

Design Rules for Adding On

by Jamie Fisher

Use these nine principles to design an addition that blends with the existing house



Adding on to an existing building is always a challenge. If you don't do it right, the house may end up looking like a poorly planned blob. A well-planned addition, on the other hand, blends with the existing house and doesn't "fight" with its surroundings.

When I design an addition, I start by identifying the goals of the project. The owner's goal is probably the usual one — more interior space. Look around outdoors as well, and try to

identify any other goals that the addition can satisfy with respect to the site and the existing house; for example, acknowledging a special view, taking advantage of solar orientation, or improving the entry sequence.

Once the goals are clearly defined, you can begin playing with the actual shape of the new addition. The following is an illustrated list of nine rules of thumb that I keep in mind during the design process.

TRY AN "INVISIBLE" ADDITION

It may be that there isn't much that can change about the site and the way the house sits on it. The owner simply needs more room. If that's the case, you might try what I call the "invisible" addition.

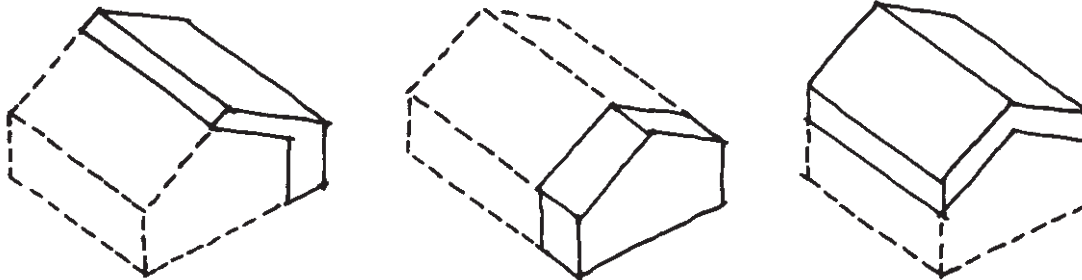
No, I haven't discovered a way to make an addition truly invisible (though in the case of some additions I see, I wish I had). An invisible addition starts with the basic shape of the house, then ends up with an enlarged version of that same shape.

This strategy is seldom the cheapest approach. It requires matching the existing structure in every way: materials,

details, color, and proportion. But done well, the technique can make surprisingly large additions absolutely disappear.

One disadvantage of this approach is that the proportions of the existing house limit how much room you can gain. You can probably double the size of a house invisibly, but that's about the limit of what you can do.

If you use a new design detail on the addition, a good way to make the new portion of the house disappear is to transfer that detail to the existing house (window trim or gutter returns, for example). Seemingly minor improvements can be a real plus for many houses.



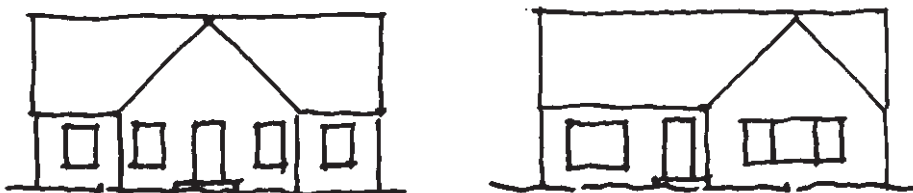
If the basic goal of the project is just to get more room inside the house, try to design an "invisible" addition — an enlarged version of the original house that's not noticeable as an addition.

GO FOR BALANCE

Symmetry looks right, but it's often easier to create balance. Symmetry invariably forces constraints on a design, and often the constraints produce unwanted results. Examples include a dormer that "looks best" in the middle of the roof, but doesn't fall in the right spot inside, or a large window that ends up right behind a toi-

let to preserve the symmetry of the outside.

While the constraints of symmetry are limiting, the opportunities of balance are boundless; balance celebrates differences rather than stifling them. For example, try juxtaposing big and little, solid and void, vertical and horizontal, presence and absence.



Resist the impulse to design a symmetrical house (far left), and think instead of balance (left). You'll have much greater design flexibility, and the results will be more interesting.

AVOID FLAT ROOFS

Avoid flat-roofed additions. Except on a flat-roofed house, where they might make some sense, a flat-roofed addition hardly ever works. The most compelling reasons for avoiding flat roofs can be technical (for example, you'll have problems with difficult drainage and excessive snow loads). More often, however, they are symbolic: A sloping roof acknowledges nature, a flat roof challenges it. If you have both types on the same house, it sends a mixed message.



Avoid flat-roofed additions — they conflict visually with existing sloped roofs (left). A sloped-roof solution can usually be found (right).

ADD A CASUAL BACK TO A FORMAL FRONT

Typically, a house shows its most formal face to the street, while its more casual sides are the private sides. This is being two-faced in a good sense. Just as we have different sides to our personalities, houses present different attitudes on their different sides. This is

not a matter of being cheap, dishonest, or inconsistent — it's acknowledging the uses of the different faces of a house. The more casual side of a house is where you'll have parties and family gatherings, and you'll probably want a relaxed atmosphere.

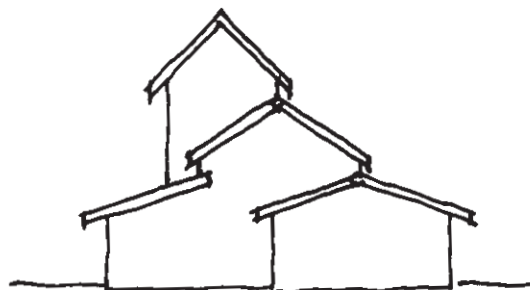


A house may have more than one personality. Here, the Tudor-style front (far left) hides a large shed roof on the back (left). On a narrow urban lot, passersby can't see the addition from the street.

START WITH A CONSTANT ROOF PITCH

An old rule for additions is to use the same pitch as the existing roof. While this is good general advice, there are situations when a different pitch works. My rule is if you go higher with the new roof, it can have a steeper pitch; if you go lower, the new roof looks good with a shallower pitch.

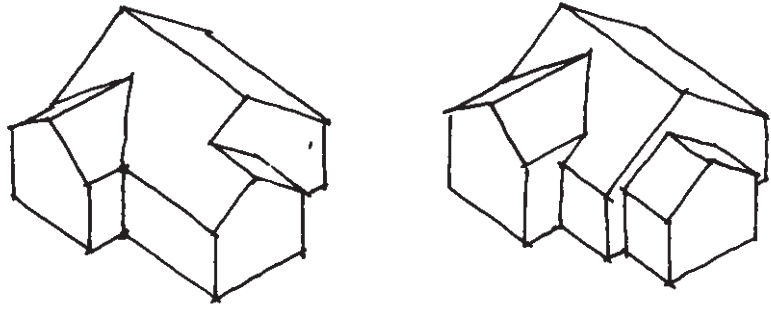
Resist the impulse to choose a pitch based on the need to maximize interior headroom (which is usually recognizable as architectural gluttony). The notable exception, however, is the gambrel, or so-called Dutch colonial, a barn/house design that grew from the need to increase storage space in the hayloft.



Matching the existing roof pitch is usually a good idea (top). However, if the new roof is higher than the existing one, you can get away with a steeper pitch (bottom). A shorter addition looks good with a shallower roof.

OFFSET THE ADDITION

Start by extending the rooflines of the existing house, then try offsetting them a little. Extending the plane of the current roof may be simpler to build, and it is certainly easier to detail and weatherproof. However, it can often rob a design of interest. Offsetting the walls of the addition can help.

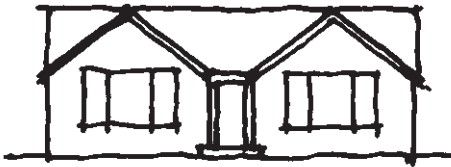


When designing an addition, start by extending the rooflines and plate heights of the existing house (left). Then, to add more visual interest, try offsetting the new walls and roofs (right).

AVOID DUALITY

Two identical, stable shapes that sit side by side create a duality. It's very hard to pull off without it looking stodgy. If you are faced with this, consider these two time-honored strategies for getting out of trouble. First, try to make the two shapes different from each other;

make one big and the other small, make one tall and the other short, even make one red and the other blue. Anything, just not two of the same thing. Second, make the two objects reflections of each other, creating an imaginary line of symmetry between them.



These identical roofs (left) look formal and stodgy. Instead, make one roof large and one small (middle), or make them a reflection of each other (below).



TRY ADDING A THIRD ELEMENT

Sometimes the pieces of a house just don't work together: Either you can't break a duality or the proportions are wrong. In that case, try adding a third mass, or even a fourth, to help create a visual balance.



When the shapes and proportions of a house don't work well together (top), try adding a third or fourth element to help create a sense of balance (above).

IF IT LOOKS LEAKY, IT PROBABLY LOOKS BAD

The eye is accustomed to seeing water being shed, not dammed. If the eye gets caught up in conflicting eaves, chances are water and snow won't find their way off the roof, either — except through the roof and into the living room. Sure, you can solve it with torchdown rubber roofing and crickets, but the formal problem persists. Try to work out the roofs so that the visual problem is solved along with the technical one. ■

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