“There is a lot of housing built in the 20th century that can easily be overlooked today as tired and not worth saving,” says architect Ann Sellars Lathrop. “This has led to the common practice of teardowns, especially in the affluent suburbs of the Northeast.”

The result, Lathrop says, has not only led to a shift in the scale and look of many New England neighborhoods, it is causing a drain on resources. To renovate an existing house is, in contrast, a sustainable approach because far fewer resources are used and far less material goes from the job site to the landfill.

Lathrop, whose firm, Sellars Lathrop Architects LLC, is located in Westport, believes that most outdated residential structures can be successfully transformed to meet 21st-century energy standards and lifestyles. This 1950s Cape in Westport was sturdily built, but small and inefficient.
for a growing family. Lathrop was hired by Annie and Ty Bailey to design the additions and renovations. Although the new design was intended to fit the vernacular of a historic neighborhood called “Old Hill,” the owners’ goal was for it to feel more modern than strictly traditional. The Baileys were not interested in tearing the house down, says Lathrop, but did want to maximize the energy efficiency inside and out, and make sure that the new design would fit the needs of their busy lives.

For example, the rear of the house, above right, was a family room that had been converted from a screened porch sometime in the late 1970s. There was little if any insulation in the walls, and the windows had single-pane glazing. In addition, the fireplace was better at leaking air from the outside than it was at creating warmth. With the help of the contractor, Craig Chard of Chard Builders, New Fairfield, the walls and roof were rebuilt on the existing foundation, a new chimney fireplace was built (with a lock-top damper to prevent air leakage), and spray foam insulation was generously applied.

Throughout the house, new energy-efficient windows and doors were installed, and the exterior walls that remained were patched, repaired, primed and painted. Every material that could be salvaged was considered for reuse, and every square inch of the interior was maximized for the greatest use. Additionally, the roof was raised to provide larger bedrooms and bathrooms. Most bedrooms and the main living areas are situated to take full advantage of a broad southern exposure, so extensive natural daylight strategies were used to reduce the need for artificial lighting, accentuate the warm natural interior materials and help focus attention on the outdoor landscape.

As a result, not only were the Baileys pleased, but the project won AIA Connecticut’s 2012 Alice Washburn Award for Addition/Renovation.

Family room | Architect Lathrop worked closely with homeowner Annie Bailey to position doors, windows and skylights for maximum natural light and southern exposure, but also to allow views and access to the yard for dogs and kids. The new fireplace—and the flat-screen TV—can be seen from the kitchen.

Kitchen | To increase the multifunctional aspects of a combined family room/kitchen, Lathrop says, the original kitchen and dining room were flipped. This allowed direct access to the living room and the new mudroom. The attic was removed, allowing a partial cathedral ceiling with skylights directly over the new kitchen. The new sink and three wide windows were positioned to afford views of a nature reserve across the street. Architect and owner worked closely to make the kitchen the hub of the house.

Living room | The only footprint addition in the redesign was a much needed front-entry vestibule masked by a spacious new front porch. Previously, there was no front door access to the house; visitors had to go through the kitchen and dining room to get to the living room. Now, all-new larger windows open the view from the living room to the porch, and a custom-stained wood door with sidelights is a welcoming focal point announcing the new entry.
Dining room | The new dining room, where the kitchen used to be, has the advantage of being close to the functional cabinetry of the kitchen, yet removed from the noise of the family room. The big new windows were placed to make way for doors leading to a future screened porch.

Mudroom | A portion of the garage used for trash and one of the garage bays was converted into a much-needed mudroom entry. This area is now regularly used by family and friends and is filled with natural daylight along with energy-efficient lighting. The space includes a coat closet, dog bed, laundry alcove and powder room, and allows vital access from garage to kitchen.