Better Shed Dormers

by Mark Bromley

Hand someone a pencil and a piece of paper, ask them for a quick sketch of a house, they'll almost always come up with a gable-end view of a structure with a symmetrically pitched roof and punched windows. This mental image of the word "house" is one that most of us form as children, and carry with us into adulthood.

That mental image doesn't come out of thin air. There are a lot of simple gable-roofed houses out in the real world, and it's a form that has some obvious practical benefits. In a story-and-a-half structure, this approach limits the amount of headroom and natural light available upstairs. So shed dormers are often added to provide more of both. To the designer, the challenge is to come up with a dormer large enough to meet the client's need, but unobtrusive enough to preserve the familiar gable-end appearance that makes this simple house look "right."

The Recessed Dormer

This is typically done by setting the sidewalls of the dormer a few feet back from the gable-end walls. The upper edge of the dormer shed roof then intersects the main roof some distance below the main ridge (see Figure 1). As a general rule, it's best to tie in as far below the ridge as possible while maintaining at least a 4/12 pitch for the dormer roof. The dormer's relatively small mass avoids giving the roof a top-heavy appearance. Since it is visually recessed, the dormer "reads" as an entirely separate element, leaving the gable-end profile intact.

When Is a Dormer Not a Dormer?

Unfortunately, that approach does sacrifice some potentially useable space to either side of the shed dormer. As a result, dormers are often enlarged to extend all the way to the walls and

Architect's Choice

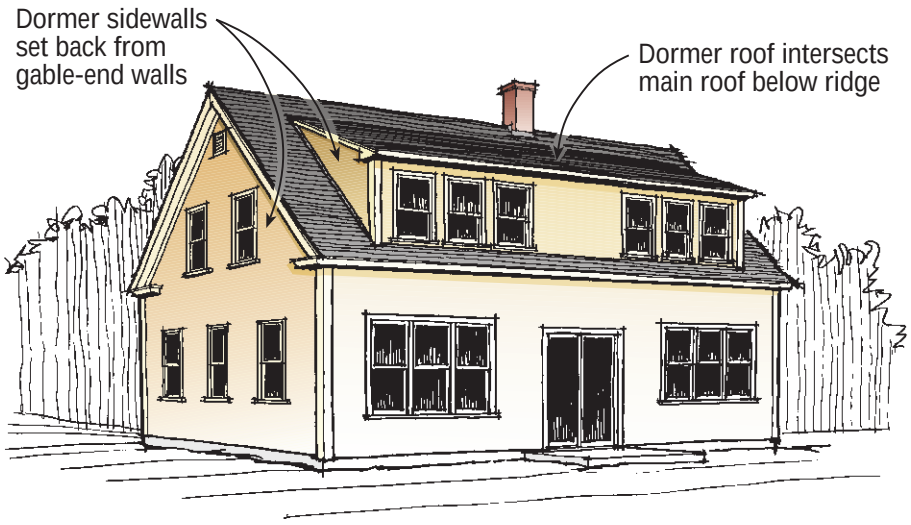

Figure 1. The roof of this well-proportioned shed dormer meets the main roof well below the ridge, and its sidewalls are set back from the gable-end walls of the main house. That prevents the dormer from visually overshadowing the main house. It also adds complexity and cost to the framing, while reducing the available living space upstairs.

Maximizing Upstairs Space

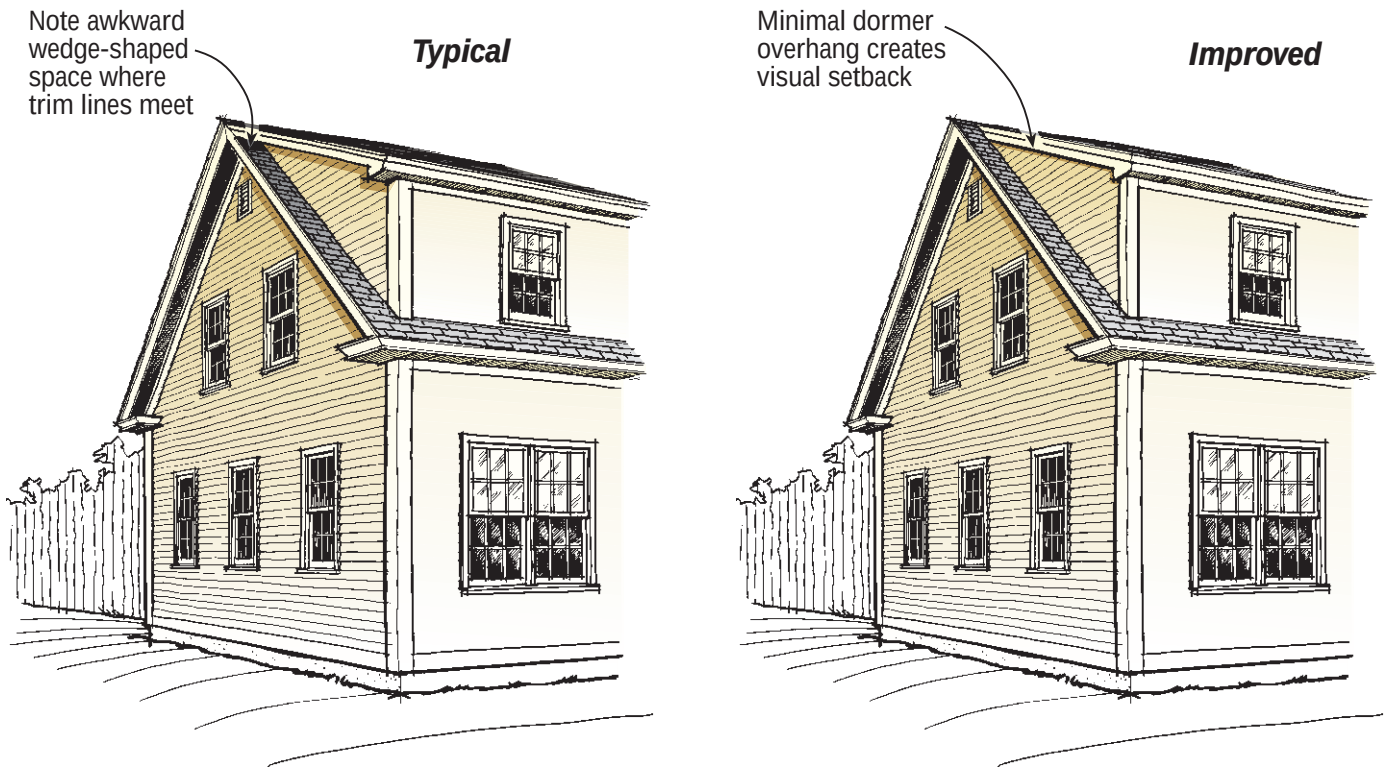

Figure 2. The "dormer" at left is actually a continuation of the main structure, dressed up with the addition of an applied rake. Here the overhang of the dormer roof matches that of the rake, leading to converging sight lines that visually tie the dormer wall to that of the main wall below. In the improved version at right, the use of simple applied trim at the dormer roof has the effect of separating the dormer roof from that of the rake, making the dormer wall appear visually recessed.

ridge, transforming the intended gable roof into a sort of lopsided saltbox. This can be structurally awkward as well. In some cases, it may be necessary to support the load of the dormer with interior bearing walls or a structural ridge beam (See "Taking the Sag Out of Shed Dormers," 9/93).

In the absence of a truly symmetrical gable end, it's necessary to create that appearance with an applied rake to mirror the slope of the main roof.

The key here is to create the appearance of a recessed dormer even though its "sidewalls" are actually an extension of the first story framing. If the dormer roof is trimmed out to match that of the applied rake and main roof (Figure 2), there's little or no chance of conveying that impression. The viewer's eye follows the trim lines to where they meet at the ridge, where it becomes obvious that the wall of the dormer lies in the same plane as that of the main wall below.

A better approach is to use a substantial overhang on the applied rake and main roof, then finish the dormer rake with minimal built-up trim. The result is a more convincing visual "setback" that's also cheaper and easier to build.

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