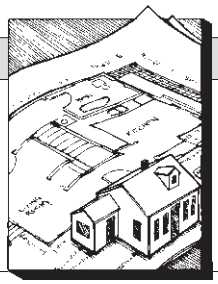

Getting Hip to Hip Roof Details

by Gordon Tully

Designers and builders, who are generally more accustomed to building gable roofs, may have trouble detailing the eaves of hip roofs on new houses. One way to get on the right track is to examine past styles that used hip roofs successfully, and note the proportions and trim system necessary for achieving each effect.

Folk Houses — A Pyramidal Roof

Unsophisticated, low-cost dwellings such as farmhouses, log cabins, and early Colonial houses almost always have gable roofs. One exception is the Southern pyramidal-roofed house, where the roof is a simple unadorned prism with almost no overhang. A successful contemporary variation is Charles Moore's 1961 house in Orinda, California (see Figure 1). He cured the obvious problem of a pyramidal roof — no light — with a skylight housing at the roof's peak. (The other features of this delightful house are described in *The Place of Houses*, Moore's classic book written with Gerald Allen and Donlyn Lyndon; published by Rinehart and Wilson, about $10 in paperback.) The key to this roof design is simplicity: minimal eaves, minimal trim, and a sense of the roof and walls being a single skin stretched over an interior frame.

French Colonial — A Roof Porch

Hips crop up in southern French Colonial houses. The best examples are big houses raised on stilts, surrounded by a porch set in under a big hip roof. The most famous of these is the Homeplace Plantation (or Fortier House), St. Charles Parish, La., built around 1800 (see Figure 2). The effect is magnificent, and a good precedent for any modern house raised on stilts.

The key to this roof design is simplicity: minimal eaves, minimal trim, and a sense of the roof and walls being a single skin stretched over an interior frame

This idea — a hip roof covering a porch and supported by a colonnade — will work with almost any eaves detail, although a shallow lintel lets the most light in. The idea works best in hot climates; northerners will glaze in a large porch sooner or later.

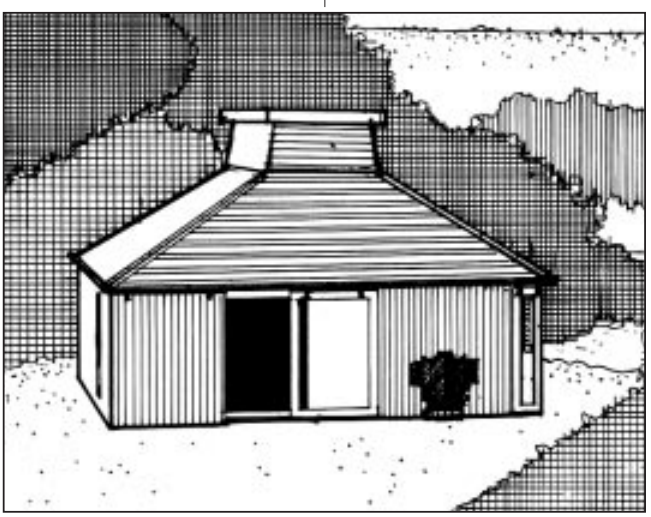

Figure 1. *In Charles Moore's residence in Orinda, Calif., the skylight well at the roof peak corrects one major drawback of hip roofs, a lack of light.*

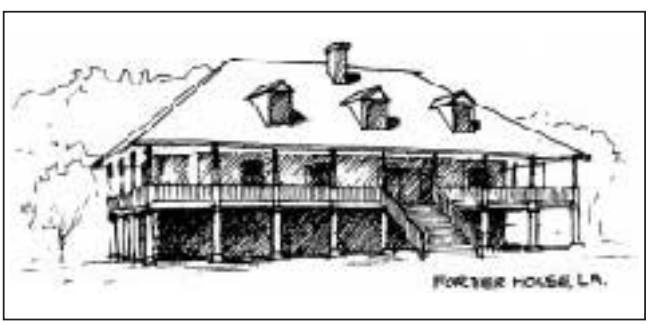

Figure 2. *The Fortier House at Homeplace Plantation in St. Charles Parish, La., is a classic example of how hip roofs can cap off porches on French Colonial homes.*

Georgian — A Balanced Cornice

Hip roofs grace some of America's most famous Georgian houses. One reason we so admire our colonial houses is that many of the surviving examples are beautifully proportioned. Everything is in balance, including the roof, poised on an elegant cornice. Is the cornice the base of the roof, or is it the top of the wall? A carefully proportioned Georgian cornice performs both functions, without either dominating.

Our feeble contemporary copies don't work because they are not well-proportioned. The facades on the originals were never more than twice as wide as they were high, and were invariably two or three tall stories high. We apply these same "colonial" details to a sprawling one-story or two-story house, and often make the cornice so small it no longer functions as the "glue" holding the roof to the wall. My advice is not to try to imitate these older, formalized styles. Such balance and proportion are not easily achieved in today's small houses, with their complex plans and attached garages.

Prairie — A Floating Lid

Frank Lloyd Wright and his imitators developed the Prairie style around 1900. One characteristic of the style is the low-pitched hip roof with large overhangs and flat soffits. The roof looks like a lid spreading over and organizing the complex forms below. The Prairie roof is plainly detailed, and sits directly on the wall below, usually without a visible lintel. In fact, the roof often appears to float above the walls. This "hovering roof" effect can be enhanced by running a continuous band of windows directly beneath the roof, and continuing the flat soffit inside to form a dropped ceiling, perhaps ending in a recessed lighting cove.

De-emphasizing the corners also helps make the roof appear to hover. One technique is to notch back the corners of the house (so that the corner occurs gradually, so to speak, instead of all at once), while letting the roof cantilever out. Another is to clad the house with continuous materials — brick, stucco, or shingles — thus avoiding corner boards, with their implication of support at the corners.

Neoclassical — An Attached Lid

There are ways to put a hip roof on a one-story building and have it look good. One is seen in the Neoclassical style, a 20th century invention which reinterprets the Greek and Roman revivals of the early 19th century in a more modern context. Start with large (30-inch) overhangs and a flat soffit, as in the Prairie style. Then, to give the house solidity, imitate the detached columns, which characterize all classical styles, by using heavy cor-

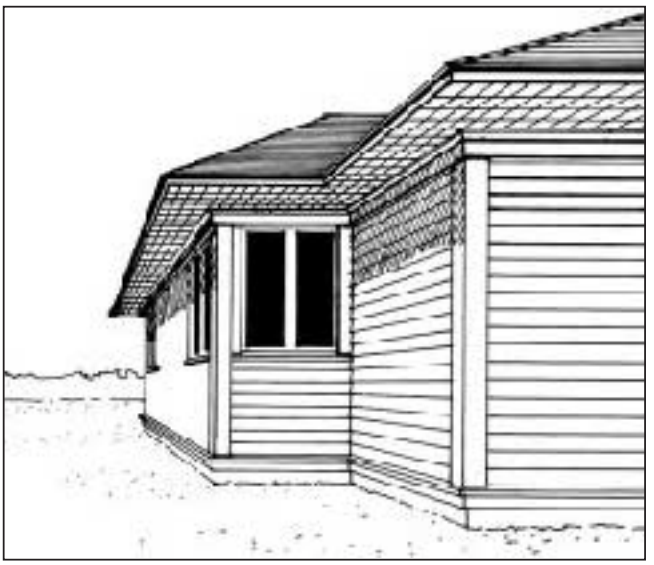

Figure 3. *This design from our drawing board shows how a hip roof with a broad overhang can complement classical details (the corner boards and cornice) in a one-story house.*

Figure 4. *In this shingle-style house, the cross gables erupt from a basic "background" hip roof.*

ner boards (see Figure 3). Finally, provide a continuous band of trim at the top of the wall to support the overhang visibly.

Mission, Tudor, and Bungalow — A Hat

If you extend the rafters of a hip roof out to form an overhang and omit the level soffit, the roof will appear to droop down over the top of the walls like a big hat. If the roof is steeply pitched, it will resemble the picturesque thatched roofs so treasured by the English. (Indeed, some Tudor houses sport imitation thatched roofs.)

In the Mission and Bungalow styles, the roof pitch is shallow, and the rafters or beams are exposed under the soffit like ribs. This approach works well on one-story houses, particularly in sunny climates. The wide, low overhangs cast so much shade that the walls below virtually fade from view — the house is all roof. When set into a lush garden, with sliding doors and a convenient pool, such a house defined the good life in the sun during the 1950s and 1960s in California. This approach doesn't work with a narrow overhang: it gives the impression that the roof is a size 36 on a size 40 torso.

Queen Anne and Shingle — The Background Hip

The most influential Victorian style, Queen Anne, features complex, irregularly shaped houses with elaborate porches and gables. Here the hip roof forms a kind of background out of which turrets and gables erupt in wild profusion. The innovation (borrowed from older styles) was combining hips and gables — an idea that proves very handy in today's house designs. Shingle-style houses used the same idea of mixing hips and gables.

When combining hips and gables, let the gable end and gable eaves set the scale and tone for the detailing. The Queen Anne style favored very heavy and elaborate eaves. Shingle-style houses usually had very simple, even knife-edge eaves, and are thus better precedents for an economical modern design, such as that seen in Figure 4.

The approaches described above provide a broad range of possibilities which you can use the next time you design or build a hip roof. Each is based on one or more styles, and each has implications for the rest of the building. There is no law against mixing and matching details from various styles — a time-honored approach known as "eclecticism." But keep in mind that every successful style produces a characteristic effect in large part because of its details. Before you charge off in some new direction, take a close look at how these examples deal with the eaves of hip roofs. ■

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