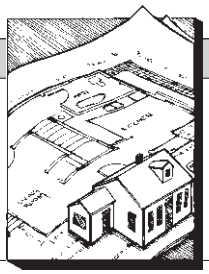


Avoiding Boring Siding

by Gordon Tully

Most house builders and designers select a siding material, decide on an average spacing or board width, and apply the material uniformly over the entire building.

While this approach is consistent with formal, rational styles of architecture, such as Georgian and Modernistic, the Romantic styles – such as Queen Anne, Stick, or Shingle – require more freedom and imagination in the use of siding. Designers and builders who wish to evoke late 19th-century Romantic styles should be able to draw on the variety of patterns possible with sidings, shingles, and boards.

Inventory of Possibilities

You can vary the pattern of exterior cladding in a number of ways.

Orientation of edges. Joints or overlaps can run horizontally, vertically, diagonally, or be arranged in a grid-like pattern.

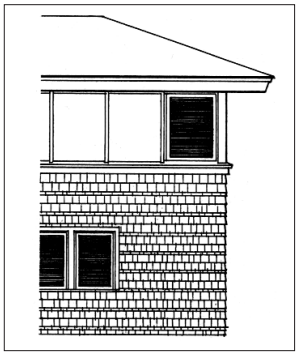
Variation of front-on view of edges. Edges are generally run in continuous straight lines, but with shingles the butt edges can be staggered, scalloped, or V-cut.

Cross-section of edges. Butt edges of siding and shingles can be thick or thin; boards can be set flush, battened, grooved, beaded, or milled at the edges; lap siding can be beaded; large panels can be battened in either or both directions.

Dimensions of siding courses. Cladding can run in continuous narrow or wide courses, blended gradually from wide to narrow, or alternated in various ways (large-small or large-large-small) or in random width. Large panels can be interrupted with batten strips or grids of almost any size and spacing (see Figure 1).

Starts and stops. Shingles can be flared in various ways to create a deep shadow line; all sorts of moldings can be used at the top and bottom of the wall or of bands within the wall – cornices, water tables, rails, belt courses, etc.; and with shingles, corner boards can be eliminated by weaving the corners (don't do it with clapboards, though).

Color. If the cladding is broken into different areas, each can have its own color, as in the extravagantly polychrome Queen Anne homes, examples of which have lately been restored in many cities.



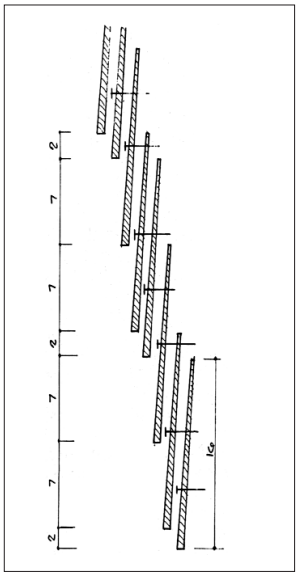


Figure 1. *To vary the exterior cladding for this house, we coursed the shingles in a 7"-7"-2" pattern. Note in the bottom detail that the nails always go through two layers.*

Making Good Design Choices

With such an inventory of possibilities, how do you choose what to do? Here are a few suggestions.

Adjust overall scale effect to fit the building. A building that is broken into areas of different cladding tends to be less forbidding (see Figure 2, next page). For example, a large, tall house with three or four horizontal bands of differing siding materials or one interrupted by sweeps, belt courses, or color breaks will seem less intimidating than one clad overall with material of the same width and color.

If the entire building is clad with one material, the dimension, color, and regularity of the material have a strong effect on the sense of scale. For example, a very small house clad with wide hardboard siding (a common sight on cheaper homes) can look like a dollhouse; while the opposite, a large bulky house clad with narrow siding, can seem overblown and pompous.

Narrow or wide courses on top? If a building has wide siding on one story or band and narrow siding on another, which should go on top? Architectural logic would place the narrow boards nearer the top to reinforce the natural perspective narrowing that occurs and to visually anchor the building to the ground with the wide courses. But historically, the opposite has been the rule: The narrow siding ends up at the bottom of the wall. This is probably a practical measure, because the bottom of the wall, not being protected by the roof overhang, gets more weather exposure.

I think any good siding job will shed water adequately, so the choice should usually be made on visual grounds. For houses right on the seashore, or other very windy sites, however, you should go with narrower courses on the bottom.

Horizontal vs. vertical coursing. With very few exceptions, houses that are broken into vertical panels look awful. In almost every case, horizontal divisions work best. Banding will help tie the house form together, while dormers, gables, and porches can break down the scale if necessary. The order imposed by the horizontal layers allows a lot of experimentation in the plan and with the roofs, without the fear of the composition breaking up into unrelated pieces. This is a particularly good way to deal with complex renovations involving pop-outs and pop-ups such as bay windows and dormers.

One exception to the rule favoring horizontal banding is when a large element, such as a bay window or tower, interrupts the horizontal bands. It is sometimes a good idea to clad the interrupting element in its own type of cladding, particularly if the interruption occurs on a long and potentially monotonous run of wall. It's easy to overdo this, however; usually it is best to let the horizontal bands run right over the interruption so that the house remains tied together visually.

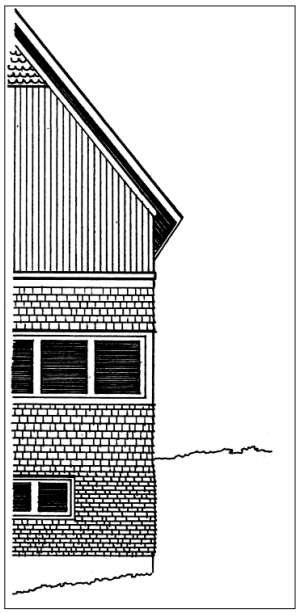


Figure 2. *In this tall, narrow house, the architect, Jeremiah Eck, layered the cladding to break down the scale of the wall. The shingle coursing narrows at the lowest floor; the third level is clad with vertical cedar boards topped with decorative scalloped shingles.*

Varying coursing width. Changes in coursing should be made either abruptly at a piece of trim, or gradual-

A building that is broken into areas of differing cladding tends to be less intimidating than one clad with material of the same width and color.

ly over several courses. Changing courses gradually, however, can create an odd effect in that the wall bulges out because the narrower coursing creates a thicker stack of boards or siding. For this reason, I usually make the change at a piece of trim.

The same effect occurs near the center of fan-shaped decorations made of clapboards. To keep the bulge from getting completely out of hand at the focus of the fan, trim the thick edge of the siding when making the tapered pieces (See JLC, On The House, 11/89).

Rhythms in coursing. I enjoy creating rhythms in coursing shingles. First, select shingles for normal spacing to create the desired coverage. For example, use 16-inch shingles lapped 5 1/3 inches to give triple coverage.

Now respace the shingles to create a rhythm. In this example, you could create a 7"-7"-2" rhythm and still maintain triple coverage (shown in Figure 1). The main courses are now 7 inches wide instead of 5 1/3 inches, which will change the scale of the building. (The 2-inch courses appear as accents and don't "average out" with the 7-inch courses.) The only technical drawback is that two out of three shingles are now nailed 8 inches from the butt instead of the previous 6 1/3 inches, so you might not want to do this on a very windy site.

Line-ups and gradual changes in coursing. A vexing problem for perfectionists is ensuring alignment of courses on either side of intervening elements such as door and window casings. Shingles require the most care, because a leftover half-course of shingles face-nailed under a window sill will split and blow off long before the rest of the shingles need replacement. A cut-away clapboard, on the other hand, works because it is continuous.

In a continuous field of siding, one course can vary from the adjacent one by about 5% to 7% without drawing attention, while the maximum variation within the field should be held to about 15%. This usually gives ample variation to meet the outside of most window and door frames. This same rule also works for varying the spacing between vertical batten strips on plywood.

Alternating courses add another opportunity for adjustment, since you can sometimes change from a 1-1-2 rhythm to a 1-2-1-2 rhythm without anyone noticing. This (along with normal course variations) gives you great flexibility in making things line up.

In a pinch, courses do not have to line up going around a corner. For shingles with woven corners, all exterior corners have to line up; but interior corners can be ended against a narrow vertical trim piece the same thickness as the applied siding, allowing courses to jump. If corner boards are used, the coursing can change at that point, but I do not use this crutch unless all else fails.

Sweeps. The skirt-like sweeps seen on some Shingle houses are a wonderful way to end a section of shingled wall, if not used to excess. One way to make a flared sweep is to nail horizontal 2x's in graduated depth over the sheathing. Another is to bend the sheathing out over horizontal spacers nailed into the studs. In either case, close up the bottom of the sweep about _ inch to 1 inch above the end of the shingles, using a milled piece of cedar.

Another type of sweep, indigenous to some parts of New England, looks somewhat odd (see Figure 3). Simply build up many shingles at the bottom of the wall or section of cladding, gradually increasing the spacing from zero to normal coursing as you go up the wall. This will create a bulge rather like a rolled sock in profile. You will see these occasionally on Shinglestyle houses.

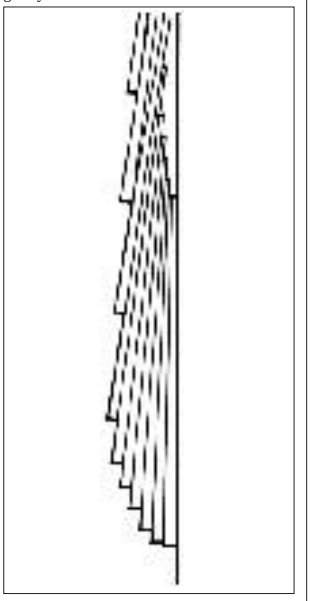


Figure 3. *An unusual way to create a sweep at the base of a wall is by gradually increasing the spacing from zero to normal coursing. While most commonly done with clapboard siding, this can be done with shingles as well, as shown here, using 16-inch*

This short article can only open the door on the vast possibilities available in cladding a house. A whole book could be written about decorative shingle panels, for instance. I hope you will explore these ideas and perhaps try them on your next project.

Gordon Tully is an architect practicing in Cambridge, Mass.