiling also adds to the warm and comfortable feel of the room, creating a safe haven.

**Splurge when necessary** By now, you can see that cost was a huge consideration for me, but I'm a firm believer in splurging once in a while—in a sensible way.

For the most part, I think it's smart to keep materials like tile neutral and cheap, but I had my eye on a pricey green onyx mosaic tile. I decided it would look great in my shower and bought a few extra square feet to use as a border pattern on the bathroom floor. I combined it with 12-inch-square limestone tiles cut in half (photos, p. 45). Using an expensive tile as a border is a great way to get the look you want without going overboard.

I splurged on a brushed-nickel faucet in the powder room downstairs, since that's the one my guests use. Another indulgence was wood flooring. I toyed with putting carpet on the second floor to save money, but once the wide-plank, white-pine flooring was installed on the first floor, I was so impressed I used it throughout the house. Another splurge was the replica Edison light bulbs hanging in the kitchen.

Now that I've lived in my house for a few years, I like looking back on the process. I think of how it all came together and what I'd do differently. Details throughout the house serve as reminders of conversations, ideas, problems, and solutions. In the end, I got to know myself better and came away with a sense of great accomplishment, not to mention a wonderful house I feel fortunate to own. **H**

*Erica Broberg practices architecture from the East Hampton, N.Y., house she designed for herself.*

See Resources on page 94.



**CASUAL YET DRESSY** Even though the dining area is just an extension of the kitchen, it can still serve as a formal space for entertaining.

## Lessons I Learned

As happy as I am with the house I designed, there are a few things I wish I'd done differently. Here are some thoughts to keep in mind if you're planning a home of your own.

➤ **THINK AHEAD** Even if the idea of a spouse, children, or working at home seems improbable, it makes good sense to create a house that can adapt to a changing lifestyle.

● **IMAGINE ADDING ON** Even though you may not want an addition or a pool, site the house to accommodate both; it's good for

resale. Situate outdoor utilities and basement access where they won't affect a future addition, because relocation can be costly.

● **NEVER SKIMP ON STORAGE** A house can never have too many closets. Always add more than you think you need, including an oversize coat closet in the front hall if you can.

➤ **PAINT THE BASEMENT** You always think you'll get around to sealing and painting the basement floor and walls, but once you move in and fill the space, I promise, you never will.

➤ **VENT IT** Always put an exhaust fan in each bathroom. Adding them later is an additional expense, not to mention a mess of drywall dust.

● **INCLUDE ATTIC ACCESS** Frame in a pull-down stair to the attic and add a house fan, which pulls the hot air out and cools the house in the summer.

● **ADD A PANTRY** If you can, design a walk-in pantry. Floor-to-ceiling painted shelves can hold all of your pots, pans, dry goods, and anything else you can't fit in your cabinets. —E.B.