Designing with Siding

by Mark Bromley

When builders think about siding, they tend to focus on things like water-shedding ability, installation details, and ease of maintenance. And despite what you might think, those things also matter to most architects.

But siding can also be a powerful design element. Depending on how it's used, it can break a large uninteresting mass into several smaller areas that are visually more interesting, tie disconnected elements together, or change the way a building fits into the topography of its site.

Massing with Siding

The architectural term "massing" refers to a building's basic exterior form, or how a given elevation presents itself to the eye. The goal of effective massing is to create a pleasant and varied elevation, one that is broken up into a number of distinct elements rather than appearing as a single large expanse. There are all sorts of ways to achieve that, including varying rooflines, and adding dormers, porches, bay windows, and various sorts of bumpouts. However, this comes at a cost: The sorts of structural elements conducive to good massing aren't cheap.

In many cases, though, thoughtfully applied siding can achieve the desired result with less expense than adding structural elements. With many of today's homebuyers choosing to spend money on square footage rather than on traditional massing, that's a useful option.

The house illustrated in the top of Figure 1, for example, presents a tall expanse of horizontal siding relieved only by punched window openings. The resulting absence of scale — a sense of how the building compares to that of a human figure — makes it appear to the

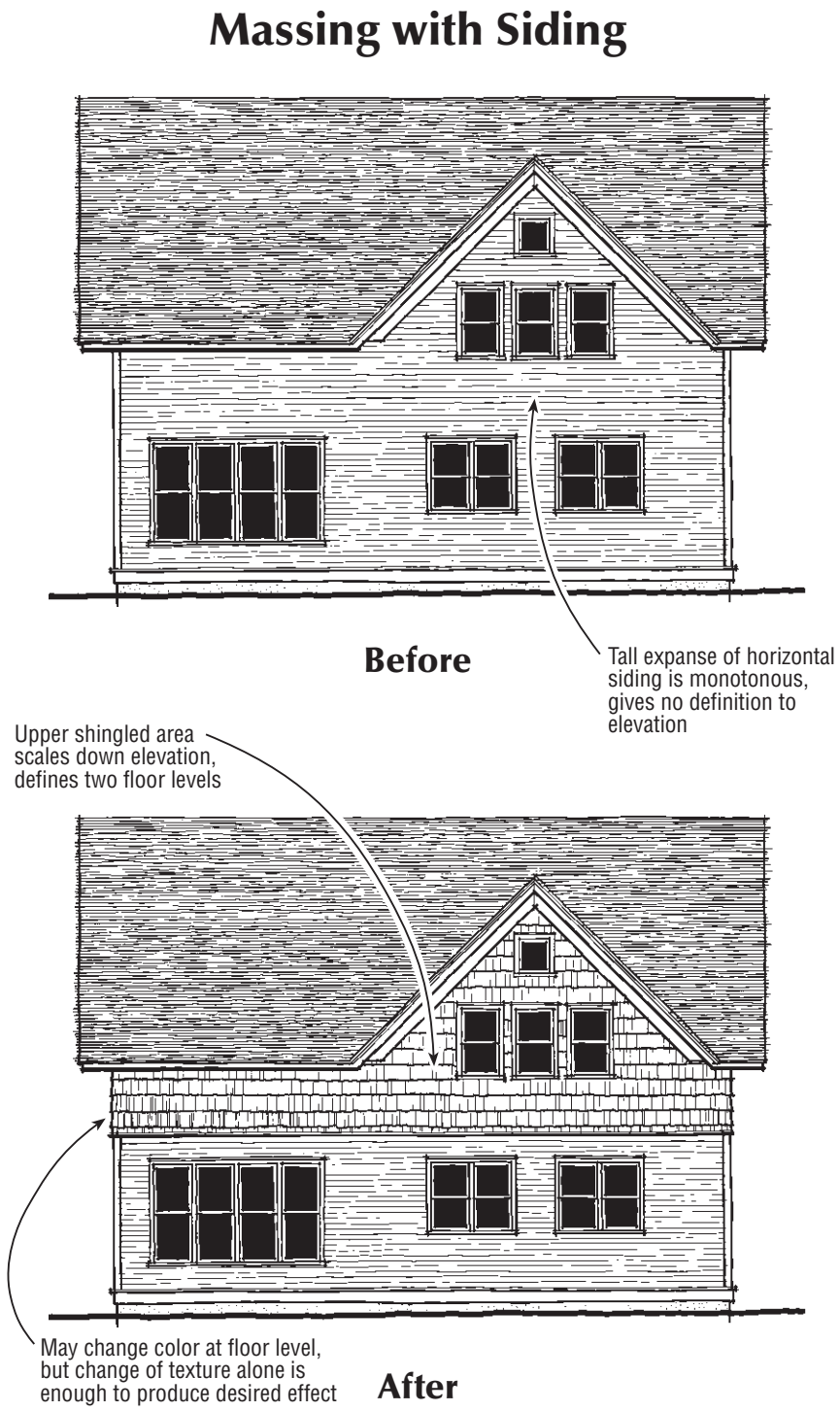
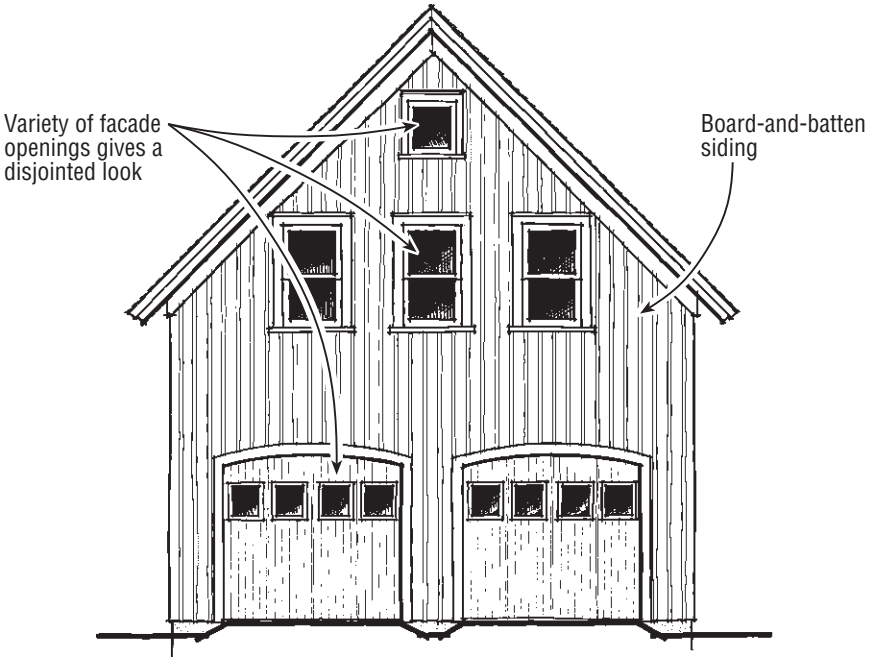


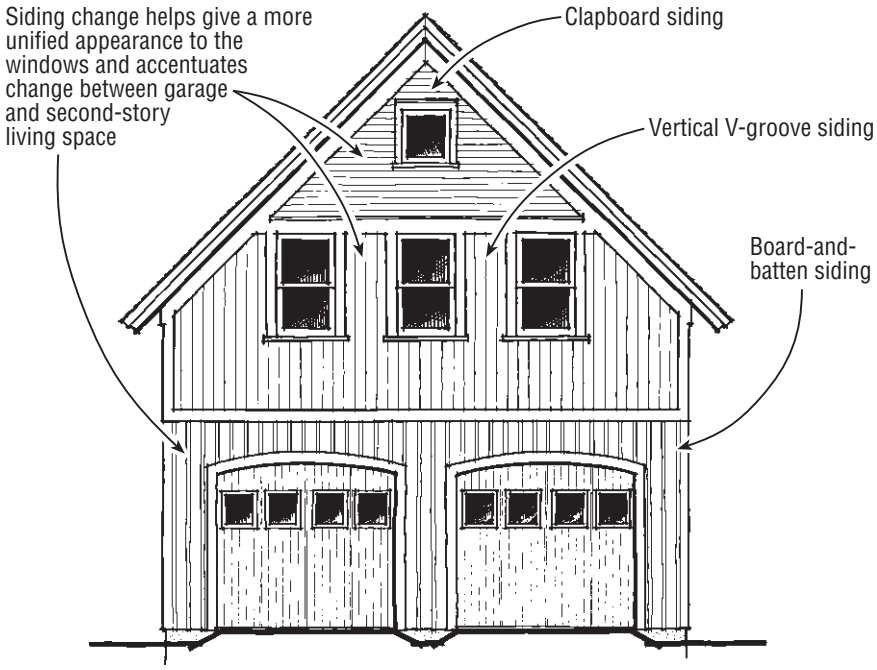
Figure 1. A blank, tall elevation (top) is a frequent side-effect of the trend toward high residential ceilings. Changing the siding at the second-floor level (above) improves the apparent massing by adding texture and a sense of scale.

Unifying Exterior Elements



Before

Figure 2. The assortment of doors and windows with the board-and-batten siding gives the garage elevation at left a scrambled look. The addition of horizontal trim and a change of siding (below) tie the three second-story windows together and signal the change of function between the garage and living space overhead.



After

eye as a single monotonous mass.

In the altered version, a change of siding produces a much different effect. The shingled upper portion now reads as a separate element, scaling down the entire elevation and defining the two floor levels.

Unifying Exterior Elements

In Figure 2, the detached two-car garage is clad at first in board-and-batten siding. That's often an appropriate choice for a modest outbuilding, but in this case, the variety of openings in the facade gives it a disjointed look.

At right, the original siding has been retained on the lower level, while clapboards — a material more in keeping with the finished "bonus-room" living space — are used above. Between the two, the living-space windows are enclosed in a band of vertical v-groove boards. That allows them to read as a single element, rather than a series of individual openings with no apparent relationship to each other or the interior space.

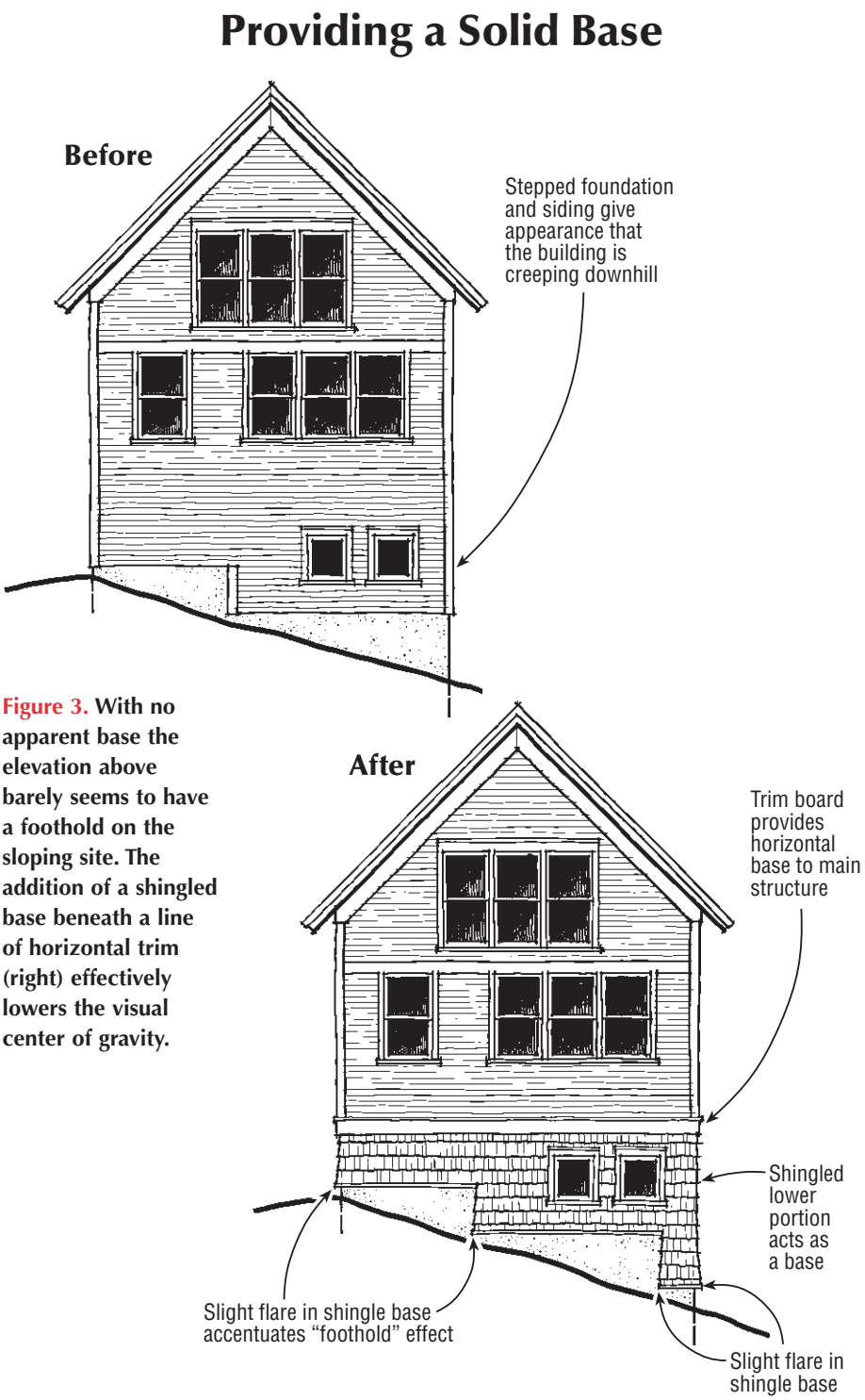


Figure 3. With no apparent base the elevation above barely seems to have a foothold on the sloping site. The addition of a shingled base beneath a line of horizontal trim (right) effectively lowers the visual center of gravity.

Providing a Solid Base

Finally, siding can be used to give a building a firm "seat" that anchors it to the site, as illustrated in Figure 3. In the left-hand drawing, the relatively tall, narrow elevation lacks a strong connection to its sloping site. The stepped foundation and siding give the unsettling impression that the building is gradually creeping downhill.

Adding a band of trim at the main-floor level provides a strong horizontal that squares off the main structure, allowing the shingled lower portion to read as a separate element — in effect, as a pedestal that supports the main structure above.

A wide horizontal shiplap can achieve similar results when paired with shingles or clapboards above.

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