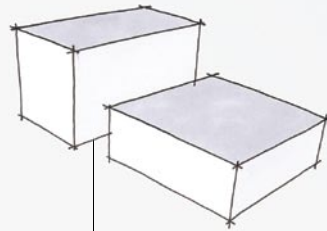
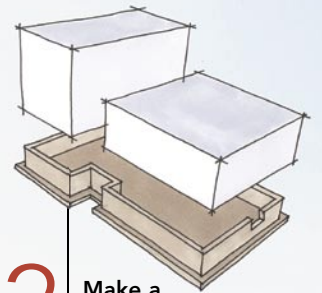


How Great



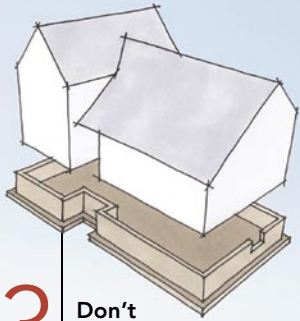
1 Keep the shapes simple



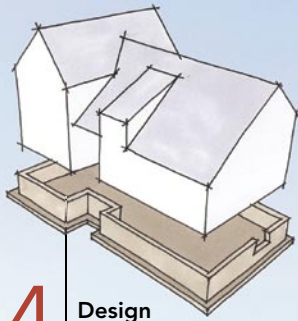
2 Make a statement with the foundation



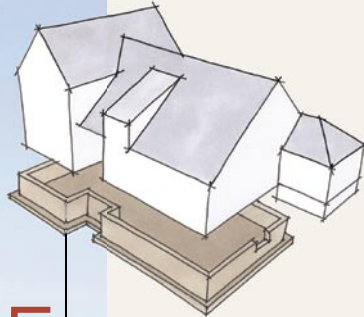
Houses Take Shape



3 Don't overdo the roof



4 Design dormers with restraint



5 Integrate additions with the major house shapes



6 Use details where they make the most impact



An architect explains how to use these six principles of massing to shape a distinctive small home

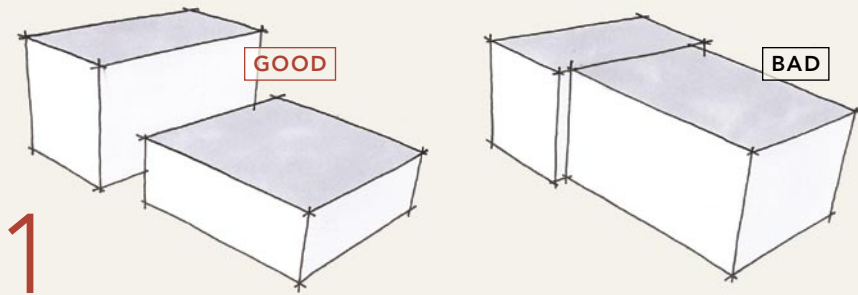
BY JEREMIAH ECK

After designing lots of houses, I've seen what can happen when I mention the term *massing* to clients. Their eyes roll back into that space where jargon goes to die. But as pretentious as the term sounds, it nevertheless describes a fundamental design element that can't be ignored.

Massing describes the way a house looks in three dimensions: height, length, and width. The interrelationships created by these dimensions give a house its mass and determine whether it looks right. This house, designed by my partner, Paul MacNeely, sits on the shore of a small lake west of Boston. At 1926 sq. ft., it's modest in size, yet it projects a sense of variety and function typical of larger homes. In fact, massing is a great tool for making a small house seem more spacious.

A former professor of mine used to say, "Keep it simple, but make it complex." That's just what Paul did by balancing the six principles of massing explored here. Yes, injecting this kind of complexity makes for a house that costs more than one designed with a simpler approach. But the result can be a house that's really worth coming home to.

Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, is a partner at Eck|MacNeely Architects in Boston (www.eckmacneely.com) and the author of *The Distinctive Home* (The Taunton Press, 2003) and *The Face of Home* (The Taunton Press, 2006).



1

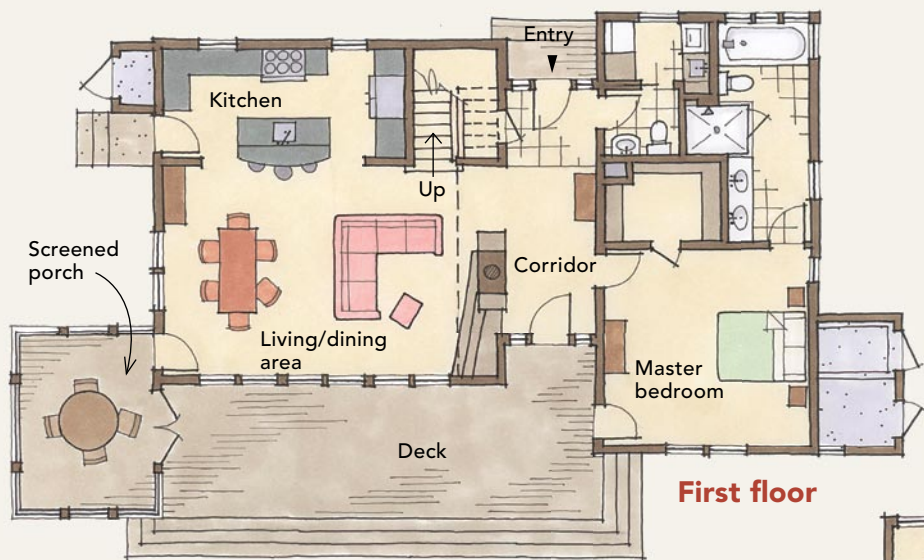
Keep the shapes simple

A house with good massing doesn't make you wonder where to look first. The general rule is that the composition should have one dominant element. In our example, it's the taller portion of the house. Your eye goes there first, and then begins to explore the rest.

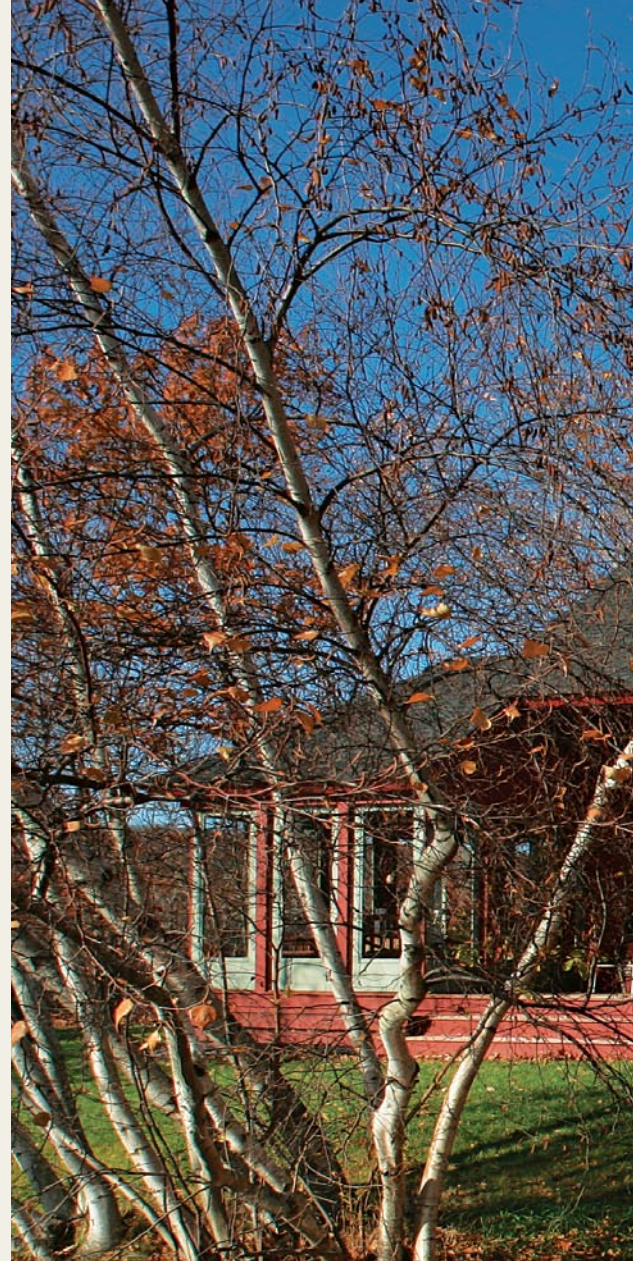
One way to make a small house seem larger is to break it into distinct parts. Start with simple, uncomplicated shapes that are easily identifiable as major or minor functions of the house. Don't overdo it; one or two major components are always better than too many. In this case, we divided the

house into two wings: one for living/dining, the other for sleeping (floor plans below). This reflection of the inside function on the outside massing is one mark of a distinctive home.

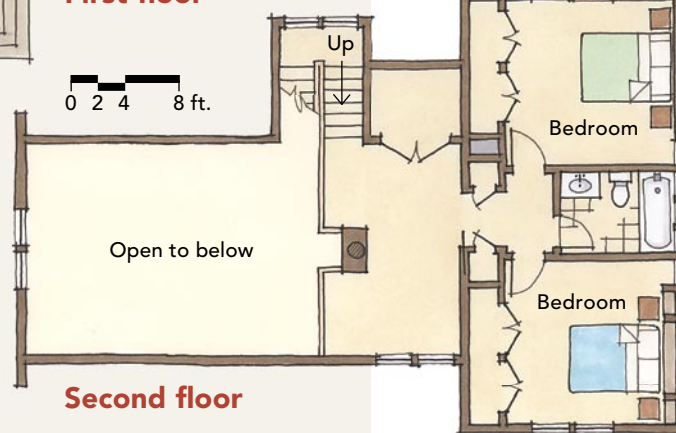
It's also important that the separate masses of the house have strong boundaries so that they read as distinct from one another. Shadow-lines from offsets and indentations achieve this goal. Note how the separation at the entry and the lower form of the one-story portion create a distinct hierarchy. The bulky alternative shown in the "bad" drawing stops your eye cold.



First floor



The design is just a square and a rectangle joined by a corridor that runs through the house. Yet the inset entries front and back, along with the offset corners of the house's three parts, create opportunities for each to take on a distinctive character.



Second floor

SPECS

Bedrooms: 3

Bathrooms: 2½

Size: 1926 sq. ft.

Cost: \$205 per sq. ft.

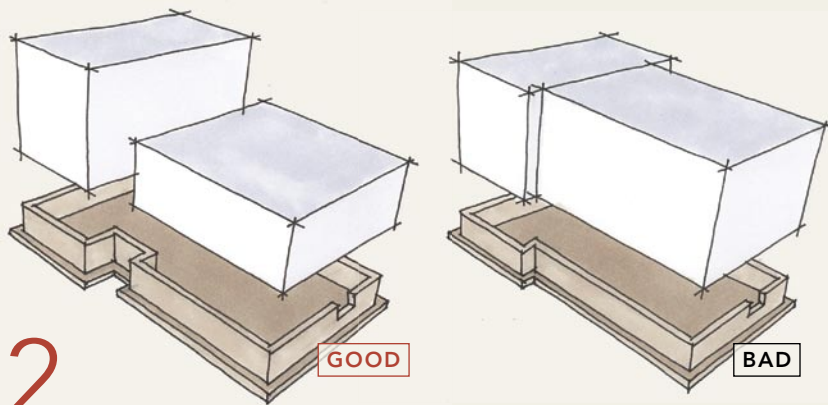
Completed: 2005

Location: Auburn, Mass.

Architect: Paul MacNeely

Builder: Tim Cronin, Kinsley Homes

Massing is the term for how a house looks in three dimensions: height, length, and width.

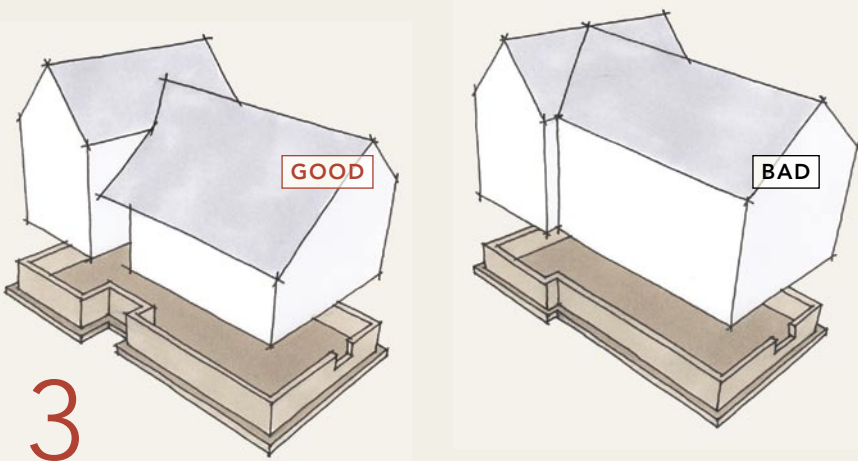


2

Make a statement with the foundation

Realize that a small change in the foundation can make a big difference in the rest of the house. The indentations on both sides of this foundation not only begin to define the entry hall but also separate the two wings of the house.

The entry refined. Recessed entries provide a bit of shelter. The glass doors and generous side lites create a transparent notch between the two primary masses of the house, further distinguishing them.



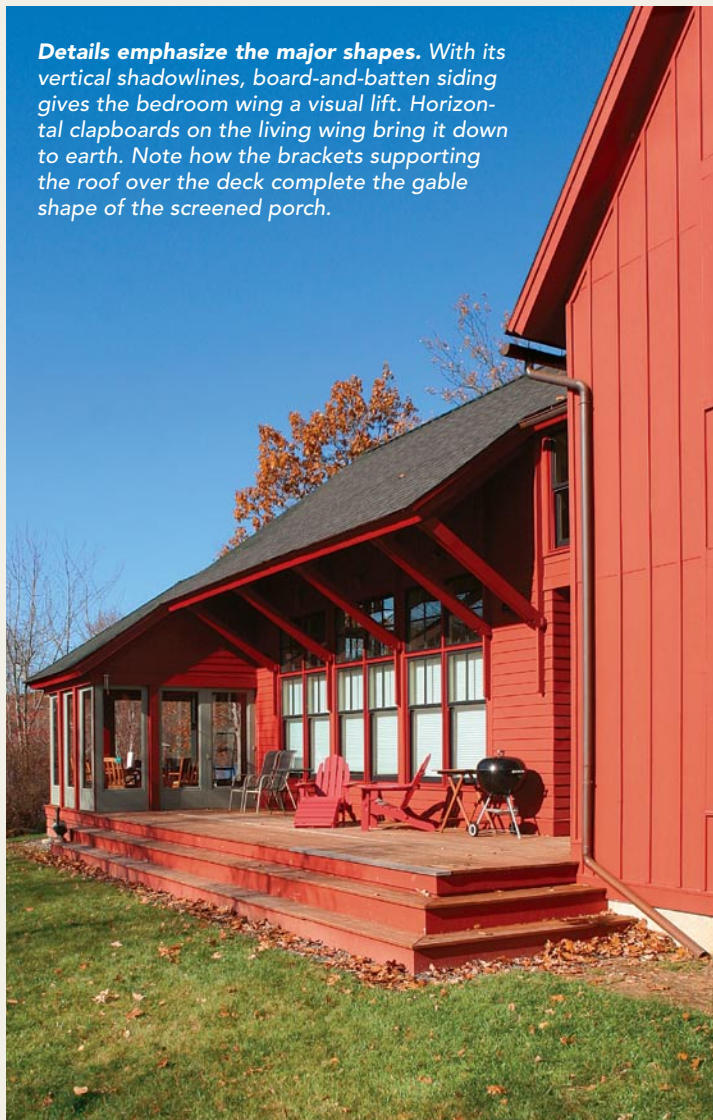
3

Don't overdo the roof

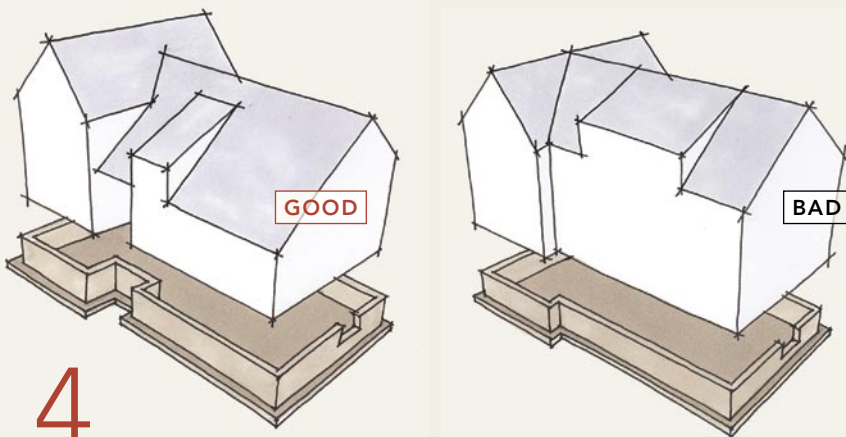
Whether a roof has a steep slope or is almost flat, with a large overhang or small, it should look at home on the house. A steep roof, for example, would be out of place on a Craftsman or ranch, house styles typified by shallow roof pitches and deep overhangs. Too many roof types can be just as confusing as too many house shapes.

This house is in New England, where steep gable roofs and their saltbox variations are ubiquitous on houses that range in style from

Victorian to cottage. The tall bedroom wing of this house presents a steep gable to the street. Although the intersecting gable over the living wing is a different pitch, there is no dissonance because the gables aren't seen side by side. Note how the intersecting ridgelines in the bad version create a static elevation. By stepping the ridge line down, the house moves toward an assembly of distinct parts, emphasized by the triangular piece of wall on the bedroom wing over the entry.



Details emphasize the major shapes. With its vertical shadowlines, board-and-batten siding gives the bedroom wing a visual lift. Horizontal clapboards on the living wing bring it down to earth. Note how the brackets supporting the roof over the deck complete the gable shape of the screened porch.



4

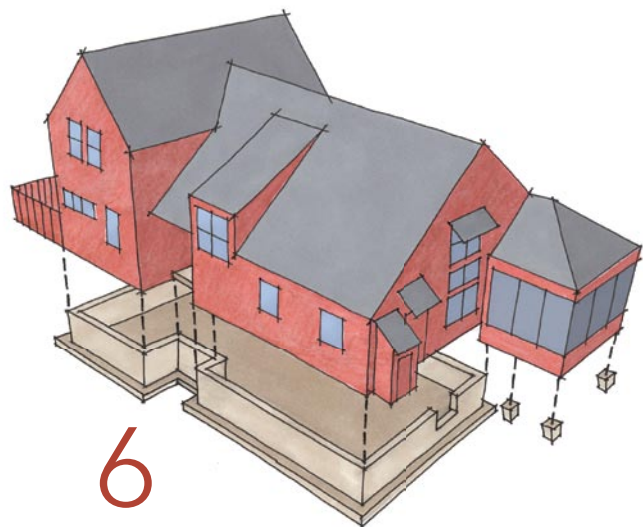
Design dormers with restraint

Dormers should never overwhelm a roof by being too big, or take away from the importance of the major roof shapes by injecting incompatible forms into the composition. For the sake of consistency, we often repeat the main roof's slope in the dormer roofs. In this case, however, a simple shed roof was more appropriate for the cottage look and feel we were after. The shed dormer provides headroom for the stair landing leading to the upstairs bedrooms, and its triangular sidewall shape echoes in scale that of the bedroom wing. Repetitive related forms such as these add complexity to a house and increase its perceived size.

The greedy dormer in the gone-wrong drawing shows what happens when a primary roof is balkanized by a bloated shed dormer.



Minor portions of the house should reflect the major shapes. The screened porch projects from the southwest corner of the house, topped with a hip roof that repeats the slope of the primary roof. Three small awning roofs with the same slope shelter the garden shed, the door, and the band of windows.



6 Use details where they make the most impact

Details are like punctuation marks. They make you pause in the right places, they emphasize important points, and they lend fluency to the message. Columns, chimneys, windows, doors, brackets, and siding materials are among the details that should enhance the look and feel of a house.

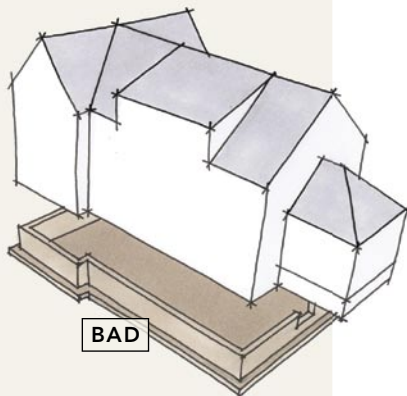
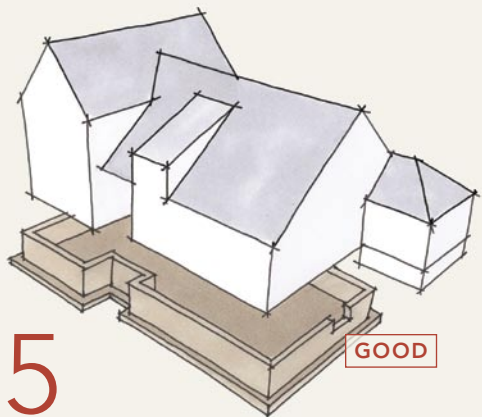
We broke this house into distinct parts to give it complexity, but we didn't stop there. For example, the largest windows are where they properly belong, in the living wing facing the lake. The smaller windows are in the bedroom wing, reinforcing the difference between the two parts.

We also changed the exterior finish on each part. The living wing is clapboard, while the bedroom wing is board-and-batten siding. The clapboards reinforce the horizontal nature of the living wing, and the board-and-batten emphasizes the vertical lines of the bedroom wing.

Finally, we used color as a unifying factor. All the material changes might have been too much, but by staining most of the exterior red, we were able to tie the various elements together. Too many colors would have been too busy and would have detracted from the overall simplicity of the house.

FineHomebuilding.com

Learn more about architect Jeremiah Eck's approach to massing, including interior photos of this home.



5 Integrate additions with the major house shapes

Additional parts of the house such as bays, porches, or even separate living components should feel like a natural outgrowth, not an afterthought, of the major house shapes. Additions are often special places, such as this home's screened porch. It is distinguished by its own roof and also embraced by the house with a portion of the main roof, where it forms a hip over the porch on the lake side. The porch is simultaneously separate from yet included in the body of the house.

When the screened porch is moved to the center of the wall rather than the corner, the connection with the main roof is lost. In addition, this central positioning of the porch in the end wall creates two hard-to-take-advantage-of walls on each side. Placing the porch at the corner makes room for big windows in the gable end, a side entry, and a little garden shed, all topped with related shed-roof awnings (photo above).