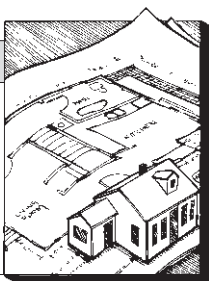


Give New Windows An Old Look

by Gordon Tully



One look at the latest window catalogs proves that interest in historical imagery is still growing. Windows can be ordered with a wide variety of trim options meant to evoke the site-built windows of yesterday; some of these are accurate, some not. At the same time we have the modern clad window, which is sophisticated in its watertightness but comes with next to no trim at all. All of this brings up the recurring question of how to reconcile new materials with more traditional appearances.

Traditional Window Construction

In a traditional wood window, the joints around the frame are covered

and protected inside and out with wood casings (see Figure 1).

Casings in older houses had to be wide enough to cover the sash counterweight boxes. While their main purpose was functional—they kept water out—the casings were often quite elaborate. The outer casings were commonly set even with the plane of the sheathing, with a decorative “backband” molding added to receive the siding.

The sill of a traditional window was an outwardly sloping piece of wood running through the wall, extending completely under the sash weight box and exterior casing. The sill served an important practical pur-

pose—it extended outward beyond the plane of the siding to catch water coming off the building and spill it away from the building. It also provided a visual foundation, which was reinforced by the narrow “apron” beneath.

The traditional window’s exterior “trim,” then, was designed first to meet the all-important function of keeping water out of the window and wall. But the wide casings and sub-

building paper or house wrap when properly installed. These flanges make the water-shedding trim of the traditional window unnecessary.

This basic clad window is quite different in appearance from a traditional wood window (see Figure 2). Those who prefer the more traditional look, then, must either forego the considerable practical advantages of clad windows and use primed wood windows, or add purely decorative trim to clad windows. Either option creates potential problems both practical and aesthetic.

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Using Wood Windows

The advantage of today’s wood windows is that they provide an authentic profile and the ability to paint the window any color. But with today’s fast-grown wood and lead-free paint, the owner will have to repaint at least every four or five years. A lot of neo-Victorian houses are going to look pretty sad after a few years of deferred maintenance. This is precisely the dilemma that clad windows were invented to solve.

If you do use wood windows, avoid the temptation to make the trim too narrow. Brickmold trim 2 1/2 inches wide, for instance, isn’t much wider than a clad window. If such wimpy trim is acceptable, why not just use clad windows and avoid the repainting problem in the first place?

One way to work around the painting problem is to use wood windows factory-coated in a plastic paint such as Polycron. This sounds attractive in theory. But I’ve been scared away from it for several reasons:

- The coating is hard to touch up.
- Water may get behind the finish if

stantial sill also served an aesthetic function, “framing” the window visually and giving it a look of solidity.

The Contemporary Clad Window

In contrast, the casing of the clad window which is popular today is only about an inch wide, projects 1 1/4 inches out from the sheathing, and runs continuously around four sides, with no sill. The cladding has an attached flange which runs all the way around the window, forming a continuous, watertight seal with the

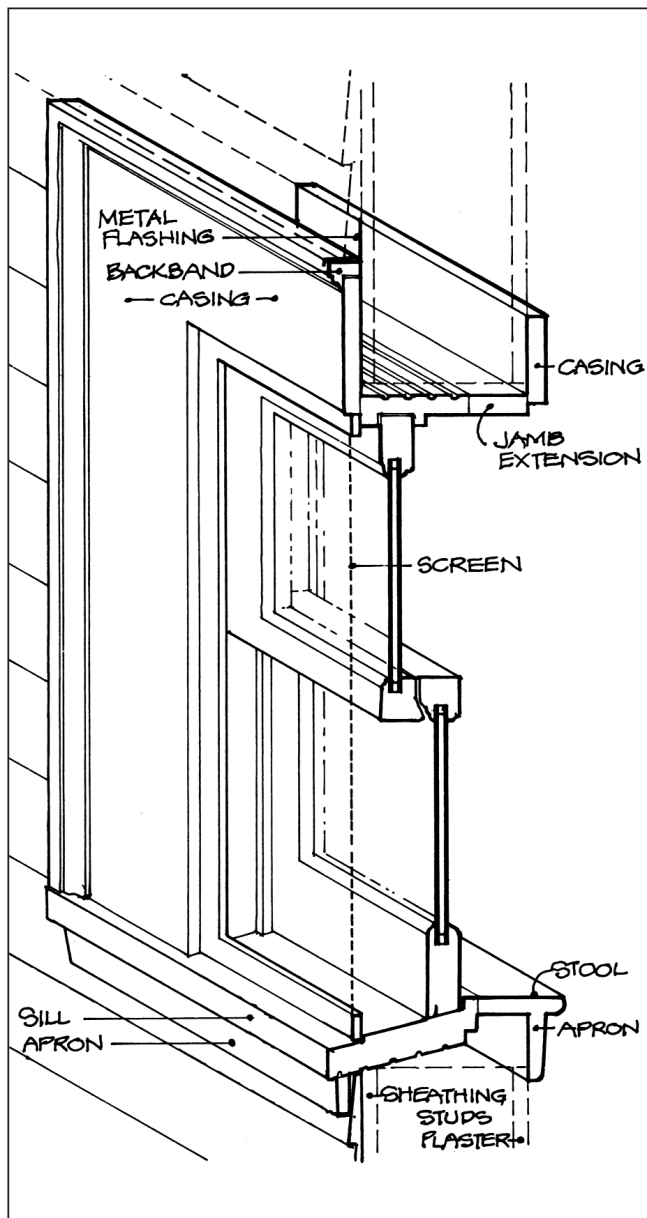


Figure 1: This cutaway shows a modern, double-hung wood window, cased on the outside with 1x6 trim and a decorative “backband” molding. Ideally, the head of the casing is flashed with metal, while the side casings are caulked. The ends of the sill are notched to leave “ears” which run under the outside casings; you may have to extend these ears when using wide casing.

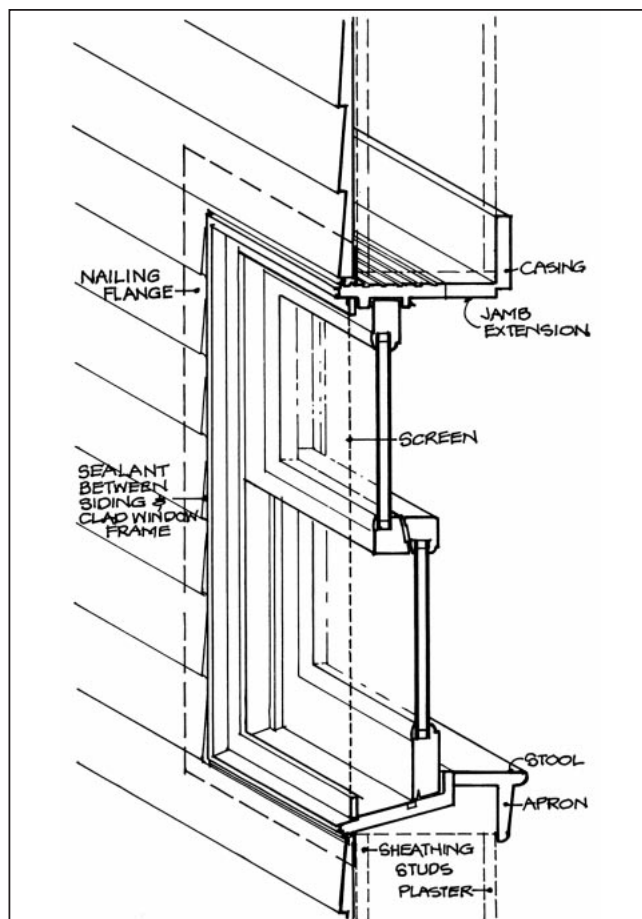


Figure 2: A clad double-hung without an added casing. Only a narrow strip of metal shows next to the siding. The siding is caulked all around the window. Note that the critical joint between the siding and window occurs over the waterproof flange.

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the wood is damaged.

- Face nailing will damage the finish and require touch-up.
- The coating might delay delivery time.

If anyone has had good experience over several years with factory-finished wood windows, I'd love to hear from you.

Traditional Trim on Clad Windows

The problem with adding trim to a clad window is that, if not done properly, it can hamper the way a clad window repels water. There are also some aesthetic pitfalls to avoid.

Seal the joints well. If water enters any of the joints around casing applied to a clad window, it can find its way behind the applied sill (which is only the facade of a sill) and from there get behind the siding, where it can cause rotting or paint-peeling problems.

To prevent this, you should caulk the joints on both sides of the casing—that is, between casing and window and between casing and siding. Since some of this caulk may

break down over time, there should also be watertight backing material—house wrap, roofing felt, or ice and water shield—behind these joints, with flashing at the bottom of the window to lead water out to the surface before it can run behind the siding (see Figure 3).

Shim where necessary. The nailing flange on clad windows has a noticeable thickness. If you simply apply flat trim over the flange, the trim will tilt. This will look horrible and open up the mitered joints. You must either add a thin shim behind the casing or rout out the back of it (as in Figure 3)—either is a fussy but necessary solution.

Give the trim some weight. Ordinary 3/4-inch trim is thinner than most siding materials. This not only looks tacky, but invites moisture into the butt ends of the siding, which can cause expansion problems, particularly in hardboard siding.

The best looking but most expensive solution is to apply the traditional backband molding to receive the siding. A less expensive way to deepen the trim is to use stock a full one inch thick. The cheapest way of all is to shim out ordinary 3/4-inch trim with 1/4- or 3/8-inch plywood. I don't like to do this, however, because I'm afraid water will get in and delaminate the plywood.

Avoid the "picture frame" look. Casing a window with identical trim boards on all four sides, as if it were a picture, ruins any sense of historic authenticity. If you don't need the authentic, historically accurate look, why not consider eliminating the trim, at least on the jambs?

Get a window that's set back.

Traditional wood windows have their upper sashes—the outermost—set back about an inch from the plane of the sheathing. Some of today's window manufacturers, however, make both their clad and traditional-style units with the sash set even with the plane of the sheathing. This discrepancy is quite noticeable, especially in a house that has some older windows. So if you're seeking a traditional look, buy from one of the makers that sets their sashes back from the sheathing plane, as in the Marvin window shown in Figure 1.

Accept some limitations. No matter what you do, a clad window will never look exactly like a traditional window—for example, there will always be an extra line formed by the projecting clad frame. But if you pay enough attention to the details you can control, these other differences will be forgiven.

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Playing It Straight

From a practical point of view, the best window solution is to simply use a clad window unadorned—the window works beautifully, there's nothing to paint, and installation is quick. This is also an appropriate aesthetic choice more often than one might think. I have used untrimmed clad windows on several of my houses. The narrow, one-inch-wide line of casing around a clad window vaguely resembles the sparest of Shingle-style trims, so I like to couple untrimmed clad windows with shingles, preferably left unfinished or coated with Flood's CWF sealer, which yields a rich, yellow-brown color.

In a recent house, I added a false sill, evoking the asymmetry of a conventional window and adding a much needed horizontal emphasis. It looks good and was not too hard on the budget.

The Quest Continues

Designers must constantly try to reconcile old visions with new materials. Should we use plastic laminate which looks like granite or wood? Should vinyl flooring imitate stone? Can vinyl siding look historically accurate? The Modernists had no hesitation on these matters: throw out history and make way for the new, they said. This was definitely a bad idea. But throwing out modern materials for the sake of historical accuracy is just as bad.

Striking the right balance is a worthy struggle to which there are no right answers—only ingenious compromises. I think the best approach is to reinterpret old ideas in new contexts without trying to strictly imitate. ■

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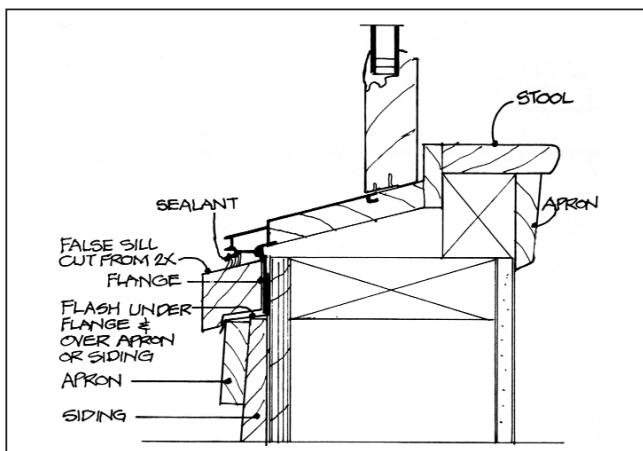
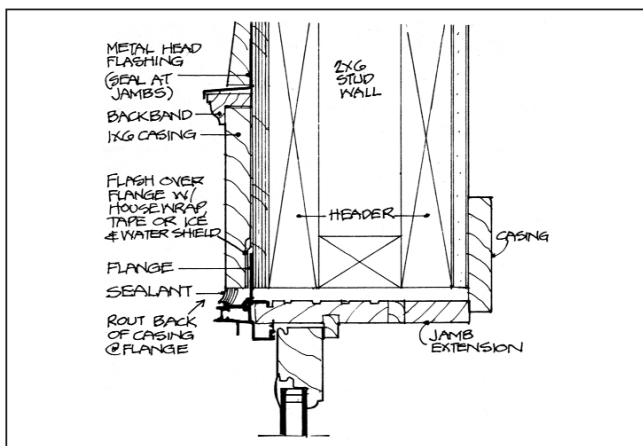


Figure 3: Head (top) and sill (bottom) details of traditional casings applied to a clad window. Note in the top figure that the casing is routed out for the flange thickness. The flashing under the false sill in the bottom figure is to protect the siding below from a breakdown of the sealant between the false sill and the sill.