BY DESIGN

A Cookbook of Exterior Details

by Georgia Toney Lesley

Smart builders know that good curb appeal is essential to bring in buyers, and exterior style is one element that helps a design stand the test of time. Unfortunately, builders often shoot themselves in the foot by relying on "stock" siding accessories instead of exploring ways to add style to their exteriors.

I decided to go out and actually survey my area for details that were attractive and easy to build. A few days touring some older local neighborhoods paid off in a collection of features that could be presented as a "cookbook" for prospective customers to pick from.

"Style" doesn't mean cramming every possible do-dad on a single exterior like you see in so many modern housing developments. "Historically correct" is not the answer either, because strict adherence to historical details is too expensive.

Pattern Books a Good Resource

As it turned out, the details that look the best and are still buildable today can be found in old "pattern books" such as *Sears Houses by Mail* (available through the National Trust for Historic Preservation) or *500 Small Houses of the Twenties* (Dover Publications, 31 E. 2nd St., Mineola, NY 11501).

These pre-World War II bungalows distinguish themselves by their friendly, human scale exteriors. The use of simple yet substantial trim, front porches, and an interesting mix of shuttered windows and heavier door trim or surrounds sets the design of these pattern

Wide Trim Adds Style

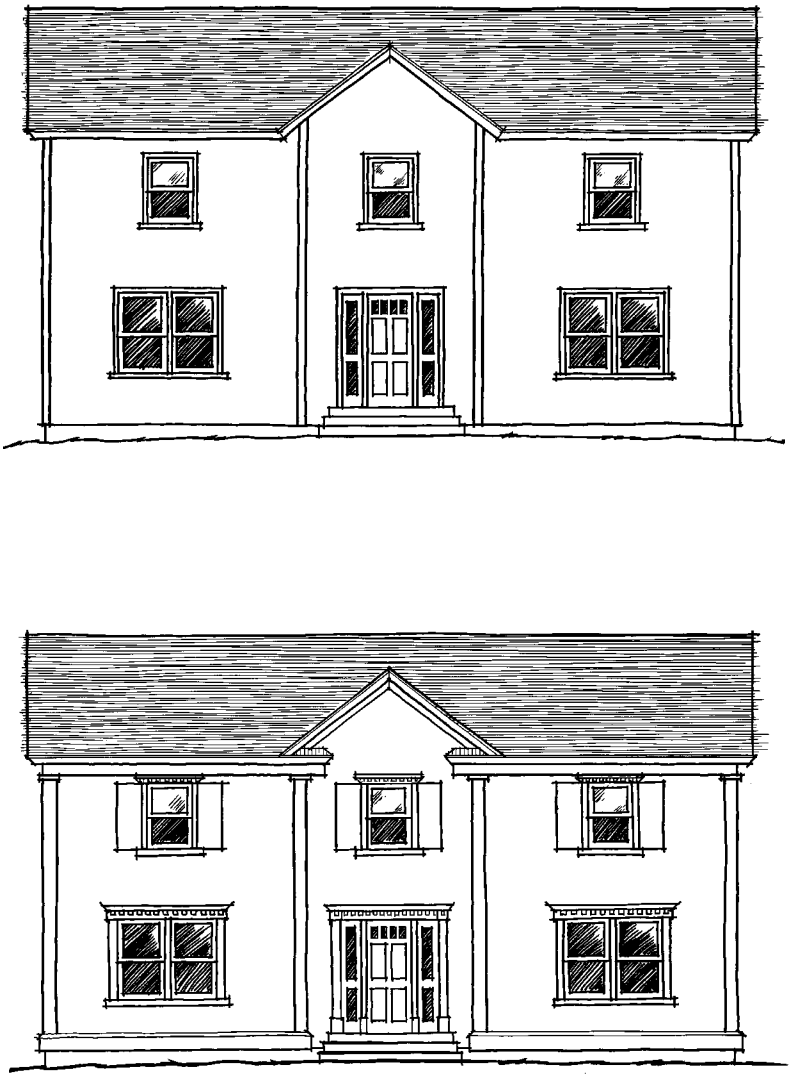

Figure 1. The imposing two-story elevation (top) can be improved by using wider trim at corners and over windows and doors (above). The addition of a frieze and skirt board anchors the large expanse of siding, and the cornice returns on the gable roof provide a more substantial cap to the entry.

book houses apart from today's endless stretches of blank wavy vinyl walls broken only by the occasional window or lonely louver.

Another book that should be on every designer's and builder's shelf is *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Lee and Virginia McAlester (published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). This is an indispensable guide for choosing the right features to use on an exterior. Paying attention to the distinct styles called out by the authors will help you avoid mixing inappropriate details — putting an ornate Greek Revival door pediment on a simple bungalow, for example.

Here are some of the "rules" I've developed to incorporate selected features of these designs into an affordable, elegant trim package.

Roof Trim

Many pattern book designs make use of wide roof trim. Adequately sized fascias are especially critical. I would use 6 inches at a minimum. This instantly speaks of "cottage" rather than "manufactured home." In addition, the use of frieze boards, even if just on the front elevation, adds inexpensive curb appeal (see Figure 1).

Corners and Columns

Corner board treatments vary widely. Some styles didn't have any (Shingle style, for instance) while colonial reproductions call for wide corners and even imitation fluted columns (Adam or Georgian styles). A classic Cape Cod, however, needs only 4-inch-wide corner boards to frame the house properly. Use common sense and scale the width of the corner to the overall building.

Avoid Spindly Columns

Heavy columns almost always look better than thin ones. In my view, 4-inch columns — turned or square — ought to be banned from front elevations for all but the tiniest entries. Skinny columns never fail to make a porch roof appear top-heavy — struggling to be held up by those

The Well-Proportioned Porch

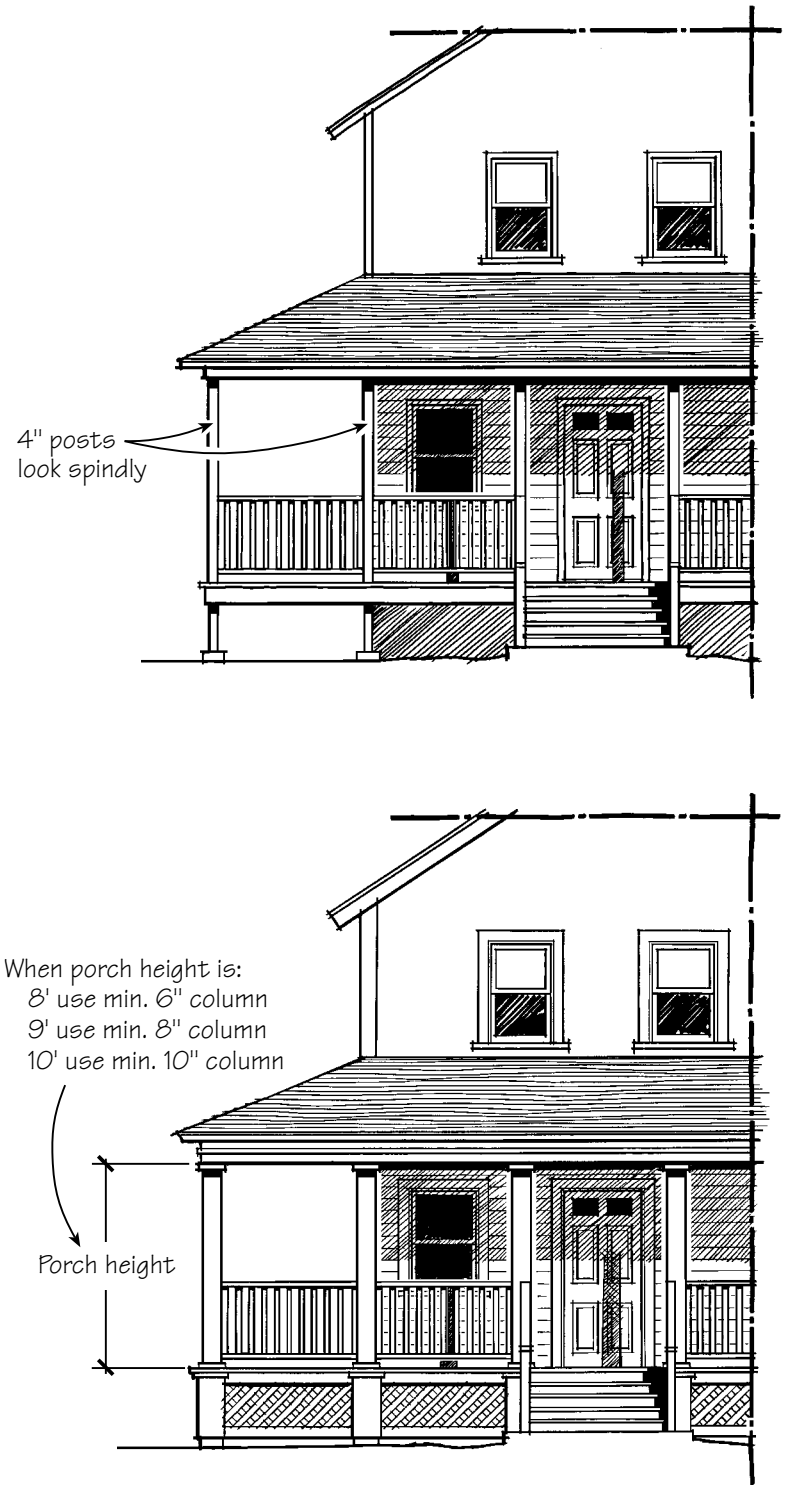

Figure 2. To avoid porches that look top-heavy and insubstantial (top), make the posts wider in proportion to their height and anchor them to heavy support piers (above). A wider frieze and latticework also improve the appearance.

spindly little legs (Figure 2).

Column rule of thumb. The measure of a proper column shaft diameter is really a function of its height. Again, I prefer a simple rule, which works in most instances for square job-built columns, the popular low-maintenance round fiberglass columns, or more expensive turned posts.

For an 8-foot plate height, use a minimum 6-inch-diameter (or width) column. For a 9-foot plate height, use 8-inch columns, and use 10-inch columns for 10-foot plates. This rule can be broken in favor of *larger* diameters, never smaller.

Window Trim and Shutters

For the most part, vinyl J-channel should never be used as window trim by itself — especially on the front elevation. Instead, use shutters or wide trim to "outline" windows. Form follows function, and decorative shutters should be sized as if they actually needed to be operable. The combined width should be no more than a couple of inches narrower than the window itself.

Shutter rule of thumb. For example, use a pair of 12-inch shutters on a 28-inch-wide window, 14-inch shutters on a 30- or 32-inch-wide window, and 16-inch shutters on a 36-inch-wide window. Multiple units pose a problem because there is no way a single shutter on each side could cover them. Historically, a bi-fold shutter might be used, but good luck finding a modern day counterpart.

Instead, use the pattern book solution, where multiple windows are outlined in a heavy trim — a full 4 inches, or even 6 inches, in width. The intention is to highlight the windows as an important design feature. Pediments, window mantles, and other decorative accessories are available in wood, vinyl, and architectural plastic at a reasonable cost, but be careful not to mix styles.

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