

the 21st-century

Farmhouse

Modern farmhouse home design shows no signs of going out of style. But what makes a farmhouse modern? Simplicity, contrast and a mix of old and new.

BY MARIA LaPIANA

The centerpiece of an addition, this chef's kitchen blends seamlessly with the original circa-1720 Sharon home.

ROB KAROSIS

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rchitecture is adaptable; it accommodates change and reinvention. Thus, style revivals happen all the time. So it's no surprise that a fan favorite, "farmhouse style," evolved into a kind of minimalist version of itself. For well more than a decade now, pared-down farmhouse-like homes have been appearing in magazines, on countless renovation TV

shows, and in the hills, towns and subdivisions of Connecticut.

Many of them pay homage to the original farmhouse, with clapboard siding, standing seam roofs, covered porches and lots of windows. What identifies them as "modern" is often an absence of ornament: gables with no brackets, black window casings with no shutters.

The name "modern farmhouse" is usually attributed to design influencer Joanna Gaines, who in 2013 on her *Fixer Upper* HGTV show, embraced the simple but chic combinations of old and new, rustic and polished, wood and metal, tradition and, well, modernity. Gaines and her followers popularized homes that were minimalist but still homey.



A contemporary "barn" in Greenwich bears the hallmarks of modern farmhouse design—clean lines and black beams on a white-on-white palette.



"It's modernism overlaid into classicism in a way ... done properly, the energy is within the cleanliness of the space."

In 2019, *House Beautiful* magazine declared the trend dead. Shortly after, *The New York Times* cited as proof it hadn't given up the ghost: a remarkable number of Instagram posts (nearly 1.2 million at the time) under the hashtag "Modern Farmhouse." Today, that number has climbed to more than 2.7 million.

The farmhouse aesthetic—both classic and modern—is loved for its functional simplicity. Its interior hallmarks include open plans, smooth lines and neutral palettes. Today it's as much a lifestyle as it is a design style. (Note: Not everyone agrees it's a bona fide style at all; more on that in a bit.) However, when we reached out to design professionals around the state to get their insights into the modern farmhouse, they knew exactly what we meant.

"I believe this style of architecture is appealing because it is sleek yet comforting," says Chris Pagliaro of Christopher Pagliaro Architects in Darien. "It's modernism overlaid into classicism in a way ... done properly, the energy is within the cleanliness of the space."

The allure of the modern farmhouse is "a combination of nostalgia and imagination," says architect Jimmy Crisp. "I think people want to imagine their kids growing up in spaces that feel open and warm, homes that lend themselves to gathering." Crisp Architects is based in Millbrook, N.Y., just over the state line from Litchfield County, where many of the firm's projects are located.

Interior designer Susan Bednar Long says it provides a "familiar, comforting and warm feeling," that resonates with clients. "It's updated for today, and strikes the right balance between modern and traditional," she says. Her firm, S.B. Long Interiors, is now based in Dallas, but the designer has a home in Connecticut (her "summer office").

Connecticut connection

The modern farmhouse may feel a bit out of place in Connecticut. Fitting in here isn't always as seamless as it is in other parts of the country. "There is a lot more history here," says architect Petra Navratilova, of Roger Ferris + Partners in Westport. "Connecticut has stayed very traditional, so we're historically sensitive to that."

Her team designed a new-build in one of Westport's more affluent (and traditional) neighborhoods. The clients wanted their home to look like it belonged, but they had a very contemporary aesthetic. Navratilova says they gave it the appearance of a classic farmhouse but made it modern by keeping the exterior unadorned: no corner boards, no window trim. They cleverly recreated an authentic look with modern materials. The siding reads like clapboard and the roof like an everyday metal roof. In fact, the structure is clad in a composite, cementitious material that looks like wood, but is completely waterproof; the standing seam roof is made of zinc.

The structure itself is composed of several connected forms; you can see the property's waterfront through the glass-walled entryway framed in black steel. Inside, the double-volume great room is awash in natural light, but it had to be scaled down; they did it by hanging a massive hexagonal ceiling fixture. It's light and sculpture all in one. White walls and oak floors enhance the open feeling.

Many feel a sense of responsibility to be sure new buildings play well with existing structures whenever possible. This was the case when the New Canaan firm of Brooks & Falotico was charged with building a modern farmhouse — on a former dairy farm — in Greenwich. The home would sit shoulder-to-shoulder with a large barn, silo and nearby cottage and guest house. The clients "wanted to live in a barn ... but they didn't want to live in a barn exactly," says managing partner Vince Falotico, who worked on the project with his partner, Chuck Willette.

The idea was to connect the seams between the farm's very old structures and the new, contemporary ones. It was important for the experience to "be rhythmic, indoors and out," says



This light-filled master bath in Redding is a prime example of simplified farmhouse design intended to provide a calming space.

STEVEN ROSSI



“When working on a modern farmhouse, we like to blend the expected with the unexpected to make a room pop.”

This historic Washington farmhouse shows a mix of old (wood beams and rustic finishes) and new (Caesarstone “concrete” countertops in the kitchen and modern shelving and furniture in a sitting area).

Falotico. For starters, the arrival is measured and meaningful. The transition from the farm proper into the home is thoughtfully paced and cohesive. To enter, you drive through the original barn into a courtyard to a covered porch to a hallway to the spectacular great room.

Inside, beautiful custom windows bring in an abundance of natural light. Black beams stand in contrast to the white-on-white palette. The sweeping wall-less area houses multiple living spaces, an open-concept kitchen, a dining nook, and a wine “cellar.”

Keep it simple

Why is simplicity such an essential hallmark of this style? Chris Pagliaro is thoughtful, but says he’d first like to clarify something: “What I dislike is the misuse of the terms ‘modern’ and ‘farmhouse.’ I don’t think the style is either. I think some felt the need to compartmentalize the look, rather than embrace it as a trend. A white house with black windows does not define a style! It’s really about *not* over-designing, and replacing the ornate and bulky in favor of simple forms.”

That said, the architect’s theory is that the market trend toward modernism gives some homeowners pause, so “many wish to avoid a full commitment

to modernism for fear that it has a shelf life,” he says. It may feel safer to strip a timeless house style of decoration, but the architect warns that “simplicity is difficult.” If you go too far, you run the risk of function following pure form.

Of a modern farmhouse Pagliaro designed in Redding, he says: “I saw the opportunity to create architecture in a way that embraced decades of design while pushing me to work a plan into a form. The form makes or breaks a design, but the plan must still afford occupants the ability to take advantage of light and view.”

Pagliaro designed the home for Ryan Fletcher, himself a builder (owner of Fletcher Development in Darien) who knows that simplifying requires more attention, not less. He believes a successful modern farmhouse brings calm to our frenetic lives. “Our eyes get tired. We’re tired of all the busyness,” says Fletcher. “We want warmth, good flow. For the most part we don’t want to live in overly large homes.” He says he wanted to manage the square footage in his new home: “I wanted to make it open and conducive to entertaining, but not cavernous.” He credits Pagliaro with getting it right, and interior designer Tina Anastasia of Mark P. Finlay Architects, with creating an overall aesthetic that softened the space.

DYLAN CHANDLER



DYLAN CHANDLER



On the inside

When Susan Bednar Long was called in to design the interior of a historic farmhouse in Washington, she knew it was important to achieve equilibrium. “I used relatable classic farmhouse elements but in a modern way,” she says. She created contrast: wood beams and rustic finishes with a modern bent, such as Caesarstone “concrete” countertops in the kitchen. Classic cabinetry styles were updated. She brought in sconces and pendants you might see in a barn, fixtures “that became clean silhouettes in a fresh farmhouse space.”

The designer favored clean-lined furniture in natural, rustic materials, like a simple oak breakfast table. She didn’t shy away from color but was judicious in using it. “I love the mix of rustic materials and clean cream fabrics employed in tailored ways, but I also want to add some personality and color,” she says. “I love referencing colonial colors on millwork cabinetry and trim. I am not a fan of the cerused oak-and-white linen look everywhere. It looks too vintage and uninspiring.”

Interior designers from Curated Nest in Cos Cob infused a great room in Greenwich with modern farmhouse notes. Owners Lina Galvao and Erin Coren collaborated on the project. “When working on a modern farmhouse, we like to blend the expected with the unexpected to make a room pop,” says Coren. “In this case, by adding black with a bone-inlay chest and a solid-wood black console, we were able to create contrast against an oversize white sofa. Colorful artwork lightens the mood. We know that the architecture within a modern farmhouse will stand the test of time. By including things that can be modified, we can be sure the overall design will last as well.”

Form met function beautifully in a modern chef’s kitchen designed by architect Jimmy Crisp—for an actual chef. The clients lived in a circa-1720 home in Sharon and wanted a sizable addition to include a kitchen, living area and loads of light—without compromising the integrity of the existing home. “I believe when it comes to additions, it’s fine to make them look different, as long as there is a connection of some kind,” says Crisp.

The homeowners agreed. Jill Paradiso had worked in restaurant and catering kitchens for years and kept a wish list of features she wanted, should she ever design a kitchen from scratch. She wanted the space to have a clean, minimalist feel but not seem jarring when you moved into it from the charming, low-ceilinged house. The transition feels effortless, thanks to a short hallway and complementary flooring on both sides of the threshold.

“I wanted to marry pragmatism with the simplicity and beauty of a farmhouse,” says Paradiso. While she may not have named the style, she certainly had the aesthetic down: vaulted ceilings and black window trim, hardworking concrete countertops, wide-plank wood floors, simple cabinetry, and industrial-inspired light fixtures. “I love that this space has a timelessness to it,” says Paradiso. “I hope we spend 30 or 40 years here, but if we don’t, I’m confident that someone else will take what we did and make it their own. I know that it will age well.”

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In Greenwich (facing page) and Washington dining rooms, simple tables and chairs featuring plenty of wood give that modern farmhouse look.

How to get the look

If you like the style but don’t live in a modern farmhouse, don’t despair. There’s probably not much you can do to alter the exterior of your home, but the interior is something else. If your home and budget allow for structural changes, consider opening up the ceiling to expose beams and give the room height. However, if calling a contractor isn’t in the cards, you can still mimic the aesthetic with some paint and carefully chosen furnishings and accents. Here’s how.

For starters, **clean house**, or at least declutter. If there’s one signature feature of this style, it’s minimalism. Tchotchkes and overly layered rooms are out.

If you’re all in, **remove excess ornamentation**, like crown molding and chair rails. Or, at the very least, paint them white (see next).

Choose one of the hundreds of **white paint** colors out there and have at it. If you want to transform the look and feel of a space in a flash, paint it white.

If **new furniture** is in your budget, choose upholstery that’s clean-lined and unfussy. Big is good. Contemporary is fine, but don’t go too Italian-modern; sleek sectionals have a way of owning a room.

Choose **weathered wood** for at least one table.

Bring in **something black**; Windsor-inspired dining chairs may be over-used, but they get the job done.

Keep **accents** to a minimum and **colors** in the neutral zone (including black and white).

Introduce **texture** and use **natural materials** wherever possible.

The same goes for **plants and greenery**.

Rethink **window treatments**. Swap out drapes for simple shades.

Hang **barn doors**.

Showcase **antiques**, but not too many.