Infill Housing That Fits

by Jamie Fisher

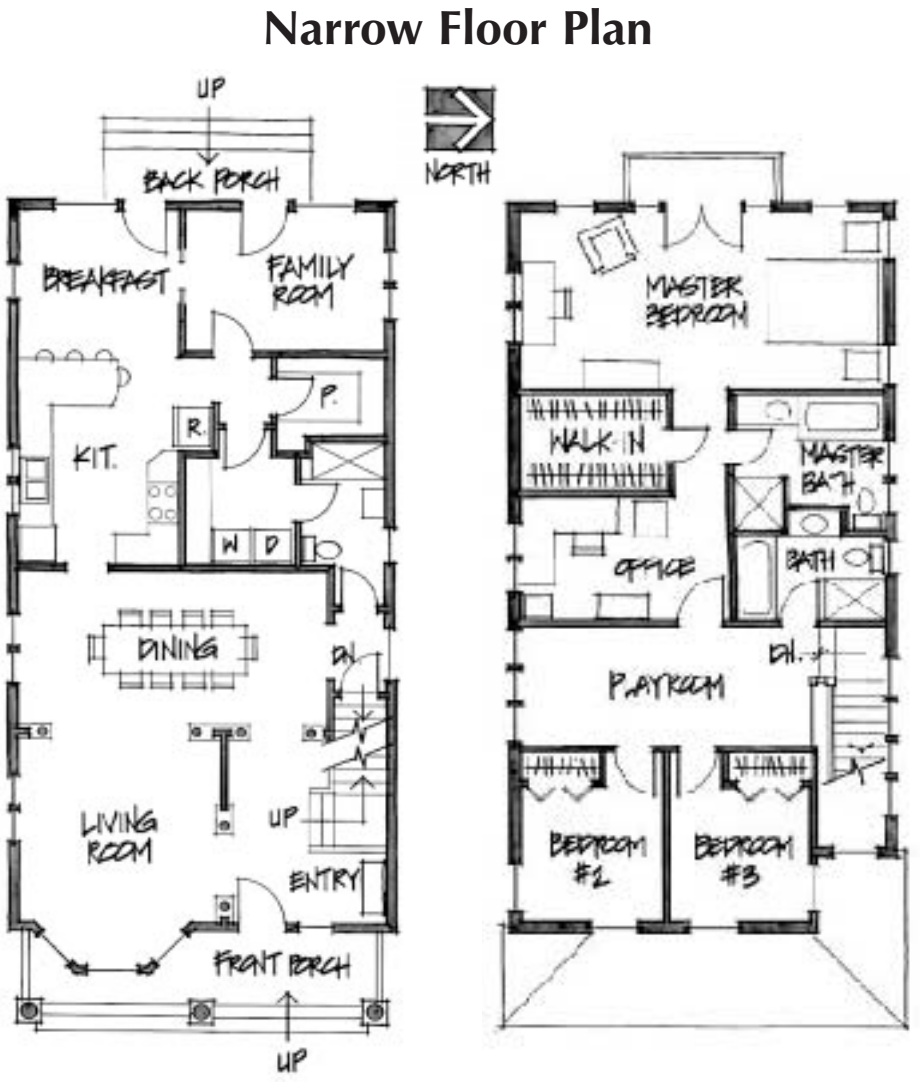

Figure 1. The goal in this new house was to fit ten rooms and two baths into two floors — all on a narrow lot and without creating an ugly box to do it.

The neighborhoods in my hometown are a mishmash of house styles. The oldest houses are pre-World War I bungalows; then come the brick tudors from the 1920s with their steep pitched gables, and the Dutch colonials with their barnlike silhouettes, mixed in with the occasional rambler from the fifties. These diverse styles coexist peacefully, and the variety they bring gives the neighborhoods charm and appeal.

Every once in a while a new house goes up, either from a tear-down or someone selling off a side lot. And whenever the telltale excavator and porta-potty show up, we all cringe — because we know the new house will likely be the ugliest one on the street. With a couple of really nice notable exceptions, the neighborhood's new houses, driven by a demand for plentiful space, are out of scale, coarsely detailed, and overly boxy.

Why are today's housing demands so often expressed in such ugly form? I struggle with this problem every time I design an infill house or a large addition. How do you make a big new house fit in with its smaller, older neighbors? And how much fit is enough?

A recent project gave me a chance to wrestle with these issues. The owners had a typical story: They loved the neighborhood, but they needed more

The Colonial Box

Figure 2. This off-the-shelf colonial design provided the space, but was so boxy and monolithic that both the author and his clients rejected it outright.

The Bungalow

Figure 3. The second scheme echoed the bungalow architecture of the surrounding neighborhood. This was an improvement, but it lost too much second-floor space and required an expensive stick-framed roof.

room. In addition to the usual rooms on the main floor, they wanted a full second floor with a master suite, two kids' bedrooms, an office for the work-at-home mom, a playroom for the kids, and lots of storage (see Figure 1). Altogether, we were looking for about 2,500 square feet on a lot 30 feet wide — precisely the situation that often results in out-of-scale boxes.

The off-the-shelf scheme (Figure 2) was the most straightforward: a pair of rectangular floor plates topped by a simple trussed gable roof. While a porch, trim, siding, window proportions and other exterior refinements could dress up this "colonial," it was basically a big, economical box, and it showed. The owners were familiar with several houses in the neighborhood built using this approach, and they rejected it.

We then tried a bungalow form (Figure 3) with a sweeping stick-framed, cross-gable roof ended by big dormers in the front and back. While this design had a clear stylistic lineage to the earliest houses in the neighborhood, this familiarity came at a price. Keeping the dormers in proportion knocked about 200 square feet off the second floor, which sent the playroom into a third-floor attic and pushed the storage into low-headroom eaves areas. Also, the stick-framed roof would lack the economy of pre-engineered trusses. The owners loved the retro look, but it was clear that compared to, say, the colonial described above, they'd spend more and get less.

The third and "final" scheme (I always place that word in quotations when talking design) took on what is referred to around here as a "farmhouse" look (Figure 4). Like the colonial, this plan has two floor plates capped by a truss roof, but the second floor surrenders about 35 square feet from the front corner (over the stairs) to allow a more complex and less bulky

The "Farmhouse"

Figure 4. The final scheme, a "farmhouse" look, supplied almost as much space as the colonial, but broke up the boxy mass.

front elevation. The roof reinforces this by switching to the hip form over the widest part of the house, which makes the bulky mass of that roof recede visually. At the rear, a pair of cross-gables creates a T, further breaking up the roof mass and allowing a vaulted ceiling in the master bedroom.

This is the plan the clients chose, recognizing that it would cost more and give them less space than a colonial, but cost less and give them more room than the bungalow plan. They also felt that this house would fit better in the neighborhood.

This job offers some lessons for trying to economically de-box a boxy house. For starters, try to nest the roof down into the living space. Low-headroom areas can serve many functions nicely, such as storage closets, bathrooms, or window seats; dressers and similar furniture can occupy the low spaces in front of kneewalls. And the slanted ceilings of such spaces add visual interest.

In addition, rather than assume a rectangular floor plan, look for places where a corner can be omitted or a surface popped out, as in the front corner of this house. Such changes can do much to eliminate boxiness without sacrificing significant space.

Finally, don't forget that while "massing" the house's large pieces is the big move, it's only the first move. Smaller-scale design elements — porches, pop-outs, dormers, cutaways — are critical to a house's appeal. This stuff takes work to study and money to build, but it can make up for not being able to do all that you'd like to with the massing.

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