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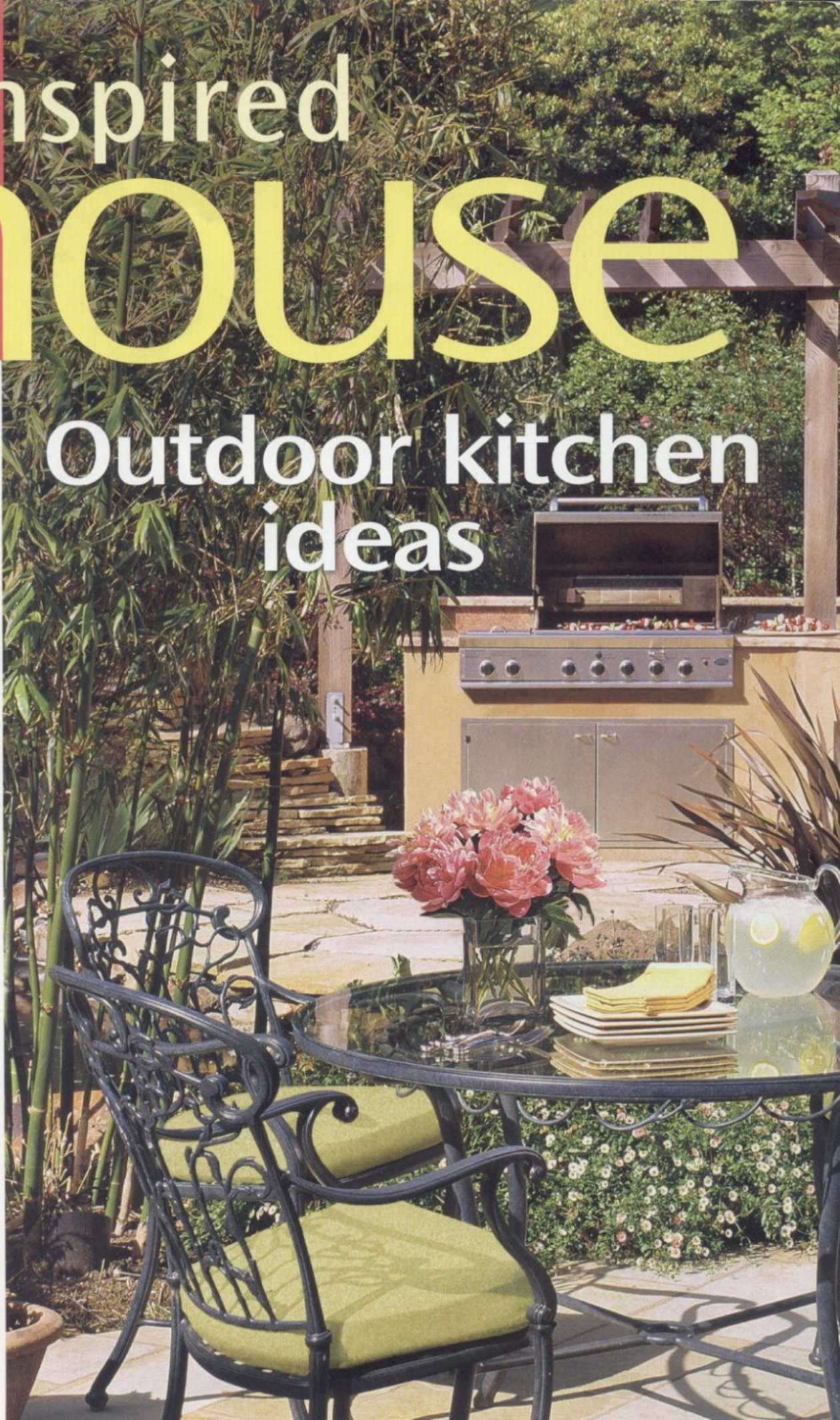
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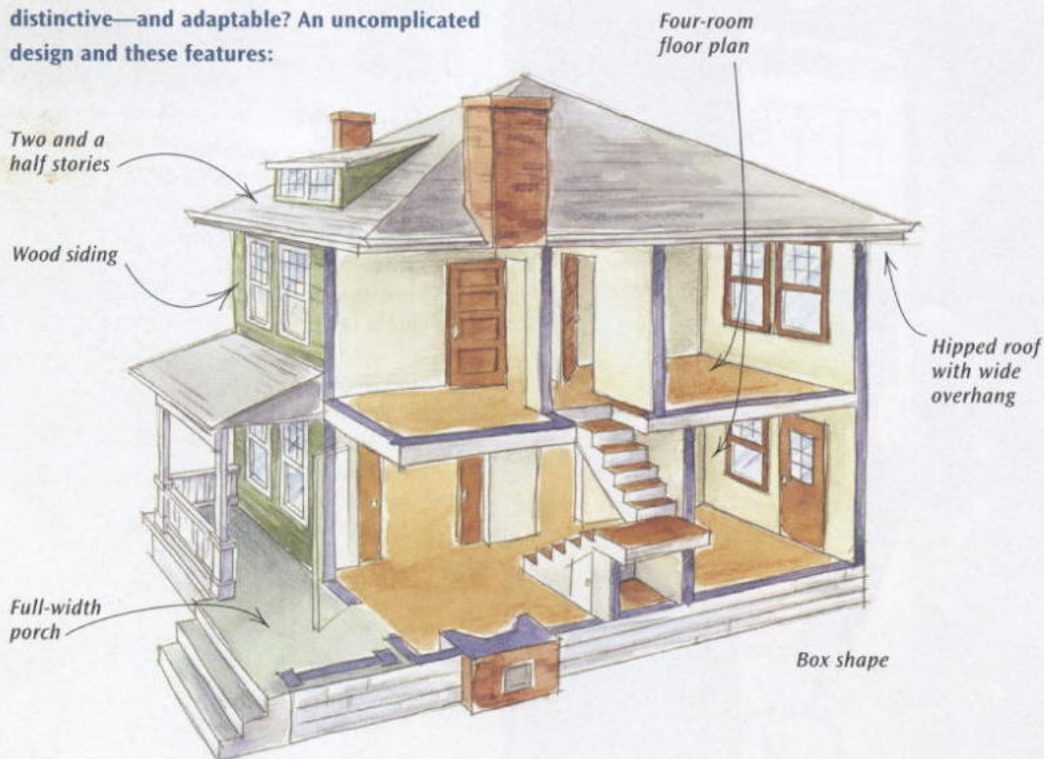
# Bringing Back the Foursquare

BY JOHN CONNELL

One family's loving restoration showcases the versatility of this straightforward style

## IT'S HIP TO BE SQUARE

What makes the American foursquare so distinctive—and adaptable? An uncomplicated design and these features:



Most of us love a good house-rescue story, and this one is as good as they get. It's about a broken-down four-square in a marginal Atlanta neighborhood that turned the head and won the heart of Warner McConaughy, a builder with an appreciation for traditional detailing, design, and craftsmanship. The story also features Allison, an interior designer, who in due time married Warner, and with him, remodeled the house, had kids, and saved the neighborhood. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

The story begins in 1991, when Warner had more building experience than budget. When the derelict house went up for auction, he bid just \$15,000—and won it. Buyer's remorse set in immediately, but then he calculated that the taxes were so low and the carrying costs so negligible that he could restore it, room by room, using little more than creativity and credit cards.

Comprising four rooms on each of two floors and another half story under the roof, a foursquare is basically a box with a porch out front. It's the simplicity of that box that makes it so easy to remodel. The absence of cantilevers or hidden structural gymnastics takes the



**A SENSE OF COMMUNITY** *The McCaughey family enjoys their porch, which links their home to the rest of the revitalized four-squares on this Atlanta street.*



**A PLACE TO PAUSE** *By taking down a wall between the foyer and the parlor, the homeowners were able to create a more open feel on the first floor. They remained faithful to the foursquare's style by using salvaged windows and flooring from other rooms in the house.*

mystery out of moving walls or cutting new penetrations.

Like a sensible pair of shoes, the foursquare delivers practicality and comfort; like a favorite pair of jeans, it can be dressed up or down with ease. Simple rooms arranged in a straightforward plan allow for discrete public and private spaces. And after almost a century, young homeowners are discovering that this basic design is still a great deal.

### **Making a grand entrance**

Warner's strategy was simple. First, he restored the exterior so the house was weather-tight, authentic, and appealing from the street. Then he moved inside and restored small sections of the house as funds became available. He

did his best to salvage what he could, using original boards from the attic floor to patch a worn spot in the living room. He found a few surviving windows in the rear of the house that could be reinstalled in front where they are visible from the street.

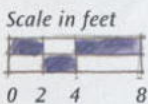
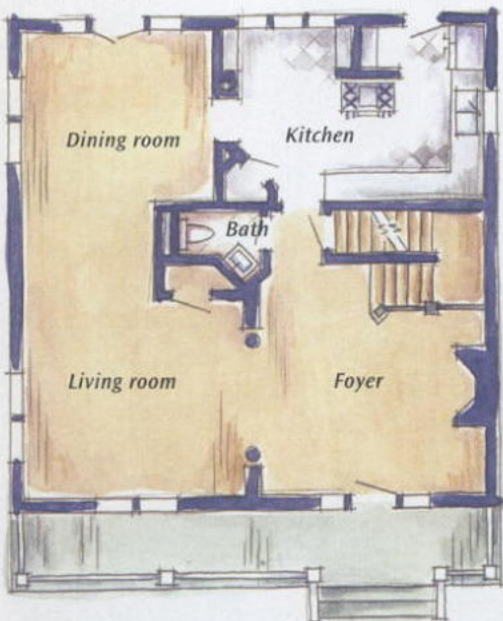
And while most of his efforts were restorative, he made a handful of sensitive changes that reflected a more contemporary lifestyle. For instance, the entry hall was faithfully restored except for the wall separating it from the living room, which was taken down to provide a more expansive feel and a sense of ceremony upon entering the house.

By bracketing the new opening with columns, he preserved the memory of the original foursquare layout. And because the columns match those on the front porch, the move was fairly seamless.

## A PLEASING PLAN EMERGES

The character of the McConaugheys' house was restored with a little tweaking of its classic four-over-four configuration—and a lot of hard work.

### FIRST FLOOR



### SECOND FLOOR



When I bought my wrecked American foursquare in 1991 for \$15,000, my friends thought I was getting ripped off—it was that bad. The house was built in 1910 as a solid, single-family home, but it had endured decades of neglect. In the 1960s, the stairs were ripped out and it was turned into an eight-room boarding house. It had a bad roof and termite damage. Everything of any value had been taken from it, including the window weights. Anybody else would have torn it down, but I knew it was a well-designed house, and I was determined to fix it. My wife, Allison, and I had a vision, and it took 10 years, but we made it happen. There were times when I questioned what we were doing. It was my grandmother, then 90, who told me to be determined and never give up.

—Warner McConaughey

**AT ONCE STATELY AND UNASSUMING** *The remodeled foursquare isn't grand or mansionlike, but it is elegant in its simplicity, and it definitely has curb appeal.*

The attic is the one area where Warner made wholesale alterations. He transformed the space under the rafters into a modern loft, housing an office, a bedroom, and a lot more storage. He underscored its contemporary feel by designing an iron railing for the staircase and matching it to the headboard in the master suite (photos, p. 50).

### A stove dictates the kitchen design

Though he loves to cook, Warner was never tempted to modernize the kitchen. He wasn't interested in an open plan because it would not be appropriate for the lifestyle he envisioned. His kitchen is contained in a large room anchored by a vintage gas stove he'd been storing for more than a decade. He opted for more traditional built-in



## THE MANY FACES OF THE FOURSQUARE

The foursquare wears details well. Over the years, nearly every imaginable architectural style has influenced its simple, boxy style.



Twin chimneys feel vaguely Victorian



Columns reflect a colonial influence



Exposed rafter tails are Craftsmanlike



Stucco sides evoke the bungalow



Open porch suggests a prairie style



cupboards and a pantry (instead of overhead cabinets), and in so doing, created a kitchen for people serious about cooking. He installed elegant and durable materials: Italian tiles, wire shelving, matte granite counters, and a large farmhouse sink.

But when it came to choosing wall colors, Warner was stumped, and that was a good thing, because it brought Allison into the picture. He was smart enough to know when to ask an interior designer for help, and Allison, who found much of her work through referrals, saw the benefit in getting to know the builder better.

They went to the house on their first date—ostensibly to talk paint. Things went well from there, this being a rare

case in which a house project actually brought two people together. Allison and Warner were married before the house was even finished.

### Details make all the difference

The simple foursquare owes much of its appeal to the fact that it is almost a blank canvas when it comes to filling in the details. Warner and Allison took advantage of these opportunities and designed unusual built-ins throughout. In the kitchen, they created windowed cupboards; in the master bath they tucked in the bathtub, sinks, and linen storage. Skillful use of trim, moldings, and tile makes these new built-ins an integral part of the historic interior.



## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FOURSQUARE

The foursquare is one of the most important house styles to emerge at the beginning of the 20th century, and a direct reaction to fussy Victorians and delicate Queen Anne styles. Simple, functional, and affordable, the foursquare is uniquely American.

Economical to build and well suited to small lots, the style quickly spread to suburbia and to every city on both coasts. Through its catalog, Sears, Roebuck and Co. sold thousands of house kits made of concrete block.

The foursquare's basic configuration was sometimes broken by corner turrets, bays, or in more expansive models, by wings added on at the back or sides. But beyond adaptations and ornament, it remained true to its defiantly simple style. A century later, it is still held in high esteem as an authentic and comfortable house. —J.C.

They solved contemporary problems with vintage style; for example, Allison never liked the scuffing that mars the lower zone of every walk-in closet with shoe storage. So she specified white tile wainscoting in hers. Similar design spontaneity resulted in a window on the stair landing that looks into the kitchen, brightening that space and improving communication from floor to floor.

**A RANGE OF IDEAS**  
It was love at first sight when Warner found this vintage stove (above)—long before he bought the house. It inspired the period design for the rest of the kitchen.

### Porches are a priority

Perhaps the most important feature of the American foursquare is its porch. More than a stylistic ornament, the porch provides an outdoor room that mediates between public and private spaces. It's a shady refuge within easy



**MELDING OLD AND NEW** Only within the confines of the private master suite did the homeowners feel they could introduce a modern loft with iron railings (below). For good measure, they integrated a symbolic foursquare design into the railing and the custom headboard (right).



talking distance of the sidewalk and the neighbors. When well-loved porches are lined up as they are on the McConaugheys' street, they enhance the neighborhood.

Still, the mark of a great porch is how well it connects interior rooms with the outdoors. Warner took that to heart when he designed and built a two-story, fully compatible porch at the rear of the house. At grade, it creates a protected outdoor place to eat and socialize, expanding both the dining room and the kitchen. On the second floor, it provides a private sitting area for relaxing or viewing the garden. It also connects the children's room with their parents' and provides another means of egress for both.

Tightly lined with well-kept American foursquares, Warner and

Allison's once-downtrodden street is now a piece of valuable real estate. Shortly after they completed their own renovation, the McConaugheys purchased and began renovating the house next door. One by one, neighbors followed suit. The revitalized houses all are faithful to the character of the classic architectural style—with the personal touches only a vested homeowner can add. **h**

*John Connell is an architect and the author of *Creating the Inspired House* (Taunton, 2004), from which this article was adapted.*

*For more information, see Resources, page 86.*





**VIVID IMAGINATION REQUIRED**  
 When the homeowners bought the rundown house at auction for \$15,000 (before photo), its charm was long gone. Luckily, they were able to picture how it would look after a full-out rescue (left). They added French doors and a rear second-story porch.



Perhaps the most important feature of the American foursquare is its porch.



**A GARDEN, TOO**  
 The ramshackle yard was completely restored and landscaped with privacy in mind—a plus when you live in the middle of a city.