

By Design

Rethinking the Bay Window

by Robert Gerloff, AIA

I've worked as a residential architect for nearly 15 years now, and I have yet to meet a homeowner who doesn't love bay windows. Bays are intimate, cozy, human-scaled architectural moments that can bring an otherwise mundane addition to life. But there are times when the traditional bay doesn't work.

An addition I recently worked on here in Minneapolis is a good example. The project was as straightforward as they come: a family room–mudroom–master suite addition to the back of a 1948 two-story Colonial revival. We wanted the addition to blend in with the existing house, so the addition's overall form — the roof slope, eaves line, siding, and window size and type — echoes the existing house. We imagined that a bay window would be a wonderful focus for the new backyard, but getting it just right took several tries.

The Traditional Design

The first bay we drew in was a traditional American Colonial bay window, with walls angled at 45 degrees, double-hung windows with muntins to match the existing house, and a shallow-pitched hip roof (see Figure 1). Generous trim was intended to make the window look like a built-in piece of furniture from the outside. Inside, we ran a wide crown mold into the bay and extended the ceiling in to make the family room feel as large as possible. All this seemed to make sense, but the resulting drawings were disappointing.

Outside, both the clients and I thought the bay looked like an anonymous lump on a flat facade. It was too small to anchor the new backyard. The clients also thought it looked too predictable. They wanted a more modern look, something with pizzazz — they felt confined by the Colonial styling.

Inside, the bay didn't have the coziness they were seeking, and the angled walls made it more difficult to fit in the furniture necessary to create a cozy sitting circle around the TV.

The Squared-Off Option

Our first efforts at redesigning the bay were simple (Figure 2, next page). First, we squared off the window so it faced the yard more directly, replaced the double-hung windows with casements, and eliminated all muntins. We extended the material from the base of the bay onto the base of the entire addition. Finally, we lowered the ceiling of the bay 4 inches and ran the crown molding only in the room itself, not in the bay.

Squaring off the bay gave it a larger presence in the backyard. The casements with no muntins made it feel more modern. Creating a matching base for the addition made the

Traditional Bay Window



Figure 1. This traditional bay window — part of a proposed addition to the back of a 1948 two-story Colonial revival — is attractive but lacks the visual heft to anchor the new backyard (exterior view). Extending the family room ceiling into the space makes it feel larger, but the angled walls are confining and limit furniture placement (interior view).

bay look and feel far more integrated with the house and less of an anonymous lump off the back.

Inside, the dropped ceiling made the bay feel more cozy and intimate, and the extra square footage was perfect for setting a sofa in, creating a better sitting circle around the TV. But somehow it still didn't work. The windows were too

Squared-Off Bay

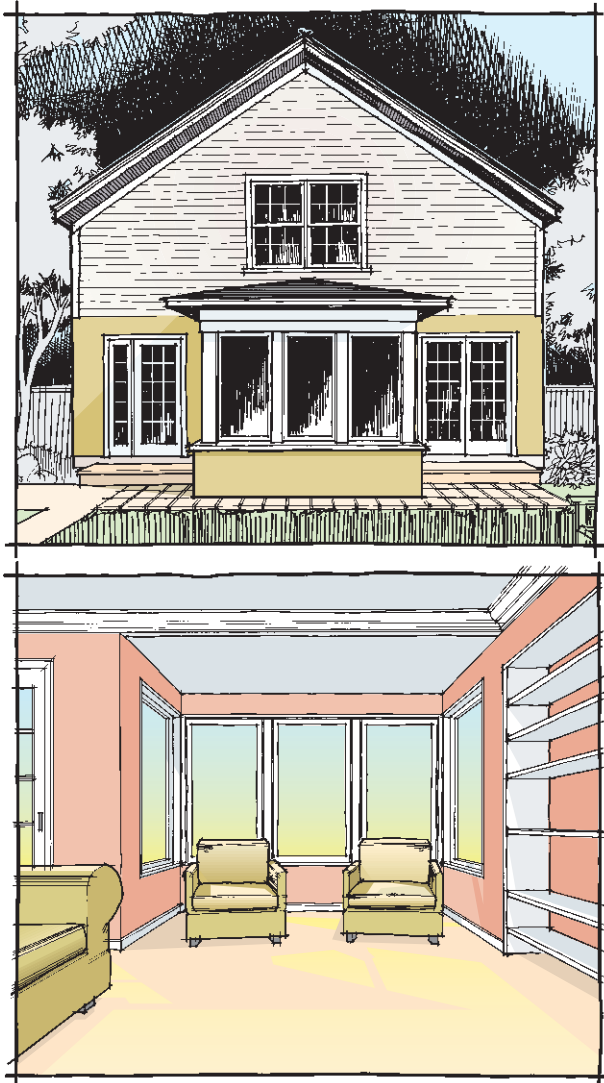


Figure 2. The redesigned squared-off bay has stronger visual presence, while matching the siding on the base with the addition itself helps integrate it with the rest of the structure. On the inside, lowering the ceiling of the bay and holding back the crown molding makes the enlarged bay read as a separate niche, rather than an extension of the family room.

Flat Roof/ Asymmetrical Glazing

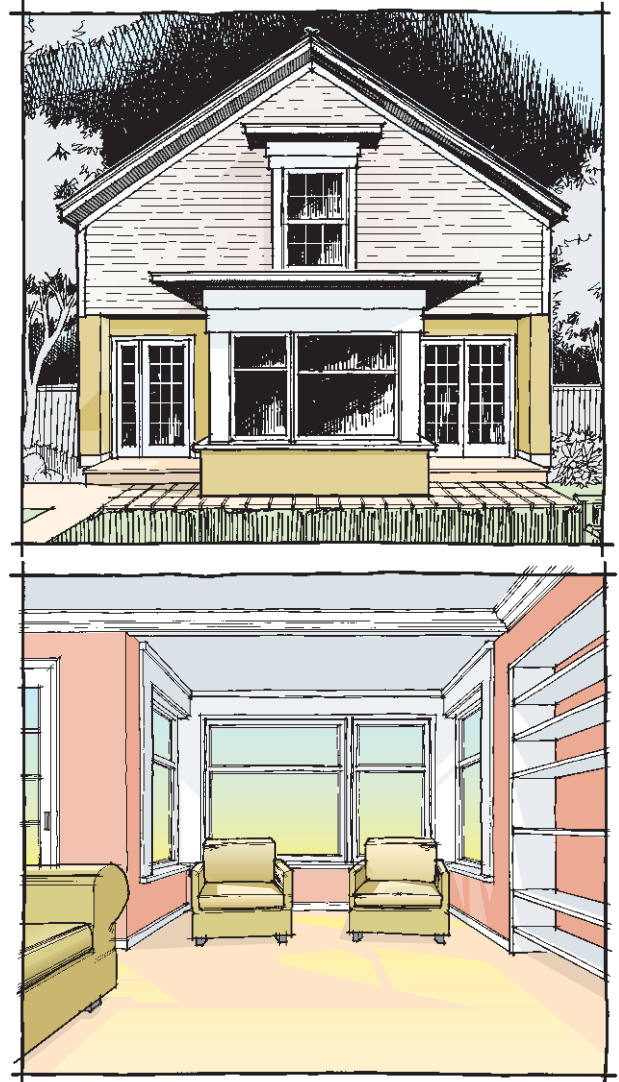


Figure 3. Raising the bay slightly and flattening the roof give it a more contemporary look that's reinforced by the asymmetrical glazing. Recessing the doors at either side of the bay adds a sense of depth (exterior view). The muntins reframe interior views and enable the bay to stand out as a strong design feature.

blank, and it looked as though we had a Colonial revival house with a modern bay stuck on. Plus, it still felt too flat.

Square With Flair

In the next draft, we flattened the roof and lifted it higher (Figure 3). We pushed the doors back into the facade, creating small overhangs above. We reintroduced muntins, cutting the casement windows into thirds both vertically and horizontally. Inside, we built up trim between and above the windows.

Outside, flattening and lifting the roof makes it look more

modern and less predictable. Trim between the window and soffit adds detail. The small overhangs over the two doors create shadows, making the facade feel less flat. Cutting the windows into thirds makes the whole piece look fresh and modern — it definitely attracts the eye.

Inside, the asymmetry makes the bay stand out as the grand feature the clients intended — and fought for — the entire time.



Robert Gerloff, AIA, is an architect in Minneapolis, Minn.