



Photograph by Phillip Mueller from *Welcoming Home* by Michaela Mahady. Reprinted with permission by Gibbs Smith.

Author and architect
Michaela Mahady
shares her secrets
to a happy home.

BY SARA BROWN

The Welcome Home

IT'S THE STUFF that fairytales are made of — living in your dream home. A home that speaks to you and draws you in. As Goldilocks would say, a home that feels “just right.”

But how do you create such a space? What warm, welcoming qualities do such dwellings possess? These are questions that author and architect Michaela Mahady answers in her new book, *Welcoming Home*.

“Innately, we all know the kinds of things that make a space feel good around us, but when it comes to designing or renovating a home, we often just rely on room sizes and a list of amenities we think we need to make our home more valuable,” explains Mahady. “Instead, people should learn from their own experiences and really trust in that. Understanding what spaces have made us feel most comfortable and alive in the past is a really crucial tool for designing a welcoming home.”

Before you get started, though, Mahady suggests asking yourself a series of questions to help unveil what type of home will resonate the most with you. “Think about the spaces that you’ve been in throughout your lifetime that felt the most “right” to you. What size were they? If you’re in a space and it feels just right, measure the ceiling height and the room dimensions. Also note where you find yourself sitting in that room and where the light comes from. That will tell you a lot about the kinds of qualities you need in certain spaces.”

Also turning to memories of past places that made you feel good will help you understand your own likes and dislikes. “Someone that grew up in a really small home may either really hate small homes or want to achieve that same sense of security that they got in that home,” Mahady explains. “Everyone wants to know how their future home will feel, so if it’s molded around your own past experiences and perceptions, you can feel confident knowing that it will feel right to you in the end.”

A HOUSE THAT SAYS HELLO

Although everyone has different qualities that make them feel at home, Mahady has discovered that there are common, universal design characteristics that seem to reach out and speak to people. In fact, early in her career, she designed a home, dubbed the Maple Forest House, that she believes embodied all of those special qualities. Here, she shares those design elements that add a warm, welcoming presence to a home.

Front-Facing Gable. In a home with a strong gable roof, the gable seems to come out and greet you, Mahady explains. “It creates a strong, protective, almost human-like presence,” she says. “You understand in its symmetry and the protective way it envelops the roof that it’s a good place to be. It will reach out to you as if to say ‘Hello. How are you? Come on in.’”



MAPLE FOREST HOUSE: The Maple Forest house (pictured opposite and above) was the inspiration for *Welcoming Home*. First designed by Mahady for a Minnesota parade of homes, the house was eventually featured in a number of publications, including *Better Homes & Gardens*, where it instantly became the magazine’s most popular floor plan to date. Mahady received hundreds of phone calls from people who had simply fallen in love with the plan without ever stepping foot in the house. “Initially, I didn’t know how to respond to all of those comments,” says Mahady. “But as the conversations continued to happen frequently, I would simply say: ‘I know what you mean. I feel that way about the house, too.’”



Being able to work from home creates more fluidity in one's everyday experience, so incorporating a designated workspace in your home is a smart idea, if you can swing it. "If you can work from home, there's less separation between the 'work' you and the 'home' you. That goes a long way toward relieving the stress of being in the workplace at all times," explains Michaela Mahady. "At home, you can just be yourself, and I think you're actually more productive."

To accomplish this, think about how to sequester the space to make it private, suggests Mahady. "Sometimes it's just a matter of finding a place that feels comfortable before using a curtain or screen to section it off," she says. "It could also be as simple as incorporating a series of tall objects to create a 'wall' around the space."

Big Roof. A large roof declares that the house is a safe haven, shelter from the elements as well as from the rigorous pace of everyday life. "Big overhanging eaves suggest safety and protection," says Mahady. "You instinctively know that you can stand under the eaves, close to the house, and it will protect you." It also protects the walls of the house from weather, and shades the windows from the heat and glare of direct sun exposure.

Covered Porch. A covered porch is the preface of the welcoming spaces within the house itself — a transition area between the inside and outside. "It's that magical space that sits right between public and private space," Mahady notes. "When you're on your porch, you know more about what's happening around you, in your neighborhood. You can engage with people as they walk by. It's kind of special because of that."

Sheltered Spaces Within. It's no secret that many people are drawn to the charm of older homes, and it stands to reason because these homes were built with a careful sense of scale to the human form. They were also planned and zoned to separate distinct spaces and rooms within the home. Today's homes are much more casual, but you can still define the interior spaces with things like varying ceiling heights, surface treatments and carefully placed architectural elements, says Mahady. Arched ceilings,

Creating a Home for You

In order to build a home that truly reflects you and your personal needs and likes, author and architect, Michaela Mahady, suggests completing these 10 exercises. The results, she insists, will help you uncover, discover and create a place where you can most truly be yourself.

1. Learn to really see. Observe and note the way places make you feel. Which are most enjoyable? Which do you seldom use, and which do you avoid altogether if possible? Are there places in your daily life that seem uncomfortable, or lonely, or even scary? Why do you think they feel that way?

2. Explore and explain. Note the characteristics of the kinds of environments you are most drawn to. Do you have a favorite spot in your house? What do you do there? Do you share it with company or enjoy it by yourself? What about your favorite places outdoors? Are they cozy, expansive or some combination of the two?

3. Ask yourself questions. Think of all the important places in your lifetime, and record your thoughts and memories about each of those places, in written or visual form. What combination of enclosure or openness, light, temperature, color and texture comprised those spaces? What did you do in those places? What activities happened there?

4. Describe the house you live in now. How does it feel to drive up to it? Try to imagine that you are seeing your house for the first time. What does it say to you? What does it say about you?

5. Have a conversation with your present house. Tell it how it supports and comforts you, if it does. Tell it the way it frees you, or conversely inhibits you. Is it too big, too small, or just right? Does it demand too much from you financially or overwhelm you with its care and maintenance?

6. Have a conversation with a home in your future. Where is it located? Which people in your life is it close to? Is it bigger or smaller than your house now? What would the house say to you, and about you?

7. Find houses that speak to you. Consider why you are drawn to them. Look to your memories, to favorite books or magazines, to experiences as you travel. Pay attention as you take walks around your neighborhood. Which houses would you like to get to know?

8. Translate your recorded images. Trust your instincts. Learn to recognize and acknowledge your intuitive responses and understanding. Then take some time to qualify these observations: Carry a tape measure and camera around with you. Photograph and measure the spaces that pique your interest. You may find common dimensional, spatial and proportional relationships in the places you analyze this way.

9. Put the pieces together. Weave them together with an eye to incorporating the personal patterns you have discovered. Study the relationship of the house to the sun and the views on the site. Think about the relationship of rooms to one another inside the house, and think about the kind of shape the house has, inside and outside.

10. Discover the patterns in the houses that speak to you. Find out when they were built, who built them, and for whom they were built. Find architects or design professionals whose work speaks to you and who will listen to you. They can help you create a house that will welcome you home every day.



Welcoming Home (\$40, Gibbs Smith) provides imagery and insight to creating a dwelling that truly makes you feel at home.

eating nooks, alcoves and window seats are all examples of these types of “sheltered spaces.”

Details, Ornamentation & Hand-crafted Elements. The last “welcoming” characteristics that Mahady addresses are elements that, as she puts it, invite the touch. “When we interpret

our environment through the sense of touch, we gain a tactile sense of the space we inhabit,” she explains. And this, she says, is especially important in timber homes.

“If you look at an actual timber beam, you understand so much about the tree and also about the person who shaped

the tree,” she says. “It invites your touch, and you understand that the buildings that

we enjoy in the present were built by skilled people in the past, and you can see their work around you. You have a more intimate understanding and you value those things when living in a hand-crafted home.” ■