



# The Unwelcome Guest

by Gordon Tully

We used to keep our vehicles in the barn; now we try to stuff not only the vehicle, but the barn itself, into our small houses. I feel that the attached garage should be a last resort, but instead, a two-car garage is often at the top of the home buyer's priority list. This discussion will focus on the attached two-car garage, the unwelcome guest that came to stay.

The architectural problem of dealing with garages can easily be solved on a spacious site, and much of my experience, like that of many architects, comes from building on big properties. But my heart is with town-scaled houses. I feel strongly that typical oversized houses on big lots wreck countryside and city alike. Not only do they stretch the infrastructure thin,

but they use up resources and isolate us from our neighbors. In this column, I will concentrate on a medium-sized three-bedroom house intended for a relatively narrow lot.

## I Come to Bury the Garage, Not to Praise It

Since the garage is big and cuts off light and access wherever it attaches to the house, we are led to the first solution — a basement garage. Like all attached garage “solutions,” this one creates problems of its own.

A house built over a basement garage needs to be specially designed to acknowledge the fact that the garage is the visual base for the house. There is nothing worse than a house designed for a flat lot plonked on top of a base-

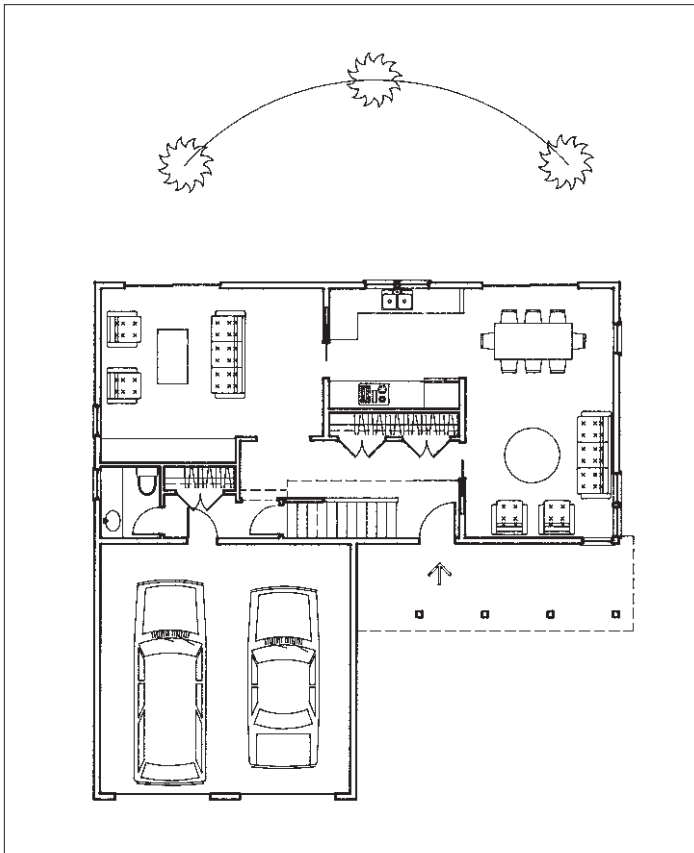
ment garage. On a flat lot, a basement garage entered at grade means elevating the main floor, as in the typical “raised ranch” design. While economical, this design separates the living spaces from the ground, a disastrous idea in my opinion.

When the garage is depressed below grade the result is an unattractive pit which fills with leaves, water, and snow, and which is often unusable in freezing weather. On sloping lots, there is always a retaining wall or steep bank between the house entry and the garage, creating an uncomfortable “step-down” appearance.

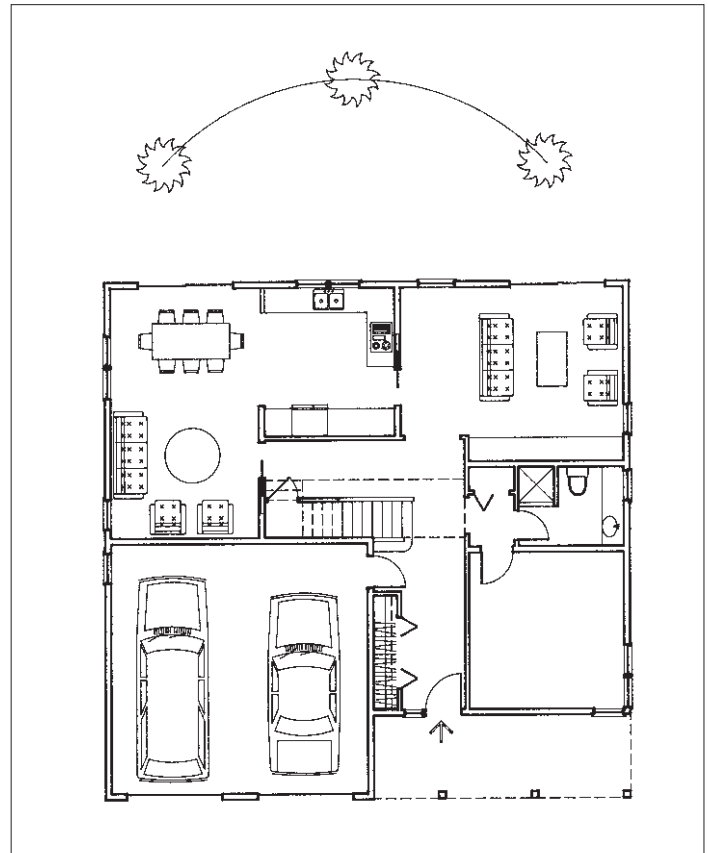
It is possible, but wicked difficult, to design an attractive house with a basement garage. The best such designs are narrow houses where the grade rises toward the rear, and the garage is frankly treated as a visual base for the house.

## Follow the Sun

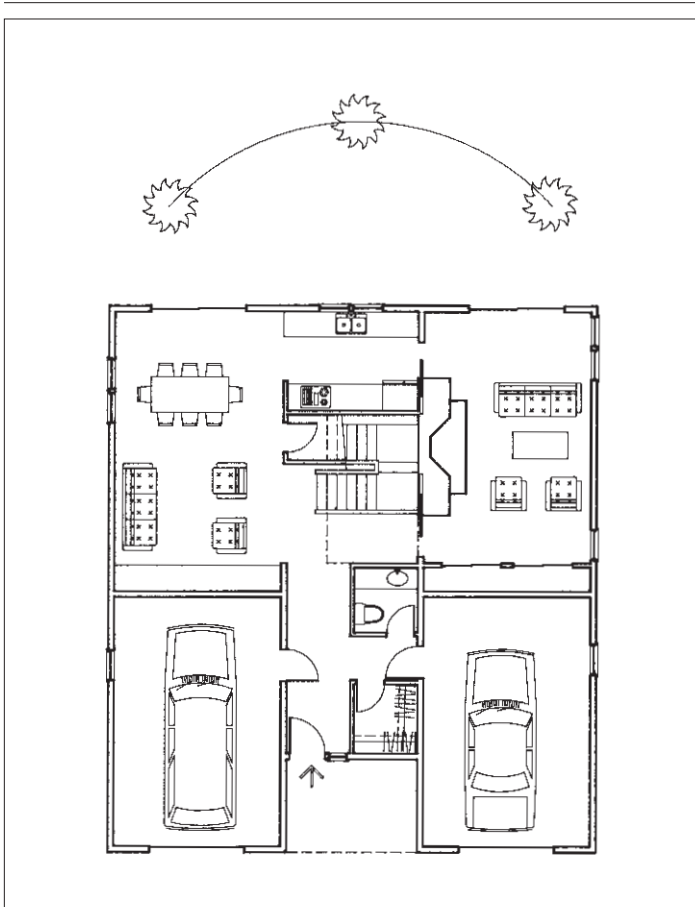
The really interesting problems occur when the garage is at main-floor level. There are only a few ways to attach a garage on a narrow lot, and



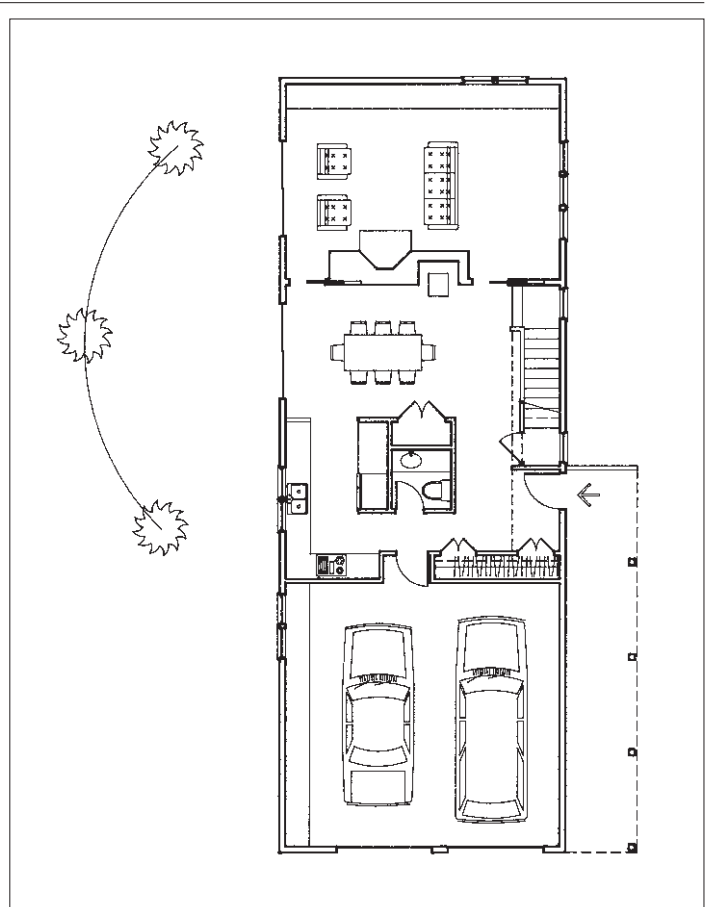
**Figure 1.** In situations where the sun or view is at the back of the lot, a garage wing can be attached to the front of the house. Because the approach is across the front yard or along a porch attached to the side of the garage, entry corridors inside the house are minimized.



**Figure 2.** The design problem created by adding another room is solved by bringing the front facade out even with or beyond the garage and adding a cut-in front porch to keep the garage visually subordinate. This creates a shadowed porch that draws you to the entrance.



**Figure 3.** Splitting the garage into two discrete elements gives the house a symmetrical look and creates a sheltered entry.



**Figure 4.** In this plan, a shaded entry is offset by a private, full-length, sunny side yard.

some of these are not satisfactory. I have worked out five plans that meet three criteria:

1. You don't have to negotiate a long corridor to get past the garage.
2. The garage doors dominate the front facade as little as possible.
3. At least three of the main spaces on the first level get sun and/or view, whichever is important.

### Sun at the Back

Suppose the sun and/or view is at the rear of the lot. You will want to spread the main rooms across the back, which puts the garage in the front, as in Figure 1, previous page (see also *Building With Style*, 1/94 and 11/94). With this plan, the garage wing looks like a small barn attached to the front of the house. A long entry corridor within the house is eliminated because the approach is across the front yard or along a porch attached to the side of the garage wing.

If you need to add another major room and the lot is too narrow to add it at the side (where it will get sun), it has to come forward alongside the

garage, as in Figure 2, previous page.

To keep the garage visually subordinate, I find it necessary to bring the front facade out even with or beyond the garage. Doing this creates a long, windowless corridor between the front room and garage.

To help solve these problems, I put economy and good energy detailing aside and designed a cut-in front porch. This shortens the entry hall, creates a visually powerful shadowed porch to draw you to the entrance, and keeps the front facade in line with the garage. But the plan is still a compromise, because the added room is on the shady side, and it cuts off natural light to the central hallway.

### Nothing New Under the Sun

The plan in Figure 3 is an invention of mine, which like all "inventions," has undoubtedly been used somewhere (I happen never to have seen it). By splitting the garage in two, this plan produces a handsome, symmetrical facade with a cozy recessed entry.

This is not the cheapest approach, however, because each garage is larger

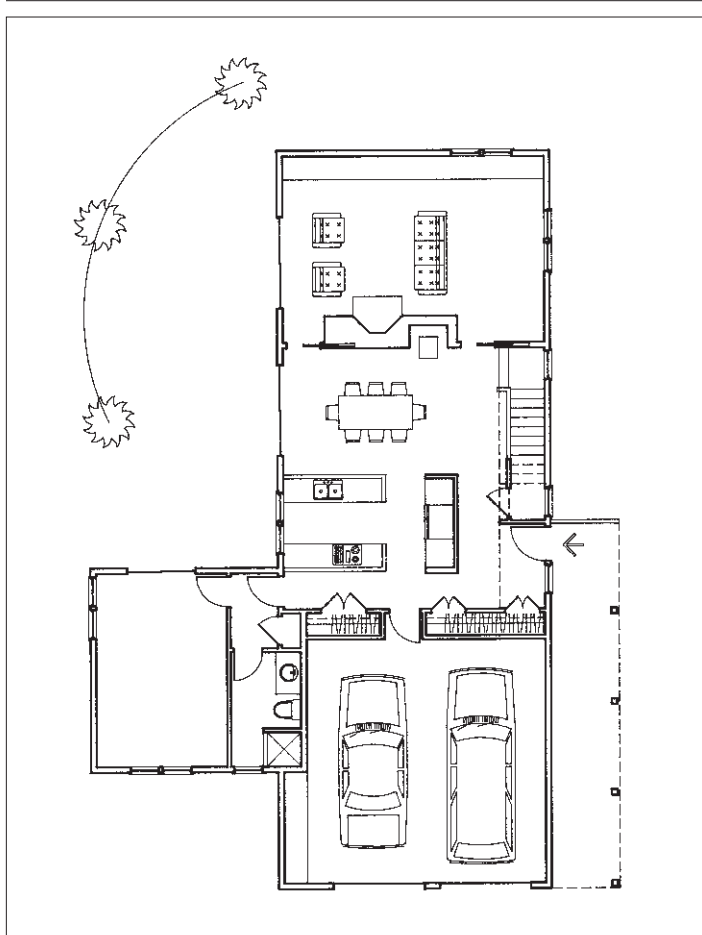
than half a two-car garage, and insulation becomes a problem. But the result seems worth it. I don't see any easy way to add another room downstairs.

### Sun at the Side

For the common situation where the sun is from the side and there is a neighbor close by, you need to put the garage at the front of an end-wise plan. Why? Because if you put the garage to the side, it either has to be on the sunny side, in which case it shades the rest of the first floor; or on the shady side, in which case your house is pushed so close to the neighbor's house and trees that they shade your house.

In Figure 4, I show a plan with the entry on the shady side of the garage, a compromise that makes the plan work. It traps the entry walk between the lot line and the house, but leaves the entire lot length, on the opposite side, available for a private yard.

Figure 5 shows a modification of Figure 4 that adds an ell. Because this requires a cross-corridor, it should be possible to enter between the garage and the added room, but I couldn't make



**Figure 5.** Adding an ell to the plan in Figure 4 creates a wasted cross-corridor space, but the gain is a private office/guest suite.

such a plan work on a narrow lot. On the plus side, the extra room would make a superb office or guest suite.

### Sun at the Front

Finally, what do you do when the sun and/or view is in front? The only scheme I know of is to detach the garage, leaving as much space as possible between the house and the garage, then connect them with a one-story link. It helps if the garage has a flat or low-pitch roof, to cut down on shading. Such a scheme was used frequently in “contemporary” plans of the ’50s and ’60s, and it works well.

Since it is not your typical Victorian or Colonial approach, you would have to show a customer the advantages of the plan. Planting a fenced or hedged-in front-yard garden, English style, could do the trick, but you might consider a computer-simulated image to avoid having to plant the garden! ■

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