

HOME & GARDEN



The view from the living room of the McCullar home is an example of ideas derived from French cinema that depict landscapes straight out of a Monet painting. The design is influenced by the steep roofs and wood accents of cottage or village architecture rather than the larger details of a chateau look.

French accents

FRENCH COUNTRY LIVING DONE IN AMERICAN PROPORTIONS

Story by Fredric Koeppel ■ Photos by Mark Weber ■ Scripps Howard News Service

To Boni Lee McCullar, the words “French Country” conjure feelings of warmth and comfort, of a fire leaping on the hearth in a spacious kitchen where the family gathers, “of a large house with plenty of small spaces where people can talk quietly or be alone.”

That’s why she and her husband, Meredith, built a French Country-style house in a gated community near Memphis, Tenn.

With its narrow, twisting streets and houses standing close together, the enclave resembles a village in the French countryside — if houses in a French village occupied 5,500 square feet, had state-of-the-art kitchen appliances and 24-foot ceilings in the living rooms.

This is a vision of French country living done American suburbia style.

There was a time when you could count on houses in the suburbs to conform to four design categories:

1. Ranch houses.
2. Williamsburg-ish houses.
3. Southern style houses with white columns.
4. Soft contemporary styles.

Then, in the affluent 1980s, a new ideal surfaced. People with discretionary income wanted dwellings with more display power, dwellings that “speak of character and permanence and substantiality,” said Brad Shapiro, president of Shapiro & Company Architects Inc. in Memphis.

Shapiro designed the McCullar house.

It’s not surprising that the crux of these desires — what Boni Lee McCullar calls “home and family and comfort” combined with the tendency toward imposing size and presence — centers on France. European architecture has always influenced American house design, from Georgian to Classical to Victorian and even the International Modern style.

The focus now seems to weave ideas



Boni Lee McCullar, of Memphis, Tenn., sits in the living room of her French-country style home which she says conjures feelings of warmth and comfort with plenty of small spaces where people can talk quietly or be alone.

derived from French cinema — all those picnics in landscapes straight out of Monet — and from Peter Mayles’s books about idyllic life in rural Provence combined with the sense that the French countryside and architecture embody sophistication, elegance, simplicity, taste and a connection to history.

Let’s turn to beforethearchitect.com for a list of French Country manner characteristics:

“Rooflines of different pitches, some low and some quite steep; roof forms mixed, e.g., hips and gables and round tops (including dormer roofs); at least one prodigious chimney; windows of different sizes and heights on a wall line; masonry clad with decorative highlights of quoins, pediments, etc;

decorative ironwork, a turret somewhere.”

“Well, we stay away from turrets and things like that,” said Shapiro, “though I know you see them all over. We strive for more restraint. The McCullars’ house was specifically influenced by the steep roofs and wood accents of cottage or village architecture rather than the larger details of the chateau look.”

While the exterior of the McCullars’ house might be appropriate in a timeless, sleepy village in Burgundy, the interior is baronial in extent and detail, especially on the first floor, with its expansive foyer, large kitchen with fireplace and seating area and, especially, the living room, with a hearth suitable for a manor of minor nobility, wood beams and that

soaring ceiling.

“Yes,” said Boni Lee McCullar, “I guess you could say that it’s baronial, but it’s also comfortable and filled with things that bring down the scale.”

She travels to France often and says, not surprisingly, “I love Normandy and Brittany!” She also loves Paris and found some of the furnishings there. Examples include a pair of well-worn yet phenomenally accommodating leather sofas from an old hotel in Paris and, from a Parisian flea market, an intricately framed mirror, now in the dining room, that combines her favorite motifs, swans and sunflowers.

Shapiro is designing another house in the French Country manner for the McCullars that will stand in a development not far from where they are now.

“When we built this house,” said Boni Lee McCullar, “we made the mistake of not putting a Jacuzzi in my husband’s bathroom. He doesn’t want to use the Jacuzzi in my bathroom, it’s too frou-frou in there. He wants his own Jacuzzi, and I guess the only way he’s going to get it is if we build a new house.”

The new house is designed in the French Country style, “but it has a very different character,” said Shapiro. “It’s really geared toward living all on the first floor. It will have very light and airy vaulted spaces. Boni with her design sense came up with something that really suited them.”

Upstairs in her studio in the present house, McCullar displays samples of gorgeous fabrics and colors that she wants to use in the new house. On one wall she has pinned sheets of graph paper, forming a surface roughly 6-by-6-feet, on which she is reproducing, tile by tile and color by color, the ornate mosaic background of a bathroom she saw and photographed in a chateau in Normandy.

She admits to being a bit of a control freak. “The best way to get something done right,” she said, “is to do it yourself.”



ABOVE: The French Country-style home of Boni Lee and Meredith McCullar that was built in a gated community near Memphis, Tenn.

LEFT: The main hallway looking into the master bedroom in the McCullar home.