

# HIDDEN

On the outskirts of Santa Fe, a young couple discovers that the raw materials for a gorgeously designed home are right under their roof.

# TREASURES

Sam Mittelsteadt tours a kid-friendly abode that is bright, bold and bursting with Southwestern style

Photography by Bill Stengel





**T**he homeowners' project began as many do: with a trip to the local home improvement store. This one, however, ended with a spectacular full gut renovation, completed on a tight budget — and in only two months.

The house, on a large plot of land just outside Santa Fe, is tucked amid large piñon and juniper trees that provide a sense of privacy. “A big part of the reason we moved here was for the quality of life,” the husband says. “We wanted to have our kids be outdoors, be near the mountains, and to have nature all around.”

But the disjointed floor plan in the 2,800-square-foot rambler home included extraneous walls that impeded the dispersal of outside light, as well as inside communication. “You felt like you were cut off from the family, even if you were just in another part of the house,” he says.

At the home improvement store, the couple realized that while she wanted “a lot more color,” he preferred everything gray, green and brown. “We couldn’t decide on paint colors, on carpet, on

profession that if people would just let us do our jobs, it would make things a lot easier.” So why not enlist professional help themselves?

On the recommendation of a jewelry designer friend, they found themselves browsing the website of French & French Interiors, run by a local husband-and-wife team that oversaw projects from general contracting through interior design. “When I looked at their portfolio, it was totally what I envisioned for my own house,” says the wife. “Once

*anything,”* he says. “After a weekend of being stressed about something that should have been enjoyable, we admitted to ourselves that we really didn’t know what the hell we were doing.”

“We’re super busy and have a new baby, and we knew that no matter what we tried to do, we’d be overwhelmed by choices,” says the husband, an emergency-care physician. “We’re in a



Heather and Matt came in, we trusted them right away,” the husband says. “The way they analyzed the house, and their vision of how it should be, was so spot on. We’d been staring at it for a year, and they figured it out in five minutes.”

Eliminating some partition walls and changing others would open up the space, improving the flow of the house and helping the rooms feel cohesive. And a new fenestration would add brightness inside the house, as well as a connection to the outdoors. “The new windows are great,” the husband says. “We see the mountains from every room of the house.”

“Our vision was to embrace what was there, but to push ourselves to interpret it in a modern way,” says Heather. Some existing woodwork was kept but transformed through paint; the cabinetry in the children’s bathroom, for one, went from off-white to bright emerald. And in an even bolder move, the wood ceiling beams throughout the house were slathered with coats of creamy white that brought

in light and lent authenticity to their hand-hewn surfaces, highlighting and reflecting the cracks and imperfections.

The Frenches’ vision also meant rediscovering and reclaiming unique pieces of furniture the homeowners already owned, such as a mohair settee — a relic from the textiles company founded by the wife’s grandparents — that’s now the centerpiece in the sitting room. “We knew it was cool, but we didn’t know how to get the beauty out of it,” the homeowners say. “Heather recognized it right away for the amazing piece it is: It has history, it’s rare and it’s beautiful.”

Such an eclectic mix of antiques, box-store finds and hand-me-downs throughout the house lends a playfulness that’s important for families with young children, Heather says. “It’s great to have a playroom, but I think making kids feel comfortable being able to play throughout the whole house allows them to be closer to their family,” she says.

**LIGHT BRIGHT**  
Husband-and-wife design team Heather and Matt French opened up the home by knocking down partition walls, painting surfaces a creamy white and introducing vibrant pops of color.





**NEW MEXICAN  
MODERN**

Designers selected Mexican-influenced patterns and textures as a playful nod to the home's Santa Fe environs.

"We were conscious of the types of materials used, so kids wouldn't feel separated from the adults — for example, we chose a table for the dining area that they could get messy and do homework on."

That dining area, complete with a nearby rope swing for the kids, borders one of the house's showcase transformations: The new airy, sunny kitchen features a farmhouse sink, a giant island illuminated by oversize pendant lights, a dazzling backsplash of Talavera tile, and open shelves and industrial bar stools painted sunflower yellow.

The vibrant hue is carried throughout the house, thanks to floor-to-ceiling drapes that flank windows in almost every room. "We like color a lot," says Heather, who used upbeat hues and Mexican-influenced patterns and textures to playfully nod to the home's Santa Fe environs. The flooring, meanwhile, is now almost entirely Saltillo tile, which required the help of a specialist.

"Because the bedrooms originally had been carpeted, we needed to bring in new tile and try to match it to the rest of the house," Matt explains. "Saltillo is made in one town in Mexico, and as they

move through the region, the differences in the clay mean changes in the tiles' materials and colors." The house's original tiles could never be entirely stripped of three decades' worth of patina and sealants to appear like new, so the new tiles in the bedrooms and closets were "aged" to closely mimic those that appear throughout the rest of the house. "It's simple and complicated at once," Matt says with a laugh.

Completing the project in less than two months required the homeowners to entrust the Frenches to make many decisions on the fly. "We probably put as much faith in Heather as anyone has ever put in a designer," the husband says. "A lot of times she'd send pictures and we'd say, 'Yeah, we like that,' but there were a lot of surprises, too. They didn't let us in the house at all during the last week."

"We couldn't decide on the lights for the kitchen, and she said, 'How do you feel with me surprising you?'" the wife recalls. "I think they're the best lights in the house."

"They gave us liberty to have fun in general," says Heather. "I love this house. I could move in tomorrow." 🌟