The Dialogue Between Roof and Wall

by Gordon Tully

In a good Georgian house, the facade and the roof appear to be engaged in a dialogue, each taking a separate point of view, each getting a chance to make its point.

What we admire in Colonial- and Federal-style houses is their balance and constraint. The houses are simple, dignified, even powerful, yet neither roof nor wall are exaggerated. In a low-cost Colonial farmhouse, for instance, walls and roof are very simple and unadorned, with any decoration lavished on the front door and chimney. In more costly Georgian homes, the eaves, rakes, window and door surrounds, and building corners are often elaborately trimmed, and in extreme cases the walls extend with balustrades to make the home look more monumental. In all these variations, each element retains a simple dignity and power, and the overall design is well-balanced.

From Dialogue to Shouting Match

We justly admire these houses and try to imitate them, but we are doomed to failure, because the underlying discipline that supported the style has been lost. Except on rare occasions, the contemporary dialogue between various house components, and particularly between roof and walls, is either one-sided or empty of true content. As in our present media and entertainment industries, our built environment too often has only two settings: loud or off.

This is too bad, because the overall form of our houses still resembles the form of those Georgian masterpieces, and for good reasons. Perhaps the most obvious resemblance is the use of a visible roof. The visible roof has always implied domesticity, which is one reason architects seeking a grand effect tend to suppress the roof and emphasize facades. (Think Gothic cathedral.) Hiding a roof behind facades, however, causes some tricky and expensive water-routing problems, which is why most homes have roofs that extend beyond eaves. The great distinction of the Georgian style was to use the visible roof in a way that gave the building a dignity and monumentality, and kept roof and wall in balance.

Why Neo-Georgian Falls Short

Expensive reproductions aside, our present copies of copies of copies of Georgian houses share little with the originals. Our floor plans, construction technology, and materials are entirely different, and the forms are much more complex. Even when the form is a simple gable-ended box — a Colonial or a Cape or a ranch — the proportions are entirely different. Far from being taut, elegant, and simple, our neo-Georgian designs are disorganized, awkward, and unconvincing — in a word, ugly.

This is not simply a result of poor design. The problem is intrinsic to the way we live and build. The Georgian originals were made of a few simple materials that you could mold, saw, forge, or brush on, usually in pieces of a size that could be handled by one person. The materials created an understandable, human scale, and because the same materials were used for structure and finish, they conveyed a strong sense of solidity and integrity.

Today's buildings, however, don't seem to be made of anything in particular (see Figure 1). The stuff you see on the surface is not the stuff that holds up and protects the building. Our buildings (of all kinds, not just houses) hide their essences behind prefabricated cladding materials.

In addition, most of the cladding materials used in housing do not form natural joints, a problem clearly visible in drip edges, vinyl siding J-channels, clad window frames, and aluminum trim. Because everything is loose, applied, stapled together, and overlapped, the result looks insubstantial and disorganized. Materials tend to come in big sheets and assemblies, without the telltale joints between hand-sized pieces that enliven and humanize

Figure 1. *The 19th-century Cape (left), with its steep roof, fine proportions, heavy cornerboards, and cornice returns, embodies the dignity and balance long admired in Georgian architecture and its descendants. By contrast, the modern ranch (right), which stands next door, exemplifies how modern materials and budget constraints produce an insubstantial design. The shallow pitch and slight overhangs give no weight to the roof; likewise, the flimsy vinyl corner trim gives no sense of support.*

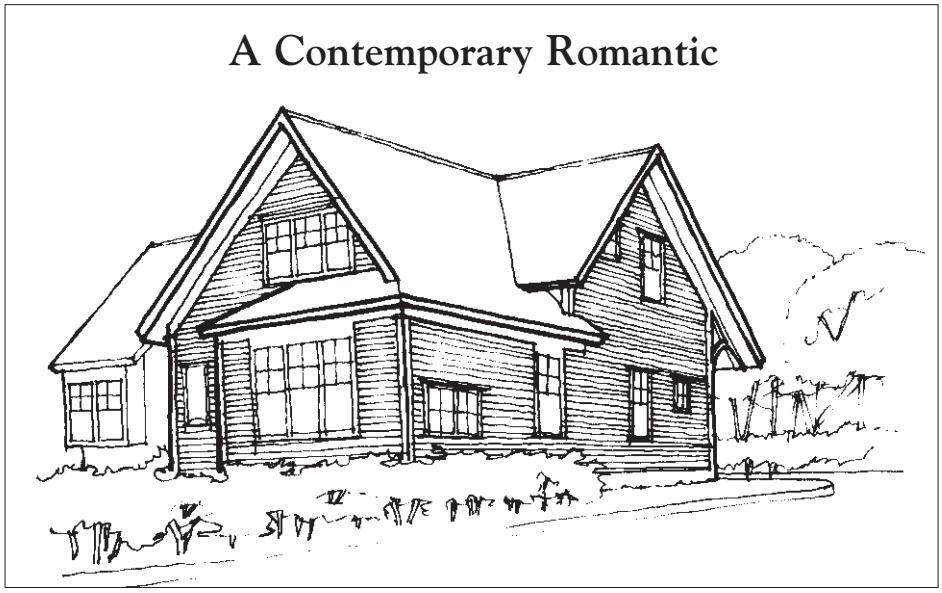

Figure 2. *Most new-home budgets don't allow for the attention to trim detail that went into the houses of the past. But there are simple and less expensive ways to express the dialog between walls and roof. In this design, the author has used heavy rake and eaves trim to make the roof dominate. Connecting the window head trim with the eaves molding makes the roof-wall dialogue more complex and interesting: Is the eaves molding part of the roof or the wall or both?*

the old houses. Even when we do use brick and stone, we use them as veneers, depriving them of their capacity to make the house seem real and solid.

The walls of today's production houses, already made insubstantial by the loosely applied veneers, are further torn to pieces by poorly placed and oversized windows. Roofs are dotted with ridge vents, skylights, dormers, plumbing vents, and exhaust piping, breaking them up and weakening their voice in the dialogue. Roofs are further weakened by their typically shallow pitch and puny overhangs. The same cost-cutting pressures also eliminate cornice trim, producing a watered-down, insipid effect.

Finally, most homes these days have huge openings for cars — openings that in the past were relegated to the barn or carriage house, but which now dominate the facade of the typical home.

Where should we look for help, if not to our beloved Georgian homes? There are several approaches. One I strongly agree with is to return to craftsmanlike materials and better-scaled design — a laudable movement embraced by many *JLC* readers. However, high labor costs mean this approach can be used in only a fraction of the housing being built in our competitive, machine-oriented society.

Another approach is to strike off in a new stylistic direction and try to use contemporary materials — stainless steel, glass, concrete, plastics, you name it — more naturally and directly. So far, however, this approach has produced only designs so startling or expensive they have no hope of being accepted in the general marketplace.

Go Romantic, Not Victorian

An approach that works for me is to use simple prototypes from the 19th and 20th centuries instead of the 18th. As you watch the styles unfold after 1800, you note that both parties in the dialogue between roof and wall began to shout. The disciplined drama of the Classical period was replaced by the increasingly showy emotionalism of the Romantic period. Romantic prototypes, with their multiple planes, asymmetrical plans, and exaggerated trim, suit our noisy times better than do Classical ones.

I do not mean to support the recent craze for "Victoriana." This is a big mistake, because the proliferation of gewgaws and frou-frou comes across as frivolous add-ons and will, in most cases, not be maintained. Picket fences have to be painted nearly every year, and all that gingerbread needs a facelift every five years or so. Such labor-intensive house care is simply beyond the means of most people. What I am talking about are simple and dignified designs with much asymmetry and overstated trim systems to pull the design together (Figure 2).

A heavier cornice at the top of the wall, for instance, will partially compensate for the usual awful proportions of today's houses. It will also force you to lift the roof off the second-floor window heads, one of the simplest ways of improving any contemporary design. Extending the roof overhang helps further strengthen the imagery and gives the roof an emphasis it lacks.

Similarly, raising the eaves in a one-story house above the level of the second floor — making it a one-and-a-half story, in other words — almost always improves contemporary designs, because it gives the wall some "breathing room" over the first-floor windows and helps restore the wall's integrity. Also, because the eaves hit at the middle of the second-floor windows, the roof, walls, and dormers are locked together. You eliminate the classical standoff between them and thus eliminate the need for the subtle detailing and proportions that are so essential to the Georgian imagery.

Post-Georgian styles often used another trick to lock roof and wall together: returning the eaves a short distance around the corner, but not finishing a pedimented gable (as on the 19th-century Cape in Figure 1). To make this detail work, you really have to turn the eaves onto the gable end, creating a little pent roof. Don't project the return very far unless you enjoy creating bird roosts. Another trick is to put small cornices atop window and door frames. These add weight and importance to these elements, tie them to the heavier trim system, and give the facade a sense of depth and solidity. In general, this heavier trim gives you more control over the balance between wall and roof, allowing you to make minor changes in the field without fouling the delicate balance.

Perhaps that is the moral here: That in a chaotic, confusing environment, the only gestures that carry through the background noise are the big ones. This is not a world our Georgian ancestors would have understood. ■

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