



Finally Home

How to Design a Life Worth Living In

For homes that carry a story — and the second homes where new ones begin

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Before We Begin

Some homes come to us already full of history — a grandparent's farmhouse, a family camp on the lake, a place that's been in the family for two or three generations. Others are the home you've chosen for what comes next — a second home in Vermont, a place set apart from the pace of everyday life.

Either way, you're not starting from nothing. You're starting from something worth taking seriously. This guide is the work that happens before any drawings are made — a set of questions that help us understand what should stay, what should change, and what kind of home will feel true to both its past and its future.

There are no right or wrong answers. Some questions will seem obvious. Others might stop you in your tracks — especially the ones about what a place has meant to your family, or how you actually want to use a home you don't live in year-round. Both kinds are useful.

This guide works for new construction, renovations, and additions alike — including homes that have been passed down, and homes you're just getting to know. If a question doesn't fit your situation, write N/A and keep moving.

Working through this with siblings, a spouse, or other family members who share a stake in the home? We recommend everyone answer independently first, then compare notes. Where a family home is concerned, the differences are often the most important part of the conversation.

A note on how to read this guide

The guide has eight sections,, plus a short section early on for homes with a family history or a part-time role in your life. Throughout you'll find shaded boxes labeled 'Designer's Eye' — our perspective on why a question matters. Read them as you go, skip them, or save them for later.

What Are You Working With?

Before we dive in, let's establish the nature of your project. Your answer below will help you navigate the sections that follow.

My project is: ☐ New construction on undeveloped land ☐ Renovation or addition to an existing home
☐ An inherited or multi-generation family home ☐ A second home ☐ Both (phased project)

➤ *INHERITED OR MULTI-GENERATION HOME: Start with the new "Continuing the Story" section below before moving into Site & Property — it will shape how you answer everything that follows.*

➤ *SECOND HOME: The "Continuing the Story" section includes a short track on part-time and long-distance ownership. The Household section further on is worth answering twice — once for how you live there, once for how guests or renters might.*

➤ *NEW CONSTRUCTION: The Site & Property and Shell of the House sections may be partially N/A — fill in what you know, skip what doesn't apply yet.*

➤ *RENOVATION / ADDITION: Work through all sections in order. The Shell of the House questions are especially important — they tell us what we're working with before we talk about what's possible.*

Continuing the Story

A short section before we begin — for homes with history, or homes apart

These questions are for homes that come with a story already attached — inherited from family, or set apart as a second home. If neither applies to your project, skip ahead to Site & Property.

If this home has been in your family

What do you remember most vividly about this house growing up, or hearing about it?

Are there specific rooms, materials, or details that must be preserved, no matter what else changes?

Is there anything about the house you've always wished were different, even before it was yours?

Are other family members involved in decisions about this home? What do they care most about protecting?

What would it mean to the family to see this home thoughtfully continued rather than replaced?

Why we ask about memory first

Priscilla always says a legacy home already knows what it wants to be — our job is to listen before we change anything. The details people want to preserve are rarely the ones you'd guess. That's exactly why we ask.

If this is a second home

How many weeks or months a year do you expect to use this home?

Will it ever be rented, lent to family, or used by others when you're not there?

Who manages the property when you're away — a caretaker, a property manager, a neighbor?

How important is low-maintenance operation versus features that need more upkeep but matter to you?

Does this home need to function well for entertaining guests, or is it primarily a retreat for your own family?

Is there a primary residence this home should feel distinct from — a different pace, a different feeling?

Designing for the weeks you're actually there

A second home doesn't need everything a full-time home needs — but it needs the right things done well. We design around how a home is actually used, not around a hypothetical everyday that never happens.

Starting strong — Section 1 of 8

Site & Property

These questions establish the fixed facts of your land — the things that will shape every decision that follows. If you don't have all the answers yet, note what you know and flag what needs follow-up.

Where are the edges of the property? Does a current survey map exist?

Are there any Right-of-Way issues, easements, or liens on the property?

How far from the property is the town-maintained road? Who maintains the driveway?

Is the property in a municipality with zoning laws? Any restrictions relevant to your project?

Where is the septic tank and leach field, or is the property connected to a municipal system?

What kinds of trees and landscape features surround the property?

Is there a view you want to preserve, frame, or capture?

Why site comes first

David always says: start with the things that won't change. Property lines, septic location, the direction of prevailing winds, where the sun rises — these are the bones of the project. Getting them wrong early is expensive. Getting them right makes everything else easier.

Great start — Section 2 of 8

Funding & Timeline

Budget conversations can feel uncomfortable, but they're one of the most important ones we have. A clear number — even an approximate one — lets us design something beautiful that you can actually build, rather than something beautiful that stays on paper.

How is this project being funded?

Does your funding require a firm timeline? How much flexibility do you have?

Is there a budget ceiling we should design to? (Approximate ranges are perfectly fine.)

Are you concerned about the home's value as a financial investment, now or when you sell?

You're making great progress — Section 3 of 8

The Existing Structure

For renovation and addition projects only. Skip this section if you're building new.

Understanding what you already have — the good and the not-so-good — is the foundation of a smart renovation. These questions help us assess what we're working with before we start imagining what's possible.

Foundation & Envelope

What type of foundation does the house sit on?

What is the roof material and type? Has it ever leaked? Any visible water staining below the eaves?

What is the exterior siding, and what condition is it in?

What type of windows are installed? How old are they?

Has the house had any weatherproofing, insulation upgrades, or energy improvements?

Mechanical Systems

What is the primary heating system? Is there a secondary? (e.g. wood stove, propane, heat pump)

Is there air conditioning? What type?

How old are the heating and cooling systems?

Well or town water? If a well, any issues with supply or water quality?

How often does the property lose power? Is there backup power?

Is solar energy something you're interested in exploring?

What does the house currently cost to heat and cool per year (approximate)?

The hidden cost of surprises

Moisture in walls, aging mechanical systems, and undersized electrical panels are the most common sources of budget surprises in renovations. The more we know upfront, the more accurately we can estimate — and the fewer surprises you'll face once construction begins.

Halfway there — Section 4 of 8

The Household

A home is designed for the people who live in it — and for the people they're becoming. These questions help us understand not just who you are now, but who you might be in ten years, and, for a family or second home, who else this home needs to welcome.

How many people will live here full-time or visit regularly? List them — adults, children, extended family, part-time residents.

Are there household or family members who need special accommodations now — mobility, sensory, or medical?

Might that change in the next 5–10 years? What do you anticipate?

Do you have pets? What kind, how many? Do they go in and out independently?

Does anyone in the household work from home? See clients at home?

On aging in place: Even if stairs aren't a concern today, it costs very little to design for the future — a main-floor primary bedroom, wider doorways, blocking in the walls for future grab bars. We always ask, and we always recommend thinking ahead.

This is the heart of it — Section 5 of 8

How You Live

This is the heart of the guide. We've learned more from these questions than from any floor plan or site drawing. Take your time with them.

Daily Rhythms

When you arrive at this home, what are the first three things you do?

What are the last three things you do before leaving, or before bed?

Where in this home — or the home it's replacing — do you spend the most time? Why?

Where do you feel most at peace — anywhere, not just at home?

The arrival sequence

The answer to 'what are the first three things you do when you arrive' has shaped more entryway designs than any other question we ask. Shoes off? You need a bench. Keys always lost? You need a hook at eye level. The most useful design decisions come from the most ordinary habits.

Sensory Preferences

Are you sensitive to light, noise, or temperature in ways that affect how you use your home?

Do you need extra light in winter? Do you prefer natural light, or do you rely on artificial lighting?

What temperature do you prefer in living spaces? In sleeping spaces?

What types of flooring do you prefer? (Hardwood, tile, carpet, radiant heat?)

Style & Atmosphere

Don't worry if you can't articulate this yet — the inspiration board exercise at the end of this guide is designed for exactly that. But if something comes to mind, write it down.

Describe your style in a few words, or name a place — a hotel, a family member's home, a room in a magazine — that felt exactly right to you.

Is there a style you actively dislike or want to avoid?

Shoes, Storage & the Way You Move

Shoes on or shoes off household?

Are you right-handed or left-handed? (This shapes kitchen and workspace design more than most people expect.)

Do you tend to lose things? Are there systems — hooks, trays, drop zones — that help you stay organized?

More than halfway — Section 6 of 8

The Kitchen

We spend more time in kitchens than in any other room — because that's where the mechanics of daily life are most visible, and where a thoughtful design pays off every single day. Answer as specifically as you can.

Cooking & Flow

Do you enjoy cooking? How often do you cook here?

When you have guests, are you a 'cooking show' host — talking and cooking at the same time — or do you prefer to have everything ready before people arrive?

Do you know the kitchen work triangle (refrigerator–sink–stove)? Which direction do you tend to move through it — clockwise or counterclockwise?

Gas flame or electric burner? Any strong preference?

The work triangle

The classic work triangle — refrigerator, sink, stove — is still one of the most reliable tools in kitchen design. The direction you move through it is often determined by handedness, habit, and the position of the window. We'll figure it out together, but it helps to start thinking about it now.

Counter & Storage

How do you feel about countertop clutter? Which appliances live out permanently vs. get stored away?

Is there a morning ritual — coffee, tea, smoothies — that deserves its own dedicated spot?

Pots and pans: hanging near the stove, or stored out of sight?

Under-counter storage preference: big drawers or shelves with doors?

Do you use cookbooks regularly? Where would you want them to live?

Do you compost? Where does that bin live — counter, under the sink, outside?

How do you handle recycling? How much storage does it need?

Dishwashing & the Sink

Do you use an automatic dishwasher? Where would you like it relative to the sink?

When washing by hand, do you work left to right or right to left?

Entertaining & Groceries

When you unpack groceries, how much counter space do you typically need?

Do you have formal versus everyday tableware? Where does each live?

Would you like the kitchen open to the living and dining areas, or more contained?

Is a wine or beverage fridge something you'd actually use?

Almost there — Section 7 of 8

Wellness, Work & Special Spaces

The way we use our homes has changed. More people work from home, exercise at home, and need spaces for practices that didn't fit neatly into the traditional floor plan. This section helps us understand whether your home needs to do more than sleep, eat, and gather.

Work From Home

Do you work from home, full or part time? Do you need a dedicated office, or would a quiet corner do?

Do you see clients or hold meetings at home — in person or on video?

If two people work from home, do you need two separate spaces where you can both be on calls simultaneously?

Wellness & Movement

Do you have a fitness or movement practice you want to support at home? (Yoga, weights, cycling, dance, swimming?)

Would a dedicated room for exercise, yoga, or meditation be genuinely meaningful to you?

Is a hot tub, sauna, or pool something you'd use regularly?

Aging in Place & Accessibility

Is it important that the primary bedroom be on the main floor?

Are wider doorways, a step-free entry, or a curbless shower worth considering now?

Are there features that would make this home work better if mobility became a concern in the future — for you, or for aging family members who'll visit?

Designing for the long arc

Aging-in-place features used to feel like a compromise. They're not anymore. A curbless shower is just a beautiful shower. A wide doorway is just a wide doorway. We can build flexibility into the bones of a home — at very little extra cost — so that it works for you, and for the family that follows you, at every stage of life.

Other Special Spaces

Are there rooms or functions this home currently lacks that you've always wanted? (Library, music room, art studio, workshop, craft room, guest suite?)

Do you want space for overnight guests? How often, and how separate should it feel from the main living areas?

Final section — Section 8 of 8

Outdoors & the Site

In Vermont, the relationship between indoors and outdoors changes with every season. A well-designed transition between the two — entry sequences, covered porches, south-facing decks — makes a real difference in how a home feels year-round, whether you're there for the winter or just for August.

How important is outdoor living to you? Deck, patio, screened porch, covered outdoor room?

Do you want an outdoor kitchen or fireplace?

Is a garage important? How many cars, and what else needs to live there — bikes, kayaks, seasonal gear?

How should the garage connect to the house — mudroom, direct kitchen entry, covered walkway?

Is there a guest house, studio, or accessory building in your plans, now or eventually?

Where You've Been & Where You're Going

These are our favorite questions in the whole guide. They often produce the most useful information of all — and sometimes they surprise the people answering them.

Where have you lived before? What did you love about those places?

Is there a room, a house, or a place you've visited that felt exactly right? What made it that way?

What do you want to feel when you arrive at this home?

What do you want guests, or future generations, to feel when they walk in?

Is there anything about the way this home has been used that you want to change — and anything you want to make sure never changes?

The feeling behind the floor plan

Clients often come to us with a list of rooms. What they really want is a feeling — warmth, calm, continuity, connection. Once we understand the feeling, the rooms tend to take care of themselves.

You're Done — Nice Work!

That wasn't a small thing. Thinking carefully about how you live — and how you want a home with history, or a home apart from the everyday, to carry you forward — is harder than it sounds, and most people never do it before they start a building project. You just did.

What you have now is a map: not just of rooms and square footage, but of the life — and the story — you're designing toward. Bring it to your first meeting with us. Bring the parts you didn't finish, too. Bring your questions, and bring the rest of the family if it's their story too. There are no wrong answers here — only the beginning of a conversation we're very much looking forward to having.

A Word of Caution

When you start sharing your ideas with others — friends, family, builders you've met at a home show — you'll quickly notice something: everyone has opinions, and they'll often try to apply their own preferences to your project. Listen politely, then come back to what you wrote here.

This is your home, and your family's story. These answers are yours. Our job is to translate them into something beautiful, functional, and built to last — not to impose our own taste, and not to let anyone else impose theirs either.

A builder who asks for a napkin sketch and a deposit is not your friend at this stage. The least expensive path to your dream home runs through clear, well-considered plans. That's exactly what we build together.

Your Next Step: The Inspiration Board

Before your first meeting, start collecting images that make you feel something — rooms, exteriors, details, landscapes, even colors or textures that resonate. Old photographs of the home itself, if it has history, are especially welcome. Magazines, Pinterest, Instagram, photographs from travels. Don't edit yourself. Don't worry about whether it's 'realistic.' Just collect.

We'll go through them with you. What people choose often surprises them — and it almost always tells us something the words in this guide couldn't.

Meet the Team

Cotton Design is a family-owned and operated business with deep roots in historic Newfane and southeastern Vermont. We've come to love working together as a family — and with people who've become like family — and we extend that warmth and respect to every client. Our team values honest communication and collaboration, which you'll feel from the very first conversation.

David Cotton — Owner & Principal Architectural Designer

Since the late 1970s, David Cotton has been the creative force behind the design of residences, commercial establishments, and public structures across New England. His path into design began after honorable service in the U.S. Marine Corps, working as an apprentice under his uncle — a respected structural engineer in Boston. In 1979 he founded Cotton Design as a residential firm; in 1994 he joined forces with

architect Paul Belaski, expanding into commercial design. A devoted husband and grandfather, a lifelong softball player, and a music lover since Woodstock in 1969.

Priscilla Cotton — Owner & Principal Designer

Priscilla Cotton has always been a designer, a calling encouraged early by her family's own eye for art and design. She is at the heart of the family business, welcoming every client with kindness and an open mind, honored to bring their dreams — and the stories behind them — into reality.

Lauren Cotton — Lead Interior Designer

Lauren Cotton grew up in the business and found her design perspective early, later working as a fashion stylist and set designer in New York City before returning to Vermont and joining Cotton Design. She delights in helping clients realize their unique vision — and if the perfect piece can't be found, she'll make it herself.

Prema Agate — Office Manager & Client Services

Since joining Cotton Design in 2022, Prema has been a cornerstone of client care and office efficiency. As the first point of contact for new clients, she's committed to creating a warm, clear, collaborative experience from the very first call.

Peter Welch — Director of Business Operations

Peter was born and raised in southeastern Vermont — an area that became his chosen home after years of living in cities across the U.S. He also spent decades as a brick mason, restoring chimneys and stone buildings throughout southern Vermont. He now acts as liaison between the design team, clients, and construction professionals, and is the point person on project financials.

Paul Belaski — Architect

After studying Architecture and Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania, Paul received his Masters of Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. In 1994, Paul and David began Cotton Belaski Architectural Services, combining creative design with energy efficiency and value-conscious construction.

Congratulations — and thank you.

You've just done something most people skip entirely. By working through this guide, you've given yourself — and us — a real foundation to build from. What comes next is the part we love most: turning everything you've written here into a home that carries your story forward.

To schedule your first consultation, reach out to Prema. She'll take it from there — getting you on the calendar, answering any questions about our process, and making sure your first meeting is exactly what it should be.

Prema Agate — Office Manager & Client Services

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