

# Trends I Could Live Without

by Gordon Tully

Every architect, myself included, is a critic. We can't agree about much of anything, but will stand shoulder to shoulder to disparage the typical single-family builder's house. Ask any one of us exactly what makes one house interesting and another reprehensible, and you will hear some pretty amazing gobble-de-gook.

My answer would mix history, site and floor planning, detailing, materials, sociology, and aesthetics into a philosophical haggle that would take about a year to prepare and digest.

But there are some things I simply don't like, so I decided to choose six of them to present here.

## Roundhead Windows

Arched windows are the preeminent cliché of the 1980s. Aside from the correct and excellent use of arches as structural elements in an arcade, you find them only rarely in any style. It was during the 1970s and '80s, however, when we all reassessed the value of our older buildings, that the arched window punched in a blank wall made its reappearance, often as part of a so-called Palladian window. The arch became sort of a club badge; if you used one, you were definitely okay.

Arched windows punched in walls have their place, but must be used with extreme caution. Most of the time, the composition can be improved by substituting a square window. If in doubt, leave it out and save a bunch of money.

Completely round windows, on the other hand, almost always come off as strange. They are associated with postmodernism, which is a dead and very dated style. In 1995, you will look at buildings with round windows and think "1987," "stock-market crash," and other thoughts you might rather forget.

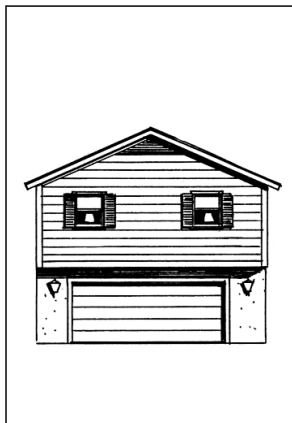
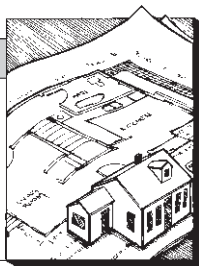
Motto: *Square is cool.*

## Faces

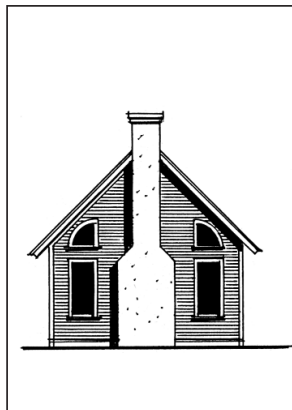
Imitating human bodies is a central theme in architecture. And deliberately creating an ugly face on the façade of a building was a favorite postmodernist technique. When I had employees, I carried on a constant crusade to remove the faces they created on my building elevations with windows and doors.

The issue here is whether the image is deliberately childlike in its execution or more subtle and indirect. Now and then a face will appear "accidentally" on a house façade—a charming if embarrassing accident. But it takes a hell of a designer to deliberately and successfully appear naïve. Most of our deliberate imitations are simply crude, like graffiti on a wall, and that's how these "faces" look to me (see Figure 1).

The way to avoid this problem is to play with the proportions of a façade until you get something that looks content. Draw the elevation carefully; relax and take a break; then look again, thinking "face." If you burst out in laughter, change the design. And never, never center a chimney on a



**Figure 1.** One mistake to avoid is a "face" such as the one on this garage. Lamps make pupils in the windows-eyes; the shutters form eyelashes, the lights, dimples; the overhang shadow makes a mustache; the door is the mouth; and the attic vent a furrowed brow. All that is missing is the nose; sketch in a bronze eagle to complete the joke.



**Figure 2.** Here we did the best we could to accommodate a client's wish for a centered chimney and flanking windows, without creating a face. It is very difficult to center a chimney in a gable and not evoke an extremely ugly nose.

gable end and flank it with windows (Figure 2).

Motto: *Thumb your nose at faces on buildings.*

## Large-Scale Symmetry

By "large-scale" I mean the whole plan or façade, not a pair of windows or a door centered under a gable. Large-scale symmetry characterizes houses built between about 1765 and 1840. Such symmetrical designs were practical because our ancestors did not have as much junk and equipment as we do. They kept everything in trunks and wardrobes, and used chamber pots and outhouses. The rich people who built big, symmetrical houses had other folks cook for them, sometimes in separate buildings. In symmetrical houses it is often impossible to tell what the original function of a room was, since most rooms could serve more than one purpose.

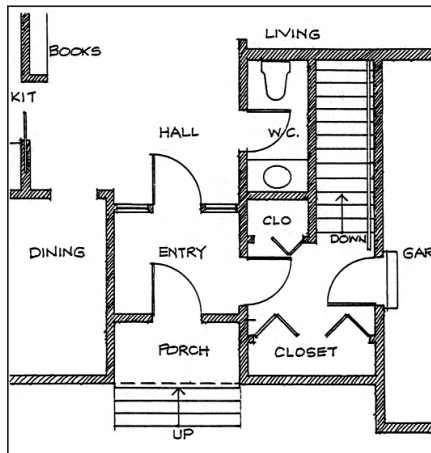
Today's small houses are intricate mazes of specialized rooms and passages, full of equipment and built-in storage. Appended to the house is a huge room for the household vehicles (which used to be kept out by the barn). Such room specialization makes "symmetrical small modern house" a contradiction in terms.

Yet builders and owners hang on to the old imagery, not only in the phony colonial houses that used to be so popular, but in some of the fake post-modernist numbers that now grace our subdivisions. Useless spaces balance useful ones, while the plan writhes in pain from being squeezed

short, so the trim has to be kept small. He just won the battle and lost the war.

Why throw away the one element on a building that might actually make this house full of modern gizmos look authentically old? While some very old houses had thin trim, it was generally unpainted. Most antiques sport substantial trim, with eaves trim running well over 2 feet wide on many 19th-century houses. To give the effect of solidity, the trim must be wide enough so that it doesn't look puny from the street.

A similar problem often crops up on houses with vinyl siding. When eco-



**Figure 3.** Here is the entry plan for a house I designed in Newton, Mass. The owner always enters the house through the front door, whether arriving by car or on foot, in rain, snow, or sun. Guests who park on the apron have no doubts about where to enter.

into an antique iron maiden. In a more practical design, room sizes and locations are dictated by their use and relation to one another.

Motto: *Keep symmetry on the small scale.*

## Blotchy Roofs

I hate shingle "blendes." You know something is wrong with a concept when it parades under a misspelled name—one look at the name, for instance, is enough to steer me clear of "lite" beer. Ditto with "blende" roofs, in which asphalt shingles are laid in different-colored courses or groups of courses.

Slate and tile roofs are often multi-colored, and the effect is quite nice, if sometimes startling, because each piece is different from its neighbor. In blendes, however, the contrasting color runs across half or more of a 3-foot-wide shingle strip rather than staying within the confines of one tab. The result is a blotchy, streaky roof that looks as if a six-year-old painted the color on with a mop.

I also detest double-thick shingles, which try to look like shakes or wood shingles. They fool no one, cost more, and give inferior coverage unless the roofer pays close attention, the diagonals drift off a straight line, with an effect like a bad moiré pattern.

I like to use a three-cut shingle, as thick as possible, with a uniform color. Unfortunately, there is usually little choice in color: red, green, black, and white are the typical options. So you often need to adjust the house color to the roof color.

Motto: *Choose your plain-colored shingles early in the design.*

## Teensy-Weensy Trim

A builder decides to build a "traditional" house. He recognizes that traditional houses have corner boards, eaves, and rake trim. But money is

nomics dictate that you must deface a building with vinyl, using 6-inch corner boards instead of 3-inchers will make a huge difference.

Motto: *Lay it on or leave it off.*

## Front Doors

Unless you live in the city, it is likely that no one ever uses your front door, especially if you live in a so-called colonial. The inappropriateness of that style to modern living is given away by the useless front door: Everyone enters through the garage or utility entrance. Sometimes people actually place furniture in front of the door if space is tight.

Rather than trying to live in a stage set, acknowledge that everyone arrives by car, and that only one functional entrance is needed at the front (although there may be several doors out the back onto terraces).

The real problem is to design the entrance so that it looks good for company and yet accommodates your skis and dirty boots. A good solution is to create a nice company entrance near the garage, linking it to the garage and possibly the back yard with an adjacent mudroom (see Figure 3). That way, you get the pleasure of using the formal entrance while having a place out of sight to deposit the debris of everyday living.

Motto: *Quit sneaking in the back door: Treat yourself like company!*

When I am king, I will abolish all these irritants. Until that happy day, I hope some of you will share in my irritation and help me eliminate these blights. ■

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