

4 ways to personalize a cookie-cutter home

By Kathryn O'Shea Evans
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Characterized by clean lines, white exteriors and black windows, modern farmhouse is a trend that captured the attention of younger generations. (Stock)

When it comes to designing a home interior that reflects you and your lifestyle, nothing beats customizing everything from the bathroom tile to the drawer pulls. But when so much of the housing built since World War II falls under the broad umbrella of cookie cutter, it can be challenging to create a personalized space.

Modern farmhouse — an architectural style known for its white exteriors with black windows, blonde wood floors and an unobtrusive neutral color palette — is just the latest mass-produced style to dominate neighborhoods, including those nowhere near a farm. It instantly appeals to the Instagram generation, in part because it seems to harness both yesteryear and today's clean lines in equal measure.

“The look gives ‘Little House on the Prairie,’ but without the diphtheria,” says Mark Eckstrom of Studio Eckström in Omaha. “‘The Waltons,’ with WiFi.”

But not everyone wants to buy the farm — or a mass-produced Colonial, split-foyer or boxy ranch, for that matter. “Many people are coming to us saying, ‘I do *not* want that,’” says Jim Rill, of Bethesda, Md. firm Rill Architects, of the modern farmhouse style. Or if they love it, they may want to tweak it to be more individualized. We consulted the pros to figure out how to make any cookie cutter space feel more current and custom, from the inside out. Here are their suggestions.



“Deep hues and earthy greens...conjure a connection to the outdoors through their biophilic feel,” says Lauren Magee, AIA, director of Architecture and Design at McLean, Virginia firm Winn Design + Build, whose firm designed this fancifully wallpapered bathroom. (Stacy Zarin Goldberg)

Focus on yourself

When you're creating your forever home, keep "you" front and center. "Some of our clients are interested in pulling ideas from the modern farmhouse aesthetic, but many are seeking guidance on how to create a home that doesn't look like all of the other homes in their neighborhood," says Lauren Magee of Winn Design + Build.

Noz Nozawa, a designer in the San Francisco Bay Area, says this approach works with all types of homes. "Every project starts with honoring a client's own story, no matter what style of home they have," she says. "I try to see past what might be considered 'generic' in a home and identify high-potential nooks or details or moments that we can celebrate through our design process.

"We will tailor and custom-size our design ideas, whether they are built-ins or furniture or window coverings or art pieces, and if I've done a good job, our designs allow our clients to see themselves and their point of view reflected in the spaces they get to live in," she adds.

For example, you might transform a small closet off the kitchen into a Downton Abbey-worthy pantry by installing bead board, shelving with brass rails and soapstone counters, then painting it a high-gloss (and truly cinematic) grass green. Or convert an empty basement closet into a dazzling wet bar complete with amazonite countertops and pixelated mosaic tile backsplash (both recent Nozawa projects).

Remember how you actually live

Robert J. Bell, of Bell Design Inc. in D.C., says functionality is key. You want to ask yourself what your goals are, he says, whether you're hankering for a quiet writer's retreat or a showstopping entertaining space. "As long as the basic structure of the home is well built and the property is laid out well, we can work to add functionality and details that create special spaces from an unalluring white box," Bell says.

He would replace a flat white subway tile backsplash, for example, with something more unexpected yet functional, such as a dimensional tile from Heath Ceramics in an ultramarine matte glaze. Or evict bland, mass-produced drawer pulls in favor of uncoated brass handles “meant to age beautifully.”



In a rural Texas living room by Houston-based designer Paloma Contreras, authentic details such as local white oak flooring and custom windows by Houston's Atelier Domingue have a timeless effect. (Aimée Mazzenga)

Go for color and texture

Vibrant color can give a generic or relatively simple structure a more tailored look, says Rill, who is a fan of the inky colors of British cult paint brand Farrow & Ball (he recently used a slate gray on a project in Franklin, Tenn.).

Dallas designer Bonnie Achariyakosol agrees, saying that paint and wallpaper are the easiest way to warm up a space. It doesn't need to take over the entire room; you can paint the lower cabinets in your otherwise white kitchen an unexpected color, or hang wallpaper with a subtle graphic motif in the powder room.

Nozawa achieved a bespoke feel for two Bay Area clients with modern farmhouse-esque homes by bringing in riots of color in the rugs and furnishings, and installing dramatic light fixtures.

The same goes for interesting textures. “I think a lot of modern farmhouses are lacking warmth and texture,” Achariyakosol says. Some of her textural go-to’s: handmade zellige tiles that are intentionally imperfect, lime-washed or grass cloth walls and plasterwork vessels with patina. “Texture is the gateway drug to a warm home, and I love it!” she says.



Copper roofs can lend a feeling of storied authenticity to an exterior, such as this one by Winn Design + Build. (Stacy Zarin Goldberg)

Pay attention to details

When Houston-based designer [Paloma Contreras](#), author of the new book “[The New Classic Home](#),” was working on a [farmhouse](#) presiding over significant acreage in rural Texas, she employed authentic finishes: reclaimed Texas white oak here, French limestone there. The result feels genuine and timeless, not trendy.

Outside, sometimes it’s the littlest touches that add up to a lot. Even painting your window trim and shutters a fairy-tale hue can be transformative, Eckstrom says, noting that he loves the verdigris color of [Farrow & Ball’s Arsenic](#).

“We love the whimsy of a decorative [Pennsylvania Dutch-style Hex sign](#) adhered below the gable end of a roofline,” says Eckstrom. He is installing them on the upper floor of a project client’s classic American four-square with a green metal roof, which was inspired by Russian dachas. “Choose a star or sun motif in bright or complementary bold colors — it will become something to wish and smile upon daily.”

And we can practically guarantee that it won’t look anything like your neighbor’s.