A Fitting Addition

by Jamie Fisher

The one-story addition is such a common remodeling design problem that you'd think by now we could just repeat successful solutions over and over again. But alas, no. Or perhaps I should say, thank goodness, no, because a significant fraction of my annual income comes from struggling with this commonplace request by homeowners looking for a little more space.

Most people aren't looking for their addition to make a big design statement. In fact, I strike a resonant chord when I tell prospective clients my goal is to make their addition look as if it was always there, to contribute to rather than change the house's existing character.

Often the solution is both obvious and affordable, in which case I back out and leave matters in the hands of a seasoned remodeling contractor. But let's skip the easy ones and dig into a typical messy one.

Working With Quirks

As part of a complete kitchen renovation, this 1906 house was to get a reworked rear elevation. The existing kitchen was separated from the backyard by a cramped little mudroom. We hoped to open the kitchen to the backyard with both a strong visual connection (a.k.a. windows) and via circulation (doors). The addition was to consist mostly of a covered back porch that would connect the kitchen to the garden.

When I begin design work on an old house, I take a mental inventory of the house's architectural quirks. Sometimes these quirks are unrelated to the specific problem at hand; other times they are part of the problem to be solved or can affect the choice of solutions. Either way, I'm looking for cues from the house that can drive the design in a particular direction.

In this case, the thing that caught my eye was the awkward lack of eaves at the kitchen (see Figure 1). While the rest of the house has 20-inch soffited eaves, the kitchen's eaves are erased by the room's southward projection, which extends the kitchen to the edge of the roof, leaving no overhang except for the gutter. Though this condition was actually part of the original design, it looks for all the world like an unfortunate addition, and I added correcting this eyesore to my own private agenda for the project.

My first attempt produced Scheme A (Figure 2, next page). This design gives the projecting kitchen its own cross-

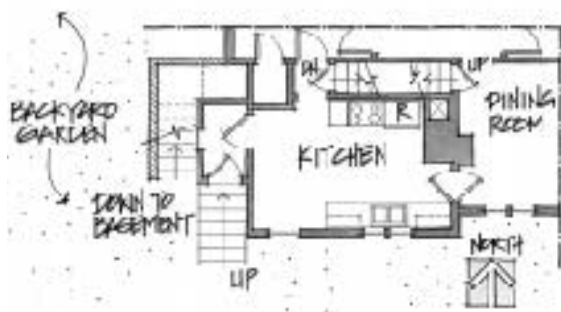## Existing Elevation

Original Kitchen Plan

Figure 1. A client's request to expand a porch and open the kitchen more to the outside presented the author with an opportunity to straighten out some wrinkles in the original house, such as a chaotic roof and a lack of eaves along the side outside the kitchen.

Scheme A

Figure 2. The first proposed solution unified the roofline, but as the clients pointed out, failed to adequately expand the porch while adding upstairs space they never asked for.

Scheme B

Revised Kitchen Plan

Figure 3. The finished plan not only greatly expanded the porch — one of the clients' chief wishes — but also corrected the eaves and roof massing problems.

gable roof with overhangs matching those on the rest of the house. Meanwhile, the lower part of the primary roof plane on the kitchen side is extended toward the rear of the house to form part of a gable roof over the new porch. Higher up, the house's main ridge is also extended 2 feet so that the projecting bay of the bedroom, which stuck out in the old design like a nose, is comfortably integrated into the main gable. This provides a little more room upstairs (that's how I pitched it to the owner), and perhaps more important, visually quiets down the elevation and avoids some awkward flashing details.

I was pretty happy with scheme A, waving it as an example of how good designs don't just solve the main problem, but also have a positive ripple effect.

Reality Check

Unfortunately, in my zeal for tidying up the house's wider problems, I had lost sight of the original goal, which was to get these people a roomy back porch. They didn't see why, if the kitchen projected south as far as it did, the porch couldn't project to that line as well.

They also didn't see why they should pay for an attic addition they neither needed nor asked for. Of course, they were right, my lessons in architectural rules of order notwithstanding. That's the

kind of reality check I've come to value from my clients.

I scurried back to the drawing board, wiser and humbler, and came up with scheme B (Figure 3, previous page).

Scheme B accepted as a given that the porch would come south as far as the existing kitchen, then set out to create an architectural context that would accept this. The kitchen still gets a new cross-gable roof, as in scheme A, but this time the roof west of the new cross-gable doesn't step back in from the eaves. Instead, it changes pitch and swings out to come flush with the front edge of the cross-gable roof.

This change in pitch suggested the need for a hip roof over the porch. In addition to better handling the geometric complexities, the hip roof did away with the excessive number of gables on the rear elevation. And the hip fits right in on this house because of the soffited eaves returns, which are themselves like miniature hip roofs. The house ends up with an internally consistent set of rules: gables for projecting rooms, hips for porches. More important, having a choice of roof styles gave flexibility in solving the design problem to the owner's satisfaction.

Take Advantage of Complexity

What can be generalized from this example?

•Take the time to understand the house you are working on. I'm not talking about just internalizing the floor plan and researching the zoning code. I'm referring to understanding the rules and logic that make up the elements of the house's style.

•Seek a solution that imposes an overriding order — but don't be surprised if the house (or the program) doesn't accept it willingly.

•When necessary, make complexity your friend. Not only can complexity provide a visual variety that makes houses charming, but it can give you a repertoire of devices wide enough to solve the problems you need to solve.

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