

A Garrison Facelift

by Jane Griswold

A while ago I did one of those jobs that gives you a chance to make a big difference in a house's appearance. The house in question was a garrison of the sort common throughout the country, with the second story overhanging the first by about 2 feet. The owners' specific request was for a larger dining room. They were also unhappy with the tight front hall — one of those where you open the front door and fall up the staircase — and the disorganized look of the main facade of the house.

Several factors constrained our options. The interior walls needed to stay where they were, which meant the only way to expand the dining room was to move the front wall. That front wall, however, couldn't move far, as the house sat 53 feet back from the street and zoning regulations required a front yard at least 50 feet deep. We could build a stoop for the front door in this setback, but it couldn't have a roof.

Architectural Sleight of Hand

So we practiced sleight of hand. To provide the room needed for the larger dining room and front hall, we brought the first-floor front wall out 2 feet, 10 inches — just shy of the required setback. This brought the first-floor wall out in front of the plane of the second floor, so we added a roof atop it to tie it back to the second floor wall.


Then we reorganized the facade. We installed new, larger windows and shutters on both sides of the door. Even though we couldn't make them line up directly beneath those on the second floor, their spacing and size improved the facade's proportions and made the smaller windows on the second floor seem less pudgy.

New Entry

The most important part of the new design was centering the front door and giving it new prominence with side lites,

pilasters, and a pediment. Inside, instead of stumbling onto the staircase, you now enter a hallway. And from the outside, the more substantial doorway organizes the facade to give the house a more balanced feel. Indeed, it succeeds so well that no one notices that the second-floor windows aren't symmetrical unless I point it out.

Finally, we did some new landscaping. We added a dry-stacked stone wall as a base for the house, and a wide brick walk as a gracious extension of the small stoop allowed by the town's zoning regulations.

None of these alterations required huge amounts of time or money, but they substantially changed the look and feel of this house, which is now roomier and brighter inside, and more welcoming and graceful outside. 

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Before



After



To expand the first floor and improve the looks of this garrison, the author brought the front wall forward, moved the front door, and replaced the front windows — relatively inexpensive changes that won valuable room inside and created a more inviting and orderly facade.