

Exterior Trim: Design Basics

by Jamie Fisher

These simple principles can turn a plain-Jane exterior into an elegant home

A lot of things must come together to make a beautiful house. These include proper placement on an attractive site, thoughtful design, good materials, skilled craftsmanship, and regular maintenance. Old houses make it look easy. Just walk through an older neighborhood: The houses may be modest (a few might even be rundown), but they look and feel right — more right than when you walk through a new subdivision. Why is that?

Much of what makes a house look good has to do with exterior details. In recent years, however, attention to exterior details — and the understanding of their effect on appearance — has diminished. There are few old-timers left in the trades to pass on design wisdom, and just as few real apprentices to receive it. The availability of modern materials and the scarcity of traditional ones have led builders to break free of time-tested ways of building, and the

new ways — whatever their virtues — don't always look as good. Finally, the home improvement center, whose market is the empowered do-it-yourselfer, has put many design decisions in the hands of untrained consumers.

"But isn't beauty in the eye of the beholder?" you may ask. Well, no, it isn't. You might prefer one detail and I might prefer another, but there are fundamental aesthetic principles that separate good details from bad ones. Being able to see and appreciate the differences is an acquired skill, like recognizing fine wine or great literature. And while adding charm to your homes won't automatically raise your profit margins, it will enhance your reputation as someone who values high-quality work. What follows are some trim details that will make your homes more beautiful.

Belt Course

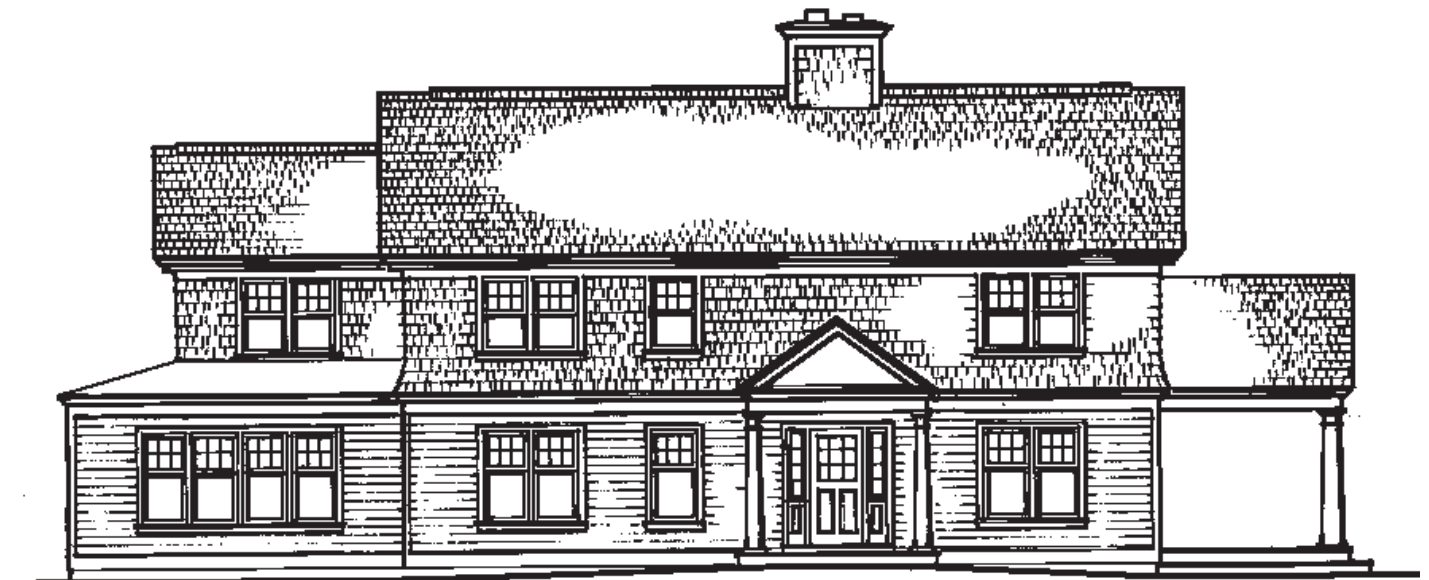


Figure 1. A belt course is a strip of horizontal trim that visually divides a wall of siding, often installed at a floor line. A belt course is defined by its shadow, so it should project out from the surface. To prevent water problems, the shelf this creates must be sloped away from the wall and carefully flashed. A belt course should wrap around corners — it should interrupt vertical trim, not the other way around.

Gutter End Treatments

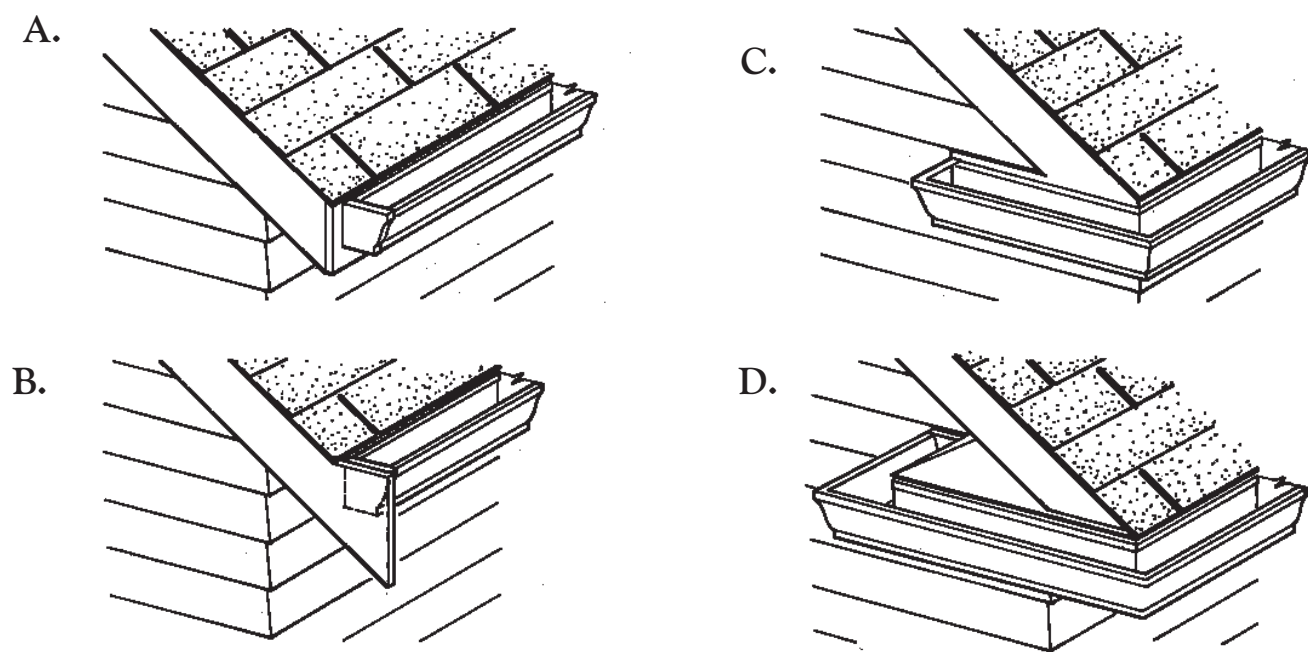


Figure 2. There's no excuse for unsightly exposed gutter ends on any house (A). On a gable roof with wide, sloping eaves, cap the gutter behind the rake board and use a small triangular block on top of the barge board to cover the end of the gutter (B). On gable roofs without overhangs, take the gutter and fascia around the corner to create a short return (C). On a gable end with an overhang, one elegant solution is to build a small hip at the corner and return the gutter to the gable (D).

Put Natural Breaks in the Siding

A house is really a collection of distinct parts stacked on top of one another: foundation, living floors, and roof. Putting horizontal breaks in the siding reinforces our intuitive understanding of this. One excellent technique for doing this is the belt course (see Figure 1, previous page). The belt course has its origins in masonry con-

struction; it's a piece of projecting trim that runs horizontally around a house. The belt course also lets you change siding materials as you go up the building. Which materials you use where is a matter of convention. Here in Seattle, the most common pattern is wide bevel siding below the belt course, and narrower bevel siding or shingles above. When used close to

the ground, a belt course is sometimes called a water table.

Detail Cornice Returns and Overhangs

The relationship of a house's walls to its roof is a big factor in its overall appearance. Fascia, soffits, rake boards, and gutters are all strong visual elements that need to be carefully inte-

Window Trim

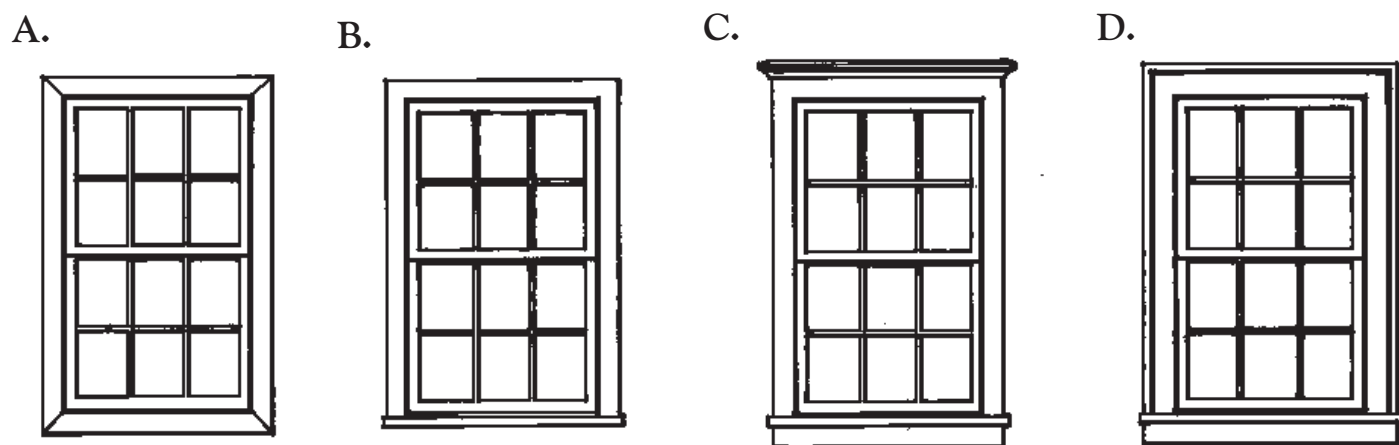


Figure 3. Different trim treatments can radically change the appearance of otherwise identical windows. Though the simplest treatment is a mitered frame (A), ending the jamb casings on a projecting sill will give the window a visual base (B). Further embellishment is provided by an enlarged, ornamental head casing (C) or a mitered backband (D).

grated with one another. Hip roofs are the easiest: The gutter is continuous and the soffit detail turns the corner. But on gable roofs, things get more complicated, as shown in Figure 2.

Trim All Openings

Windows and doors transform a wall into a facade. But a window opening without trim is a hole in the wall; add trim and it becomes an aesthetic statement. Like the frame around a picture, trim enriches the opening, raising its stature from an element of utility to one of civility. As Figure 3 shows, any trim is better than none, but some trim treatments have more visual sophistication than others.

The simplest treatment is a uniform wrap where jamb, head, and sill casings are trimmed out the same, picture-frame style. A more elegant solution is for the jamb casings to sit on a projecting sill, giving the window a visual base.

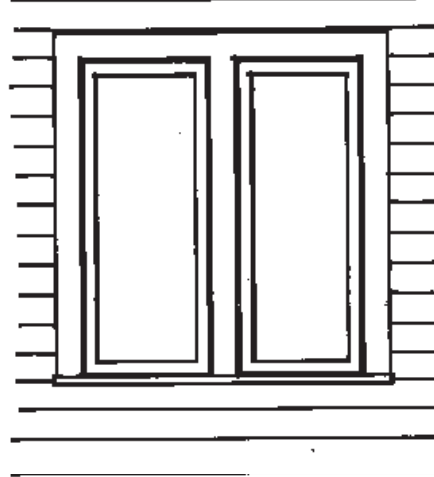
You can further embellish windows and doors by placing an enlarged, ornamental head casing on top of the jamb casing or by surrounding the casing with a mitered backband. Where I live in Seattle, in fact, the backband is the most common traditional trim style. Whenever I'm doing an addition that wants to look like an older house, this is one of the first things I'll try.

An untrimmed window is an eyesore, but even worse are multiple untrimmed windows set close together with just a thin line of siding between them. Windows that are close together in the same room are usually thought of as a single assembly; trimming them as a unit will reinforce this perception. It also enriches the facade by adding variety; instead of just siding and windows, you now have siding, windows, and groups of windows. When one of those groups extends vertically to engage two floors or horizontally around a corner to engage two facades, the compositional opportunities are expanded even further.

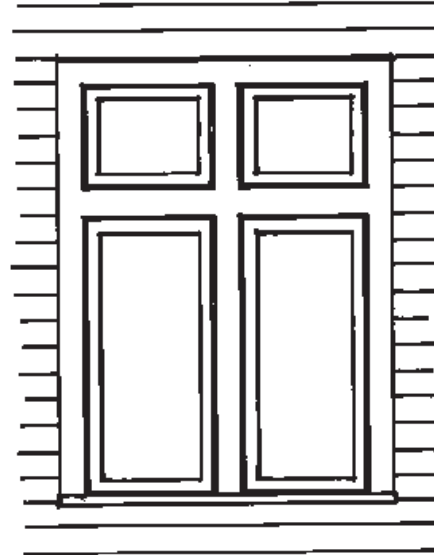
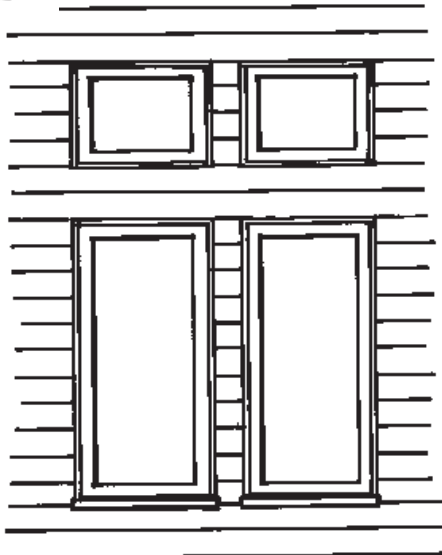
There are no hard-and-fast rules here, but if trimming the windows separately leaves a space between them that can be filled with a single board, I cover the entire area with trim instead of siding (Figure 4).

Grouping Windows

A.



B.



C.

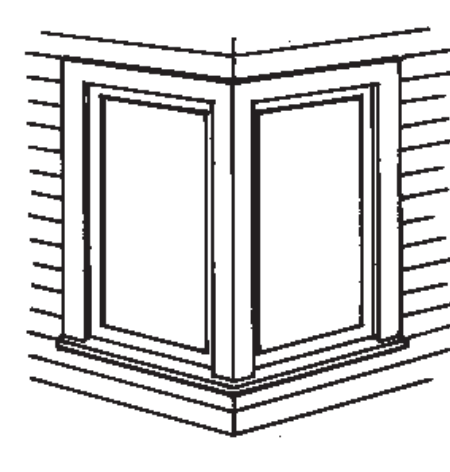
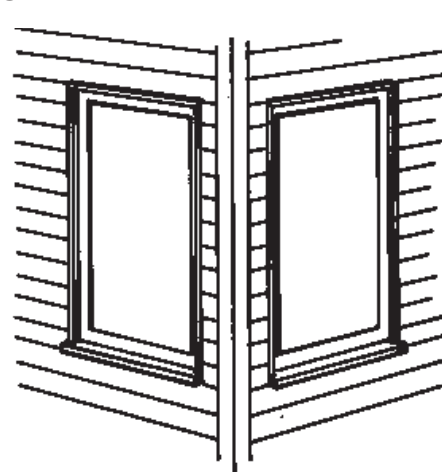


Figure 4. Windows that are close together in the same room are usually thought of as a group; trimming them as a unit will reinforce this perception (A). When one of those groups extends vertically (B) or horizontally around a corner (C), the trim options are expanded even further.

Exterior Facelift:

A.

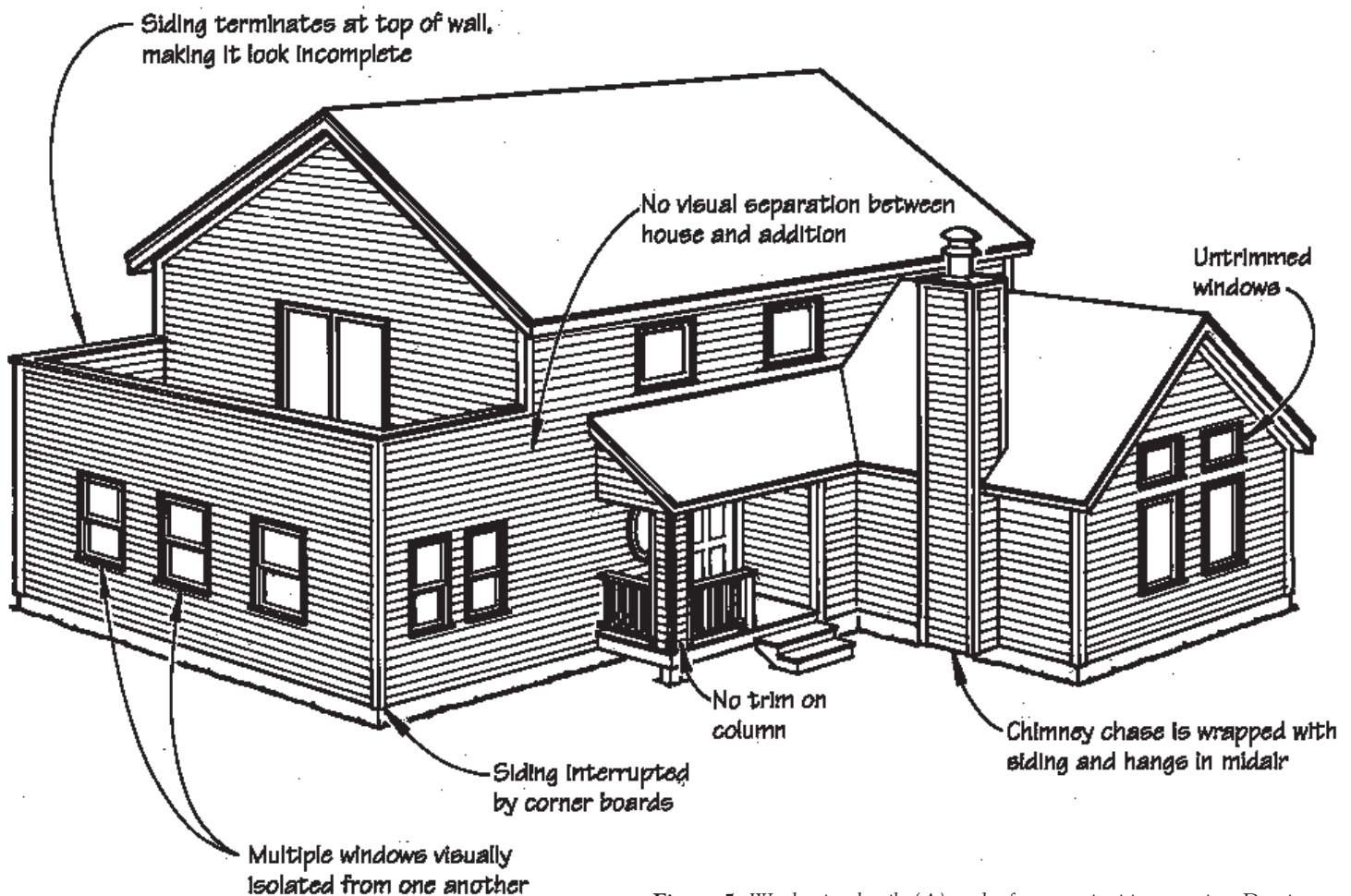


Figure 5. Weak trim details (A) make for an uninviting exterior: Despite this house's varied geometry, it has about as much charm as a tract home. Yet with only minor structural design changes, the same house becomes distinctive and inviting when refined with thought-out exterior details (B).

Avoid Boxed Chimneys

The fireplace is a powerful domestic symbol that has endured way beyond its thermal usefulness. And a “real” chimney is masonry — heavy, solid, and rooted in the earth. But real chimneys are expensive. To save money, many people install a manufactured fireplace and connect it to a metal flue that’s hidden in a wooden chase covered with siding. As Figure 5A shows, the chase sometimes isn’t even connected to the ground. To me, this falls in the same class as an aluminum Christmas tree — it’s functional and cost-effective, but most people would rather have a real tree or no tree at all.

A good compromise is to side the chimney chase with an exterior insulation and finish system. Unless you look real close, the finished product looks just like a masonry chimney with stucco on the outside. I did one last year; it cost twice as much as a plain wooden chase but was about half the cost of masonry. If even this is too expensive, rework the plan to get the fireplace off an exterior wall, or specify a gas fireplace that doesn’t require a chimney.

Imply Structure

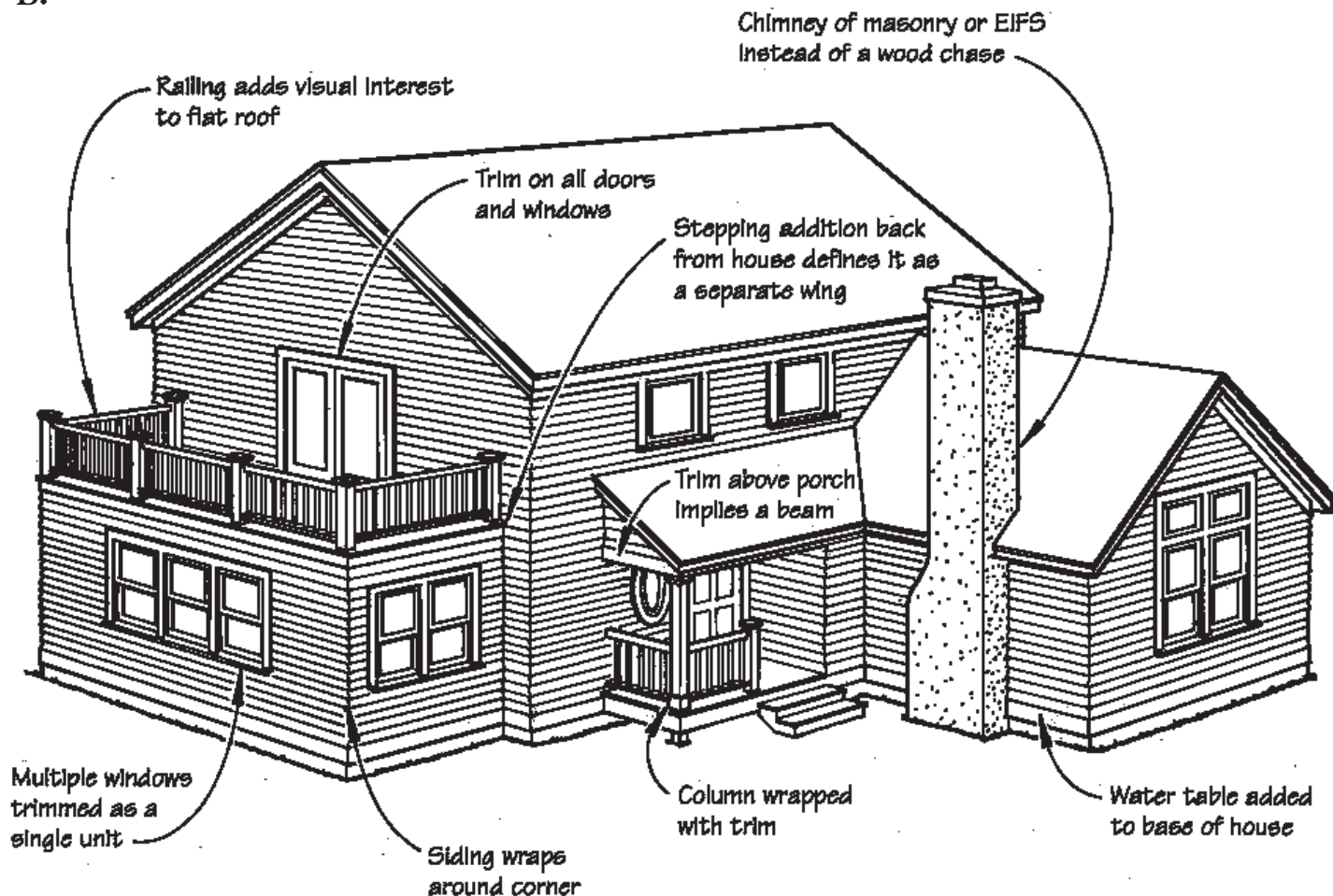
The purpose of real structure is to resist loads; the purpose of implied structure is to show how the real structure works. We

intuitively understand structure because we live with gravity every day. A building that reinforces that understanding “looks right,” though many people couldn’t tell you why. A good example of this is the porch roof in Figure 5B. The roof is an overhang that wants a beam to carry it. The beam is implied by the added trim, which also provides a gratifying surround for the ceiling plane.

Likewise, wrap thick structural columns with trim rather than siding. (You can think of it as you do the strip of wall between adjacent windows.) And treat the column with the respect it deserves, which means giving it a base and a cap.

Before and After

B.



Wrap Siding Around Corners

One place I try not to break up siding is at the corners. Though some architectural styles demand corner trim, I find that bevel siding and shingles usually look better when they turn corners without being interrupted by corner boards. If you must use corner boards, don't use a contrasting trim color. If corner boards are the same color as the siding they'll be less noticeable.

Embellish Flat Roofs

I'm talking here not about flat-roofed houses, but about flat areas of conventionally roofed houses, principally roof decks. It's technically

possible to terminate the siding at the roofline or the top of a parapet wall, but when compared with the sloped roof, this looks incomplete. A house with all flat roofs will look okay because it's visually consistent; a house with only one flat part is inconsistent. Conceptually, the house is arguing with itself.

The solution is to give the flat part a separate identity by using trim around the top. An actual cornice would do the job, as would a railing that's treated as trim. The trick is to emphasize the presence of the trim, rather than the absence of a roof. This is easier if the part of the house

beneath the flat roof has its own identity as well. In Figure 5B, for instance, the sides of the small, flat-roofed wing have been moved inward to form a corner. This defines the wing as distinct from the main house.

In short, give the exterior of your houses the same design attention you give to the inside details. With proper planning, the cost of making a home look balanced and inviting with a few embellishments will more than pay for itself in curb appeal for generations to come. ■

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