

A Small Office With Eye Appeal

by Elaine E. Laney

I was recently approached by a client who wanted help in designing a small investment broker's office in a neighborhood of mixed residential and medical buildings. The lot included a small, somewhat run-down two-bedroom house that initially seemed like a candidate for renovation and reuse as a commercial building. On further investigation, though, we concluded that it was too close to the front of the lot to leave room for the required parking.

The only practical option was to demolish it and design a new structure, taking advantage of the site's strengths while working around its limitations (see Figure 1). The tight corner lot easily met the three well-known criteria for a successful business — location, location, and location — but the necessary setbacks and a limited budget dictated a building footprint of no more than 1,000 square feet. The challenge was to come up with an approach that would look good in a residential neighborhood, but still have a welcoming and “businesslike” appearance.

Refining a Design

The design process started with the client's rough sketch of a gable-roofed structure with a front portico supported by slender columns (Figure 2, top). This was a sound beginning, but one that clearly needed additional work. Its low profile left no place for a sign, and it lacked the visual heft needed to make an impression on customers.

Increasing the pitch of the roof gave the building a more prominent elevation, and improved the interior by making it possible to use scissors trusses over the main part of the building. The resulting cathedral ceiling gave the small space a much roomier

Good Location, Small Lot

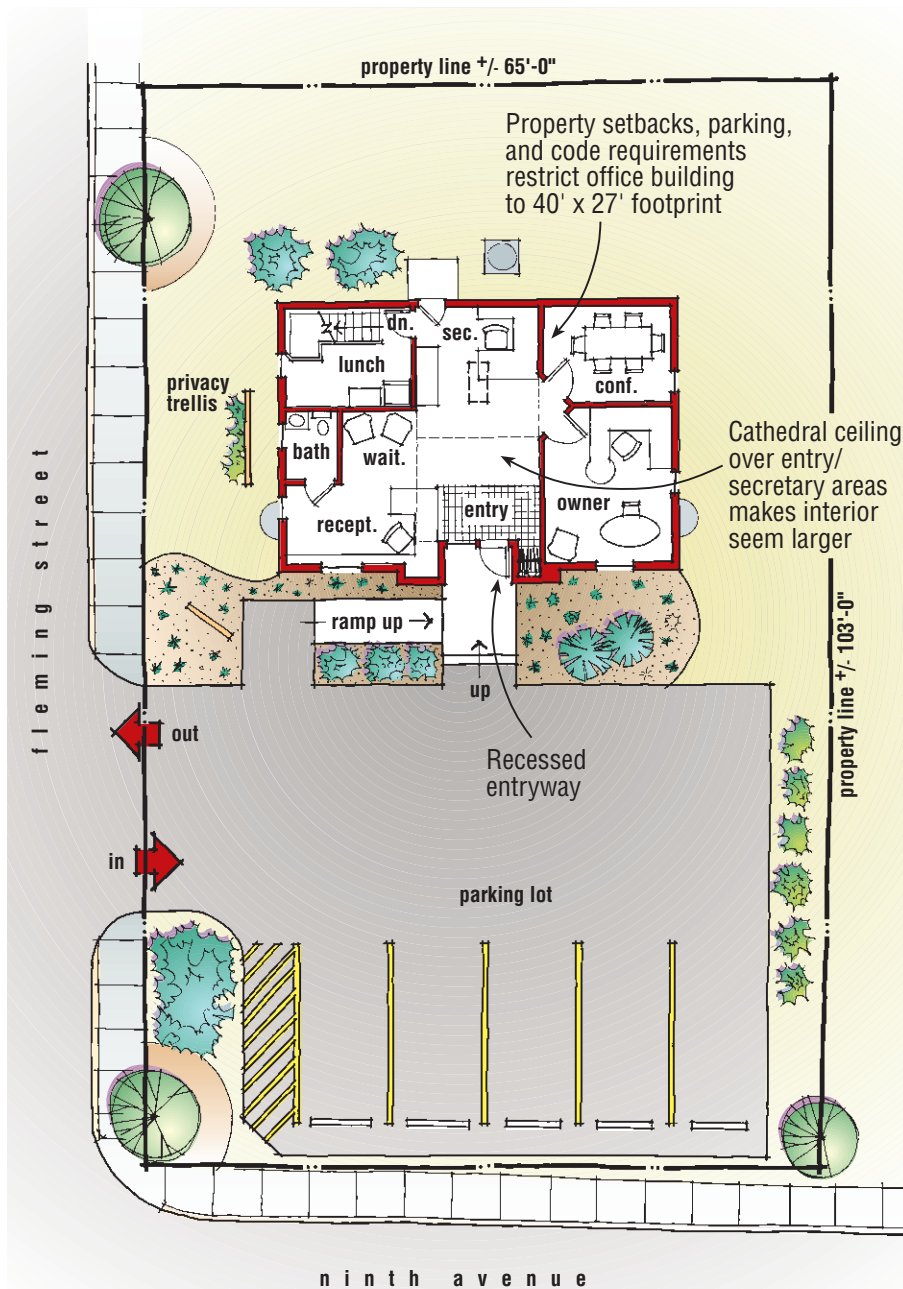


Figure 1. This busy corner lot was an excellent location for a small office building — but tight lot lines made it difficult to juggle the needed indoor space with a limited building footprint and required off-street parking.

Refining a Client's Design

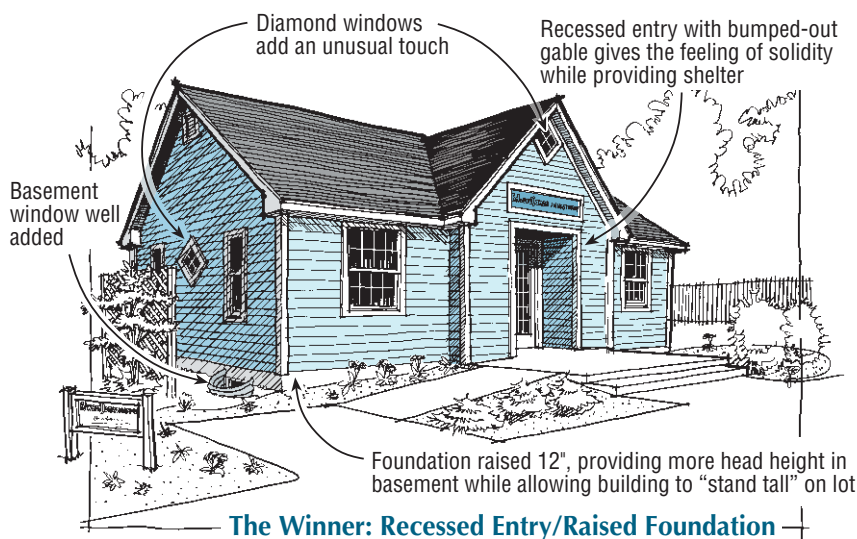
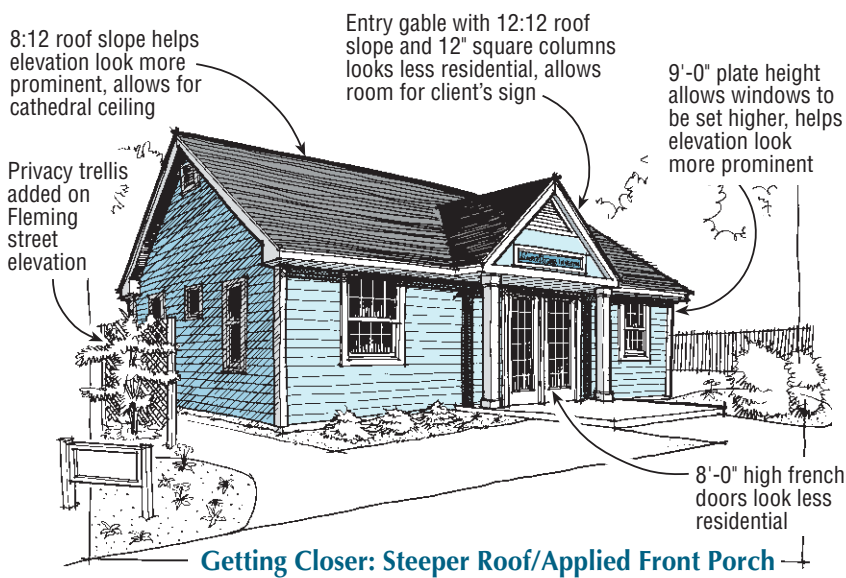
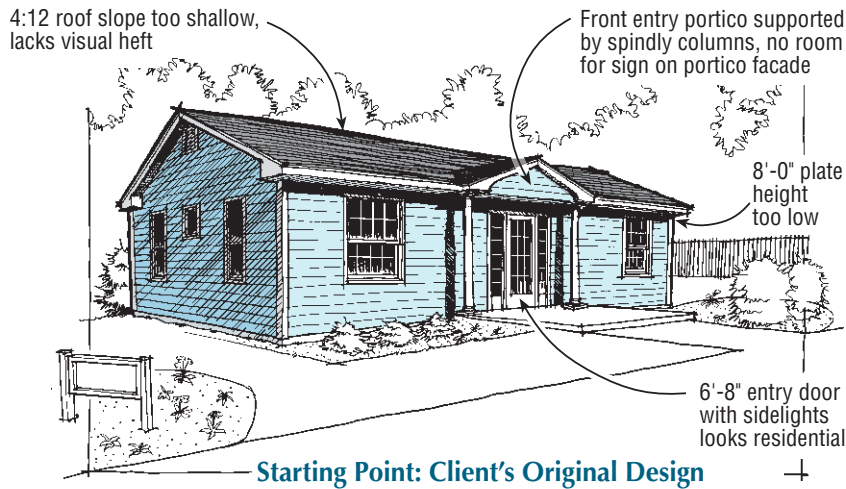


Figure 2. The initial design (top) was workable but undistinguished and too residential in appearance. Raising the roof (middle) provided a more spacious interior and a more "businesslike" front elevation. Finally, replacing the columned portico with a recessed entryway (bottom) made for a more sheltered entry and appropriately solid look.

feel (Figure 2, middle). Using more substantial columns, and replacing the 7-foot door and sidelights with 8-foot french doors, helped define the structure as a place of business, rather than a residence. But the building still lacked something — it needed a little more visual pizzazz.


A Recessed Entryway

The solution I chose was to bump out the front to create a gabled entry element, while recessing the entry itself (Figure 2, bottom). From a practical standpoint, this provided enough space to open or close an umbrella while remaining sheltered from the wind on three sides (the North Carolina mountains get plenty of rain and snow). It also gave the facade a more inviting look.

A 3-foot 6-inch recess provided the effect we were after. A deeper recess might be appropriate on a larger building, but an entry that's set back too far can seem dark and forbidding, rather than pleasantly shaded. The shaded entryway with the glass doors adds interest, and the apparent thickness of the walls, as viewed from outside, gives a feeling of permanence and solidity — a fitting impression for an investment broker to convey.

Fine-Tuning

We raised the level of the foundation about a foot above the original grade. The building then sat two steps above the parking lot, giving it a bit more presence. To provide wheelchair access, which is essential for a place of business, we added a ramp to the left of the walkway from the parking lot.

The exterior trim is simple: Flat 4-inch corner boards, barge boards, and window trim are all painted white to set off the gray fiber-cement siding. A diamond window over the main entry and another in the gable-end elevation added a final dash of fun to a very satisfying little commercial building. 

Elaine Laney is a residential and light commercial designer in Hendersonville, N.C.