

A Contemporary Greek Revival

by John Alden

How often have you had a client tell you “I like old houses, but I want something new?” The desire for a home that “looks old” is almost always limited to the outside appearance — it’s a rare client who wants a historic interior as well. In many cases, what the client is really saying is that he or she wants a new home that fits into an existing neighborhood of older homes.

It is possible to do a full-bore historic reproduction. But in most cases, the

challenge lies in finding a way to provide the desired period look, without going to extremes and at a price the client can afford.

Finding a Model

A good way to accomplish this is to use nearby buildings as a model. There’s no need to copy them directly: If the basic building footprint, proportions, and orientation are correct, and the design elements used are compatible

with the chosen style, the results can be very satisfying.

For example, I recently designed a new home on an empty lot in the center of an established New England village. The surrounding houses were a mix of vernacular styles, the most prevalent style being Greek Revival, with most structures having their gable ends facing the street (see photos). The client and I decided to adopt the most distinctive features of these local Greek Revivals, including a moderately pitched gable roof, tall narrow windows, and wide corner boards and cornice returns that suggest the columns and pediments of the originals.

Letting In Light

Windows are an especially important consideration in maintaining a period style, but glazing can also be a source of conflict. Glass was once much more costly than it is today, so most older homes used far less glass and allowed in less light than home buyers are looking for today.

To let abundant light into the house while still achieving the historic look we were after, we went with traditional window spacing on the main gable-end facade. On the south-facing ell, we added tall glass doors to flood the interior with natural light. While that approach to glazing was not “traditional,” it worked well because the viewer’s eye is drawn to the main facade, rather than the ell, which is clearly a secondary element. We detailed the door trim to match the other openings so that they fit into the overall design. In other circumstances, a similar effect could be achieved by adding an appropriately detailed sunroom or enclosed porch, provided that it didn’t compete with the main structure.

Porch and Garage: Balancing a Second Facade

The corner lot location posed a design challenge, because it required a second facade on the side street for access to the main entrance and garage. The client also wanted to add enough space over the garage to accommodate a home business or rental unit, with a

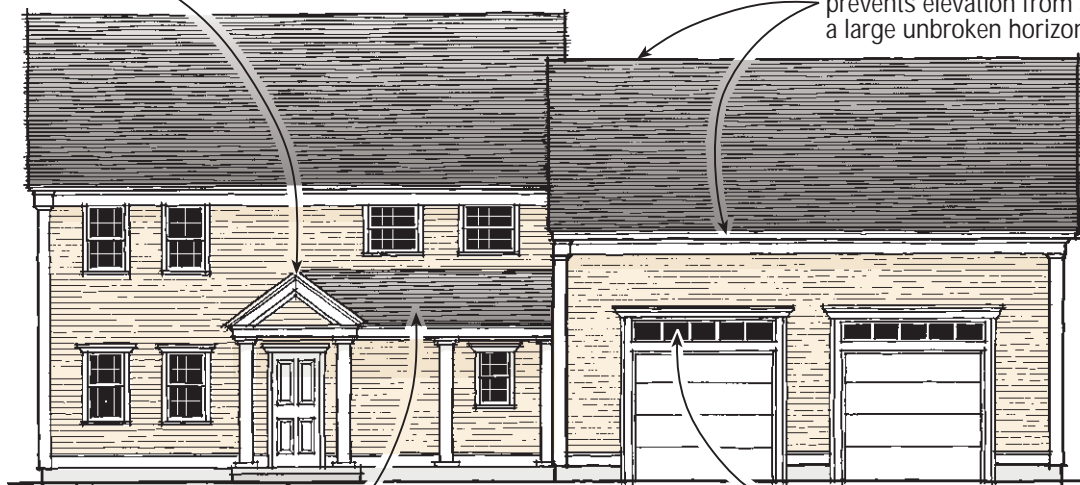


These brick Greek Revivals illustrate several characteristics of the local style, including a gable end facing the street, roof pediments with cornice returns, and a louver that echoes the shape of the surrounding pediment. Although the two-story house lacks the corner boards typical of the style, columns are suggested by the panels and sidelights flanking the main entry.



Pediment signals
location of front door

Lowering garage roofline and eaves
prevents elevation from appearing as
a large unbroken horizontal expanse



Entry porch ties house
and garage together

Transom windows help turn squat
look of standard garage doors into
better proportioned shapes,
reminiscent of a carriage house

Breaking the main facade into two distinct elements prevents the sizable garage from competing with the house itself. A pediment over the door signals the location of the main entry, and diverts rain and snow from the porch steps.

separate entry on the garage gable end, thereby making the garage nearly as large as the house itself.

Lowering the roofline and eaves of the garage placed it in a secondary position relative to the house, and prevented the elevation from taking on the feel of an unbroken horizontal expanse. The entry porch ties the two main building volumes together, while its columns supply additional vertical emphasis and a period feel.

Finally, additional supporting detail was added to the garage facade by including transom windows over the garage doors. Such "door lights" are a common feature on barns and carriage houses, where they served to admit natural light up high, where it was most needed. They serve that function here as well, with the added benefit of transforming the familiar squat outlines of standard garage doors into taller, better proportioned shapes. Making the garage reminiscent of a carriage house also works well in this neighborhood, where many of the older homes have attached barns.



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Wide corner boards,
cornice returns, and
gable trim similar to
nearby buildings

Louver similar to
nearby buildings



Large glass doors installed
on secondary facade, trimmed
to match windows and doors

The traditional proportions of the side elevation give this contemporary Greek Revival a clean, classical look. Because its south-facing ell is a secondary element, the glass doors it contains are visually unobtrusive.