

Traditional Styles, Modern Needs

by Gordon Tully

In a good design, everything must work together toward a common end. Some very inventive designers work out a unique style for themselves, but most rely on inspiration from the past. In this column, I want to explore how designers can use stylistic traditions from the past for their own purposes.

Our choice of styles is usually limited by strong local preferences. Colonial in the Northeast, brick vernacular in the Midwest, adobe in the Southwest, etc. But there is some choice in every market. For a custom home unconstrained by subdivision controls, the choice is very broad indeed.

By and large, our popular, everyday styles are no longer “alive” — that is, part of an unbroken local tradition reaching back into history. To improve our designs, we need to look back to the homes built when each historical style *was* alive and contemporary.

Adapting Styles to Change

Complicating the problem of choosing a style is the evolution of building technology. We have new materials, such as plastics and manufactured wood, new codes and ordinances, and new technical and functional requirements, such as insulation, elaborate mechanical systems, and car storage.

We also have lost some important materials such as lead paint and vertical-grain wood, and craft labor has grown expensive and, in some cases, unavailable. And we have serious concerns about renewable resources. All these things limit the extent to which we can imitate old styles exactly.

Conversely, when we try to imitate fine old details with today’s shoddy substitutes, the results always look flimsy and unconvincing. For example, just look at most of the “neo-Victorian” houses which became popular during the ’80s. We need to absorb the character of the style, then reinterpret the details to suit today’s materials, requirements, and budgets.

As I have mentioned so often in these columns, the key to choosing a style is to pick ones that work well with modern floor plans. Many historical styles don’t. I always use styles that feature irregular, asymmetrical forms, to give me the flexibility I need.

Style as a Resource

To illustrate the tradeoffs we face, let me describe my approach to detailing a new house.

Having been trained in the San Francisco Bay Area, I have always found the Arts and Crafts tradition to be a rich source of stylistic ideas. Along with the true “Craftsman” style, so named, there are several other styles — Bay Region, Prairie School, Shingle — which come from the same tradition and emphasize fine woodwork. My main interest in these styles is that good, nonsymmetrical contemporary plans work well within them.

For practical reasons, I like wide overhangs: they protect the house and

avoid the need for gutters, except over entrances. Also for practical reasons, I prefer relatively steep gabled roofs. It is much easier to get useful space under a gabled roof than under a hipped roof. So in searching for precedents, I look for styles having gabled roofs with broad overhangs.

The Craftsman or Bungalow style, and many of the various styles of redwood homes in the San Francisco Bay Region, all fit the bill. I like the long shed dormers characteristic of these styles because they are handsome and easy to build (see Figure 1).

The exposed rafter ends and extended purlins at the rake, also characteristic of these styles, are decorative but costly to build and maintain. So I box in the eaves. In fact, you will occasionally see a bungalow-style home with boxed eaves, and they don’t look as plain as you might think (Figure 2, next page).

To find historical inspiration for boxed eaves, I look back to the Prairie School.

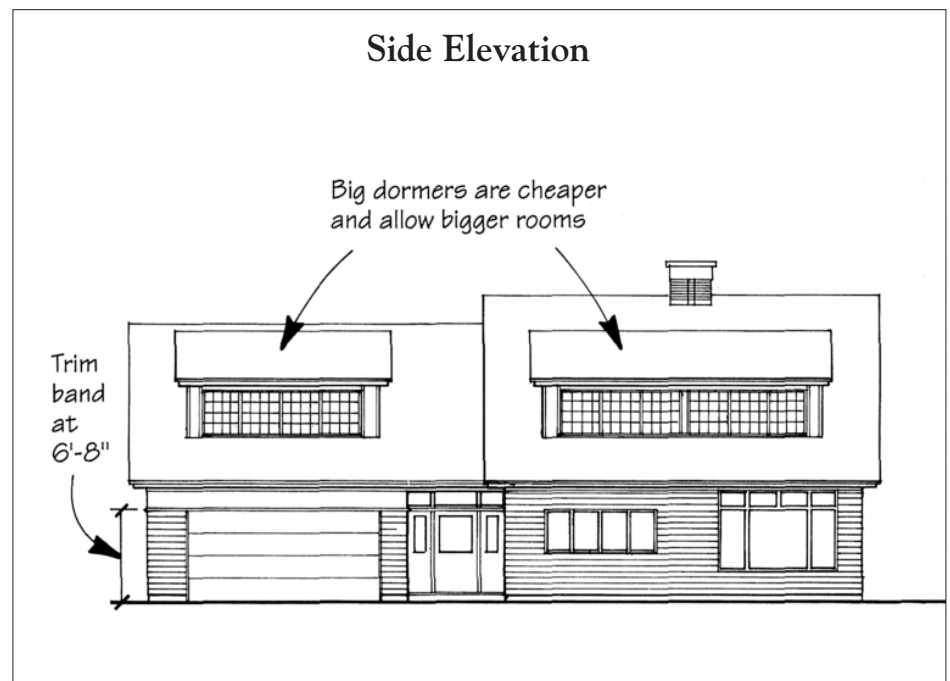


Figure 1. Long shed dormers, characteristic of Craftsman- and Bungalow-style homes, allow generous and economical space upstairs. Divided-light windows in the dormers add scale. Downstairs, the band of trim helps integrate the garage, front door, and windows.

Most Prairie School homes have flat soffits, but some feature lid-like gabled roofs, often embellished with strips of running trim on the soffit. It turns out, as I note below, that these trim strips are very useful.

Turning to windows, the divided-light windows common to most Craftsman-style houses create a richness of scale which complements the exposed rafter ends. However, I use divided lights sparingly: They are either very expensive (true divided lights) or unconvincing (snap-ins).

I also avoid added trim around the clad windows which I use almost exclusively, again for practical reasons of cost and maintenance. This leaves out another source of rich, scale-giving detail.

So I am faced with these detailing problems:

- How do I compensate for the missing richness and scale lost by this insistence on easy maintenance?
- What is needed to weld together elements derived from more than one style, such as Prairie School soffits on

a Bungalow-style roof?

- If I don't find exactly what I need in a historical style, how do I modify the old to fit the new?

Detail Solutions

An important detail I use to hold an unembellished design together is one or more horizontal bands of wood trim, a common element in many Arts and Crafts styles. Granted, this adds another surface to be painted, but it is a simple shape, and I usually put a projecting water table at the top of the trim band to shed water.

Another detail is extra trim on the fascia. A large flat fascia usually ruins the scale of a house, especially if there is little other detail to compensate.

As mentioned above, I also use running trim on the soffits. I use strips running parallel to the eaves to trim out continuous screened vents, avoiding the nasty stamped-aluminum vents commonly used. Strips running across the soffit can conceal the joints in plywood soffits.

Windows need to be proportioned very carefully. Extra-large windows — which are very nice for expanding the view and bringing in sun — need to be contrasted with small windows to make it clear how big everything is (Figure 3).

Sometimes I add a transom at the top of a big window to break down the scale and add interest. The little divided lights in the transom, so characteristic of the Arts and Crafts styles, cost a lot, so I avoid them when I can.

Changing materials on the facade is a good way of adding interest without a lot of cost. Bands of shingles can contrast with painted plywood, cement or plaster stucco, board and batten, or vertical board siding. Shingles can have paired courses, or can be run with varying course widths, for contrast. Areas of shingles can have decorated ends. Sweeps can make the bottom of a shingled wall look more graceful.

Don't copy styles for theatrical effect, however, because you will fall flat. Instead, dip into our rich building traditions for ideas to solve today's problems. Solving problems is what good design is all about. ■

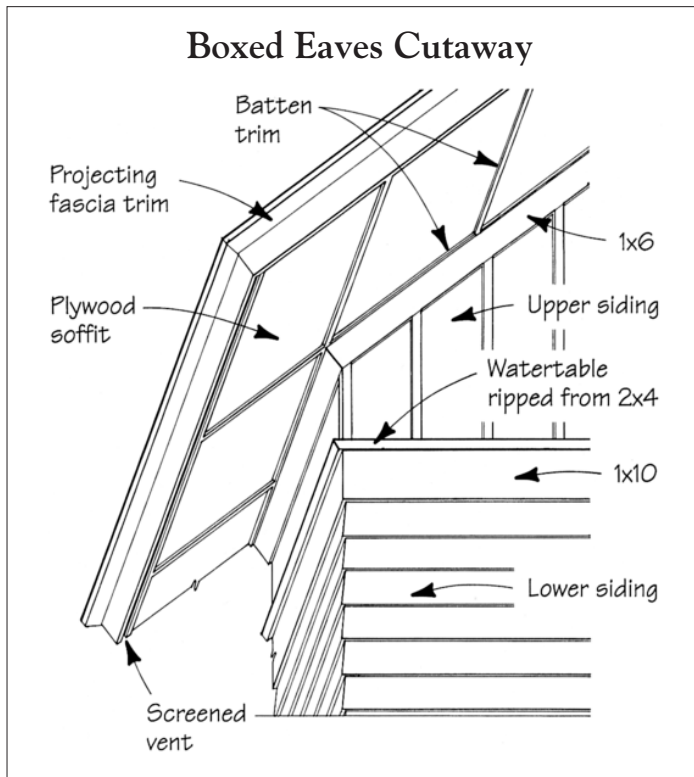


Figure 2. The author prefers wide overhangs, but avoids the exposed rafter ends characteristic of the Craftsman and Bungalow styles. In this modified-Bungalow house, note the decorative trim on the fascia, trim strips on the soffit, and the 1x6 collar. Below, contrasting siding types are separated by a trim band capped with an angled water table.

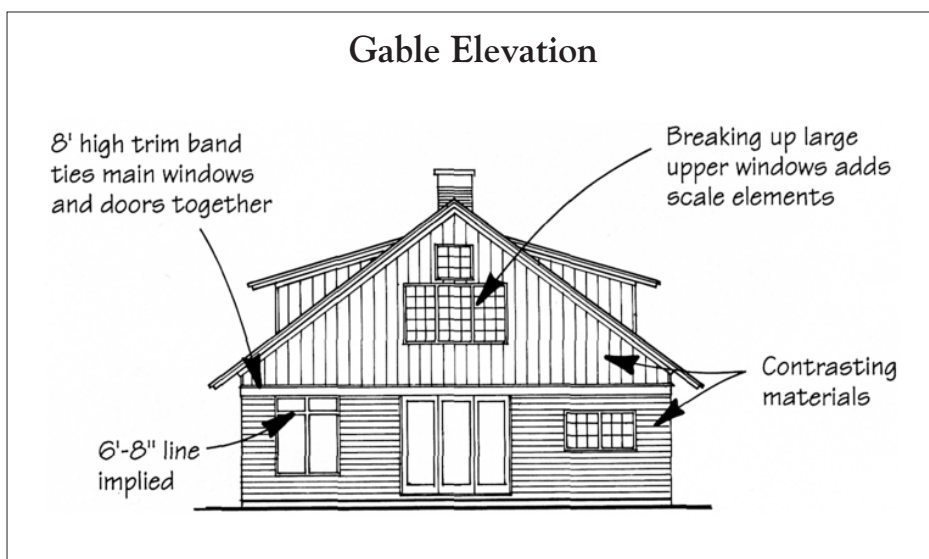


Figure 3. A trim band at 8 feet, and contrasting siding, create scale on a big facade. The upper windows have divided lights or snap-ins, while the lower ones don't. To keep windows in scale, transoms are added over the tall windows to imply a line atop the lower windows.

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