

No Wimpy Cornices

by Frank Highberger

The well-proportioned eaves of this brick home give ample visual "weight" to the roof edges. The frieze board and dentil molding (below) terminate the wall finish at the window heads, creating a smooth transition from wall to roof.



Don't undersize cornices and other exterior trim. Traditional designs offer guidance.

Have you noticed (as I have) that the vast majority of new homes are built with "wimpy" eaves details? The eaves (or cornice) of a house serve not only as a place to hang the rain gutter; they also separate the major exterior surfaces of the roof and the walls. They deserve more attention than they get!

Go to Williamsburg, Va., or look at some photos or drawings of famous old American homes, and you will be impressed by the bold eaves treatments — no wimpy cornices here!

I became interested in finding good eaves and cornice details locally. I found the one detailed here in a suburb of Pittsburgh. The top drawing was extrapolated from the exterior appearance and is quite close to the actual cornice dimensions and scale (see photos). The roof slope or rafter size on your next house may vary but if you are using siding or masonry for the exterior finish you may find these cornice details useful. Incidentally, on this house the dentil width and spacing is 3 1/2 inches.

Most of us concerned with house design have long known that the line of the window heads is the best location to terminate the wall finish — aesthetically as well as practically speaking. This decision, and the usual 8'-0" ceiling height, determine the

height of the cornice construction.

Overhang width is established too often by the roof venting method to be used, and not often enough by proportion and appearance as it should be.

When I design a cornice, my objective is to end up with a handsome, properly-scaled detail with a logical construction sequence and using as few wide trim boards as possible. As for finished lumber appearance, I suppose the days of wide, clear white pine boards for exterior trim are gone except for the highest quality work. I've seen many unsuccessful attempts by frustrated painters to hide bad lumber selection. Even considering that cost is always of prime importance, surely knots and uneven edges must be culled by the installer. You should tell him before the work begins.

Looking at the details you will notice that the 5/4x6-inch trim at windows, corners, sills and other exterior openings are bold terminals for the exterior wall finish. They look good if painted in a different color than the siding. Try white and tan. ■

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