

Backfitting Good Design

by Rosanne Minerva

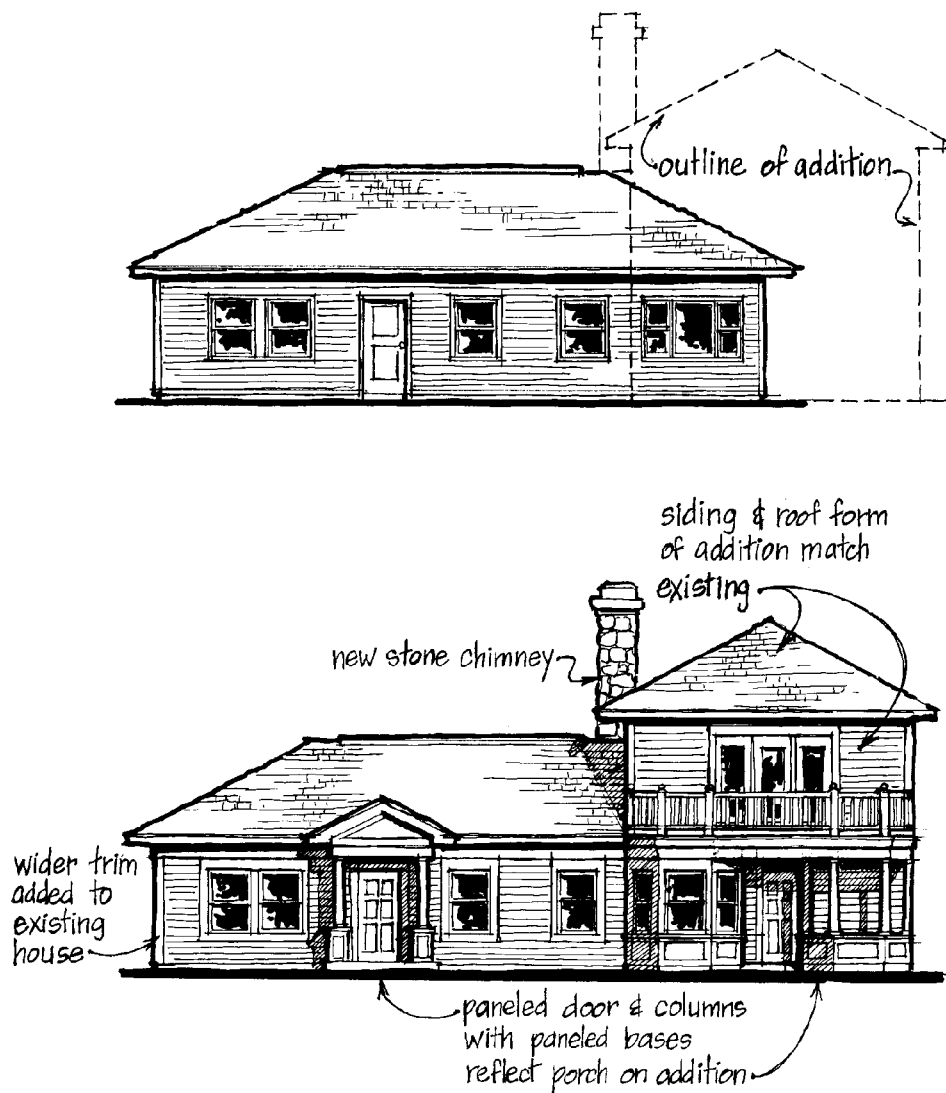
If you ever have the urge to design an addition that is completely different from the existing house, my advice is to resist it. Unless handled by a skilled designer intent on making a bold artistic "statement," drastic deviation from the original style of the home is usually a mistake. It's difficult to pull off gracefully and, at worst, becomes an architectural eyesore.

Introduce New Design Elements

In general, the design guidelines for an addition should be dictated by the existing house: A successful addition looks like it was part of the original construction. But what if the existing building is not the best example of design or is lacking in architectural interest? Rather than match the poor or bland design in the addition, you can use the

addition as an opportunity to enhance the existing house. You can subtly introduce new materials or design elements in the exterior of the addition, and carry them through to the existing house. This will visually tie the whole house together and add architectural interest. In that way you can create a new combined space that is both visually pleasing and consistent in style.

Unifying New & Existing



A two-story addition provided the opportunity to enhance the architectural style of a plain cottage (top). The wide trim above the windows, chosen for the addition and retrofitted to the existing house, is a strong horizontal link between the old and new. The addition's entry porch, with its columns on paneled bases, is reflected in the new gabled entry of the existing house.

Of course, a successful design must also please the clients and address their list of needs and desires. While this list may be at odds with the design of the existing house and may draw heavily on the latest design trends appearing in the home and garden magazines, it can also be a source of inspiration. Although many of the clients' ideas will not work, examine the best ones and explore how they may be tied into the old portion of the house as an improvement, without having to resort to a total redesign.

Some examples include introducing a new material in the addition that's not used on the main house, such as brick or lattice; adding a unique decorative feature such as a Palladian or bay window; or using some heavier trim details to give a more custom look. Design elements such as these can be easily retrofitted to the existing house in various ways to marry new and old.

A Two-Story Addition

A large addition, designed to expand a plain waterfront cottage in Virginia, illustrates several of these unifying features. The second story's size and location were determined by an existing bearing wall on the left side and extended to the property setback on the right. These constraints coincidentally resulted in a nicely proportioned two-story mass.

The overall form of the addition echoes the shape of the original structure — a pleasing rectangle with a low-slope hip roof. Working with that roof form and matching the window head heights, we focused on the trim, entrances, and other exterior elements to enhance the entire design.

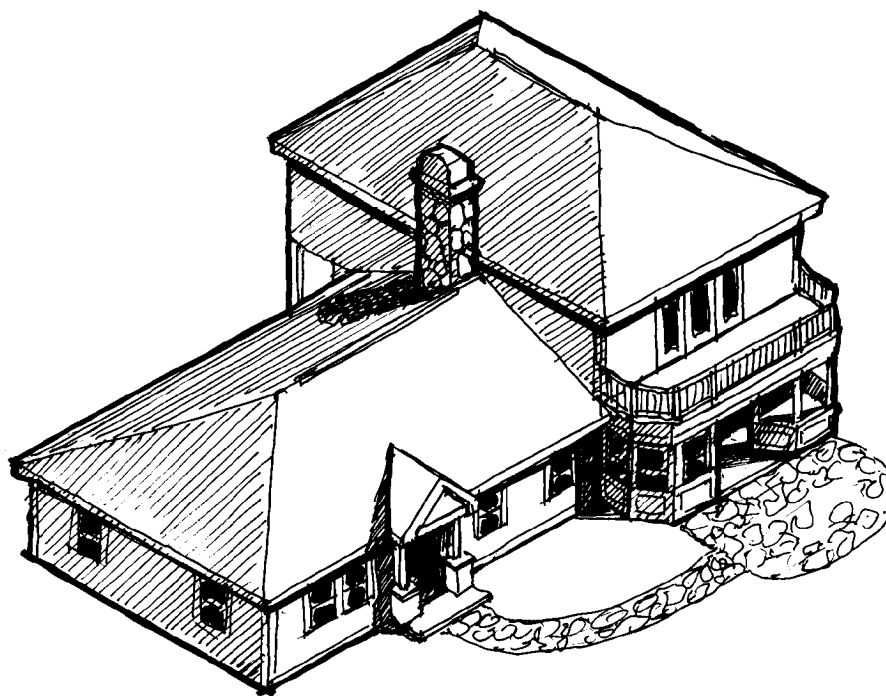
First we added weight to the exterior trim with heavier fascia, window casings, and corner boards (which became like pilasters). These were carried around to the existing house, helping to tie old and new together.

Next we focused on the entrances. A key element in the addition intended to take advantage of the water views was a balcony with French doors and below, a covered porch with a bay window and a center entrance. This new

entrance overshadowed the existing plain-Jane waterside entrance, so we redesigned the existing entrance using modified elements from the new entrance. The redesigned old entrance now has a small portico with columns sitting on recessed panel bases, closely resembling the columns and porch panels on the addition. The door itself was also replaced with a panel-style door to match the door of the addition. These elements work together to bring the original entrance into balance with the new one and tie the two together.

Finally, we introduced a new material, stone, with the addition of a large stone chimney, a patio, and a walkway that connects the new to the existing. The new building has a unified look combining the best elements of the existing structure, such as the roof lines and horizontal siding, with the best elements from the new construction.

Perspective View



Matching the roof form is critical in tying the addition to the existing structure. The introduction of a new material — stone — in the chimney and the walkway helps to tie the finished structure to the landscape.

Don't Overdo It

It's important to know where to stop in this process. Introducing drastic new elements that need to be carried through the rest of the house can get very expensive. An example might be changing the main window style from casement to double-hung because the client wanted double-hung windows in the addition. Gently persuade the client that this change in style clashes with the rest of the house and is only recommended if they want to replace all the existing windows to match. Another situation may be changing to vinyl siding on an addition when the rest of the house has wood clapboards. Unless the client plans to re-side the entire house, the change in siding material should be discouraged. 

Rosanne Minerva is an architectural illustrator and designer in Boston.