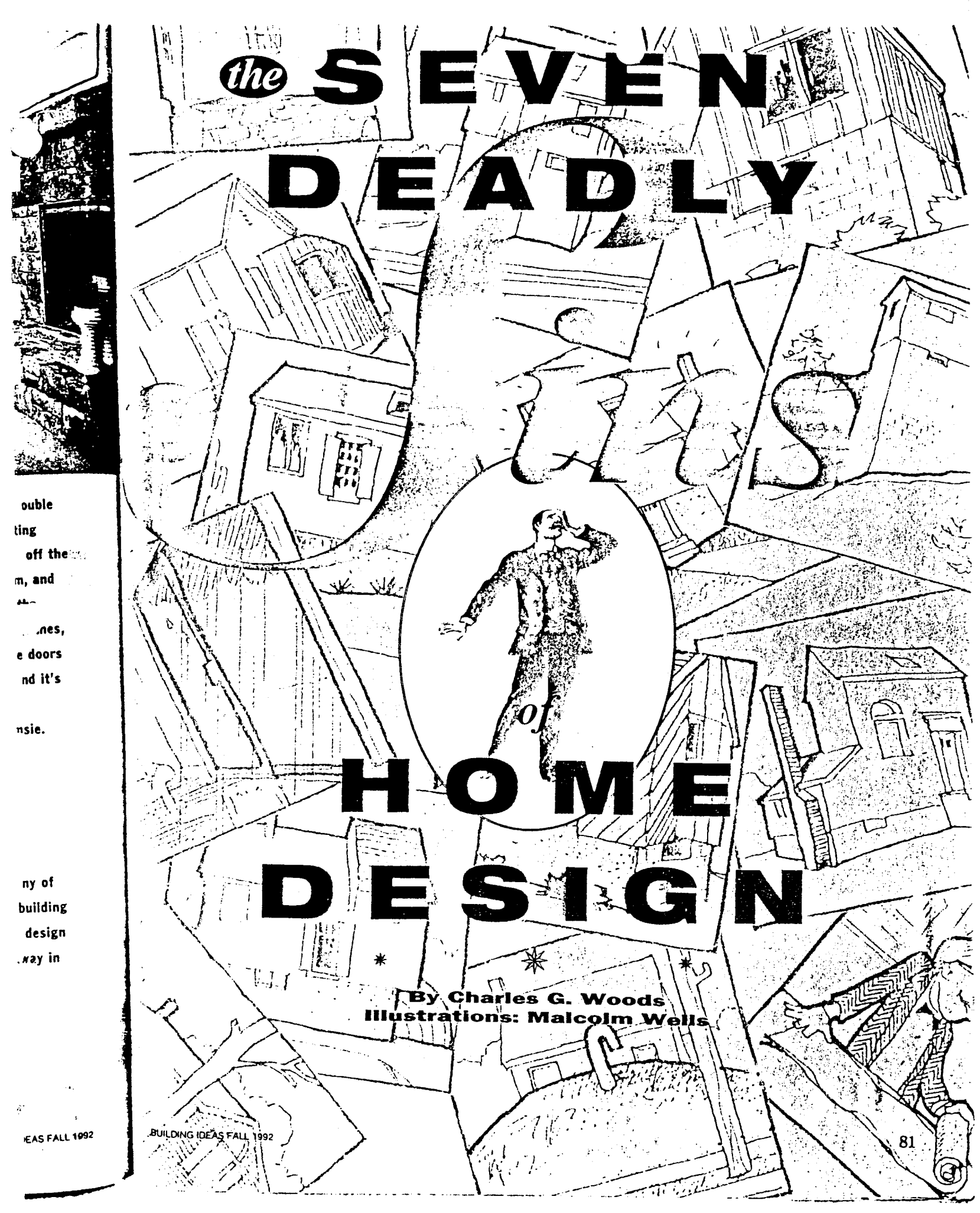
THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF HOME DESIGN



the SEVEN DEADLY of HOME DESIGN

By Charles G. Woods
Illustrations: Malcolm Wells

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It's an ugly fact: More than half of America's houses look horrible. Another 40 percent are fairly bad, less than 10 percent are pretty good, only two or three percent are good, and only one out of a hundred is really great (and we're still not talking about Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater).

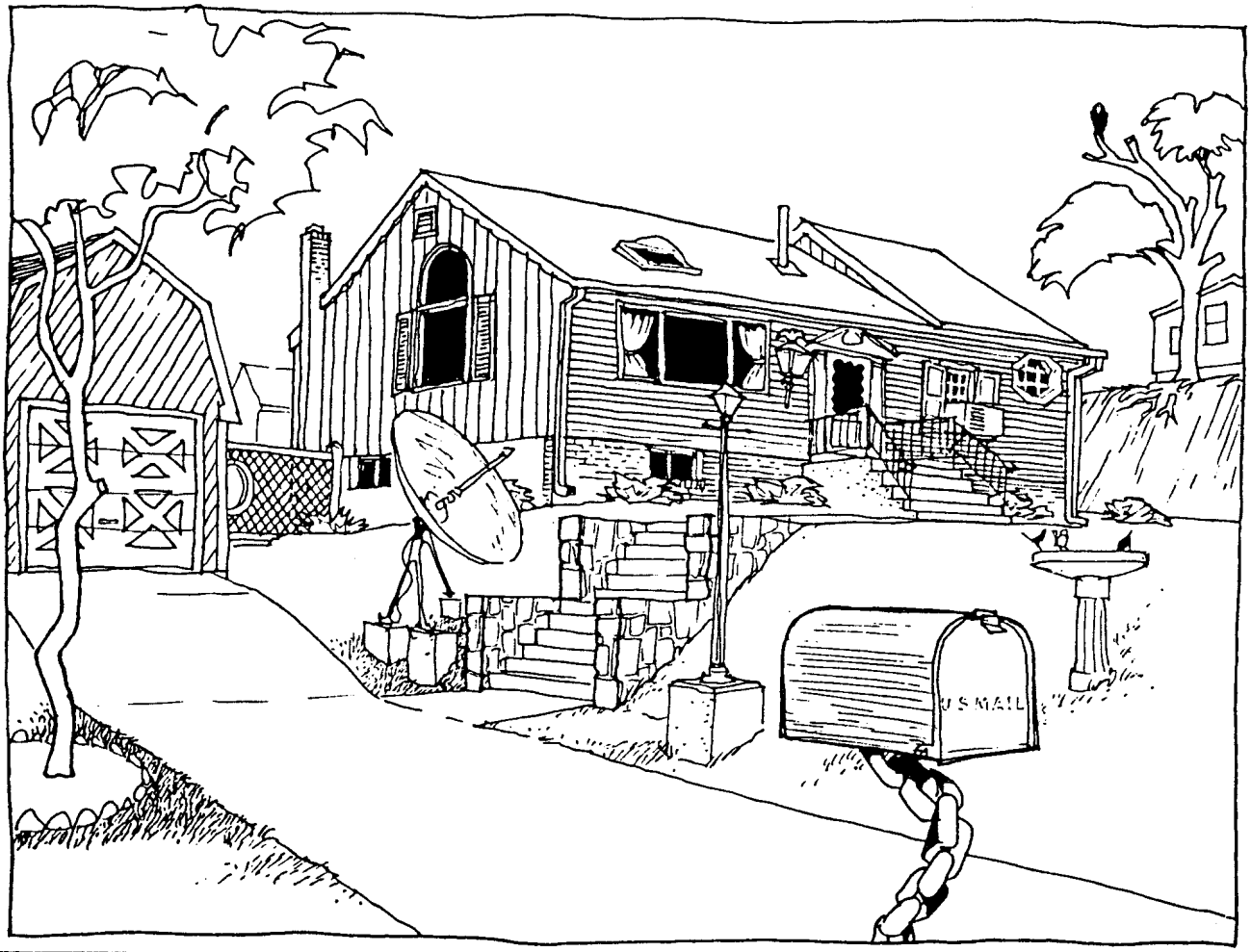
Why? Ignorance. People shop for mortgage rates and plumbing fixtures. But design? They're too often led astray, swayed by the latest trend that will quickly vanish, leaving its victims to pay 30-year mortgages on monuments to their own folly. The answer? Architects. A good, cohesive design takes a tremendous amount of knowledge—not just the technical, engineering aspects, but also the subtleties of art and aesthetics.

If I sound grouchy, it's only because I am. We are drowning in a sea of architectural ugliness.

Hiring a competent professional should safeguard you from the wretched mistakes so easily made by amateurs. What kinds of mistakes? All kinds—from those that amuse to those that astound. Regardless of who plans your home, you can protect yourself by understanding the perils and pitfalls of architectural design.

In our latest book, "Designing Your Natural House," architect Malcolm Wells and I devote 257 pages to guiding you through the murky mire of schlock design. The worst offenses, the ones that really make us shudder, fit into seven categories: disproportion, inconsistency, insensitivity, self-elevation, confrontation, complexity, and excess.

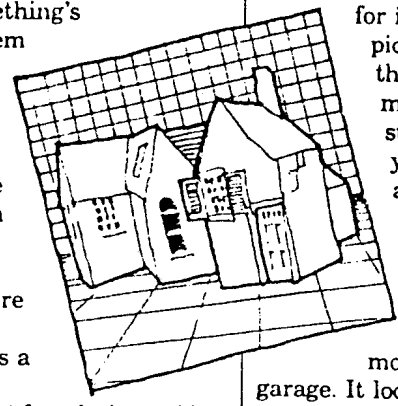
Here, in a handful of pages, are the most important of our tips to help you avoid *The Seven Deadly Sins of Home Design.*

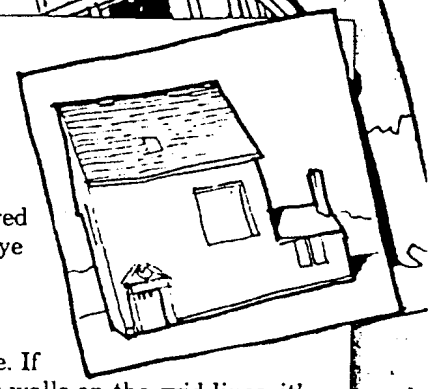


The Bad

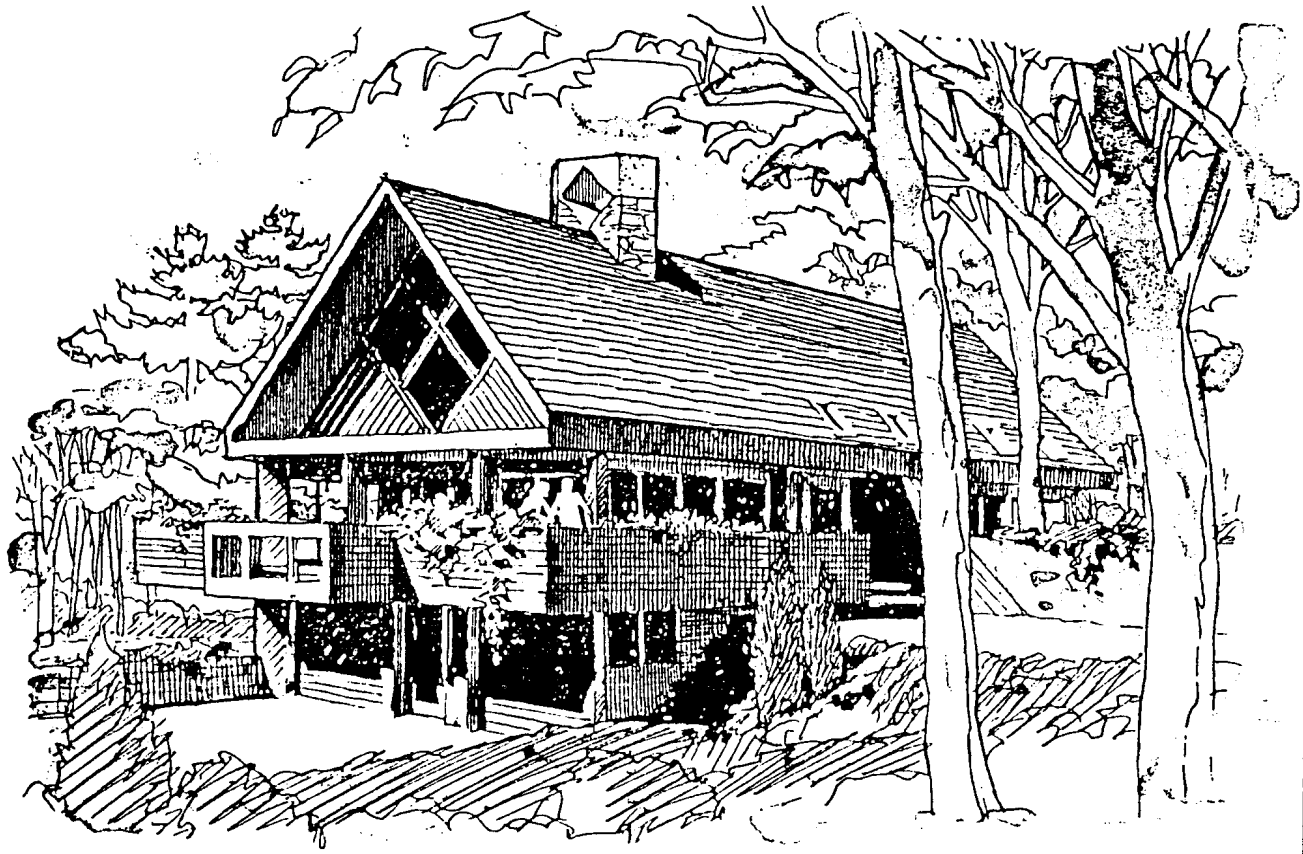
THE SIN OF DISPROPORTION

You've seen them—houses that seem as if they don't quite fit together. It's obvious something's wrong, but the fundamental problem isn't always so apparent. It's proportion—or more accurately, the lack of it. Often, the problem stems from last-minute modifications, the desire to squeeze some extra bit of space into a room where it doesn't quite fit. Bump-outs, add-ons, and extensions all present problems of proportion. Here are some tips to save you:

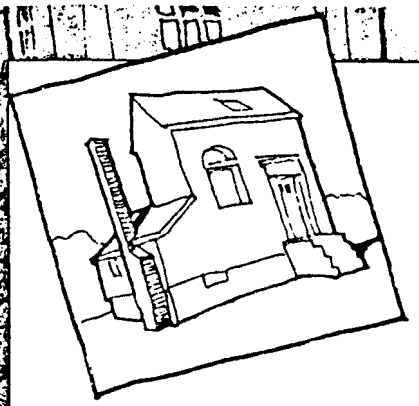


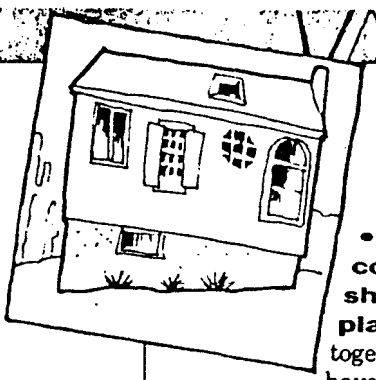


- **Design on a module.** That's a grid, like graph paper, and it's extremely important. I often use a 4-foot design grid. Wright used it, building materials are manufactured for it, and your eye picks up that there's a mathematical structure there. If you keep your walls on the grid lines, it's almost impossible to design a truly horrible house using this system.
- **Pay attention to proper overall massing and scale.** It's hard to define what's "proper," but we've all seen projects that aren't. One of the most common is the addition of a huge garage. It looks ridiculous! A garage should not be wider than the house.



And The Good

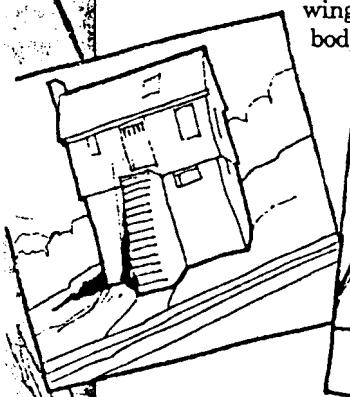


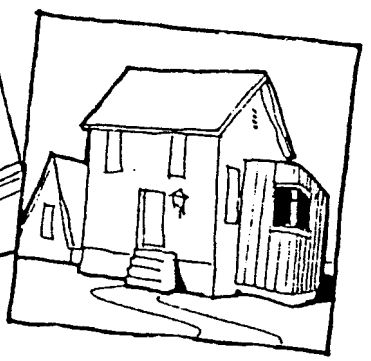


• **Relate the placement, size, and material of the chimney to the design of the house.** Keep the chimney close to the center of the building to avoid that uncomfortable appearance where the chimney side of the house looks so heavy that the whole structure seems in peril of tipping over.

• **Don't put in high front steps.** They look dumb! That's reason enough. But they're also always inconvenient and often dangerous. Why do it?

• **Integrate ells (wings) on the house.** This is an all-too-frequent error, especially in additions. A wing is a limb and shouldn't rival the body of your new home.

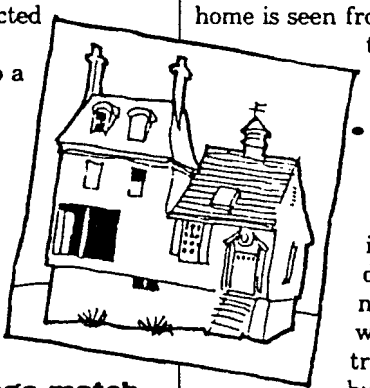




THE SIN OF INCONSISTENCY

When it comes to house design, people are fickle—or at least too flexible. It's easy to be attracted to numerous styles and unrelated features—and too easy to mix them into a mulligan stew of plans.

• **Don't mix historical styles.** French provincial and colonial styles won't fit on the same house. Some postmodernists have a flair for juxtaposing styles, but theirs is a masterful mix. When styles are blended by amateurs, it's usually an accident and looks like one.

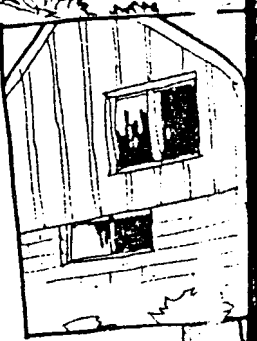


• **Make the garage match the house.** Attached or detached, a garage affects your property's architectural expression. Be sure its style, roof angles, and siding complement the residence.

• **Use windows consistently—kind, size, shape, proportion, and placement.** Certain types go together well, but if you're going to have double-hung windows on your house, they should be everywhere, not mixed with awning and casement windows. There should be a rhythm to windows from the outside as well as from the inside rooms.

• **Use very few different materials.** Don't put cedar on the front and vinyl on the sides. Don't mix brick, stone, and stucco unless you really want a home that looks like the masonry display at the building center.

• **Align and match upper-floor and basement windows.** If you're going to have exposed basement windows, treat them like part of the house. It's amazing how people want to design from the sill plate up, and disregard the bottom few feet of their home.

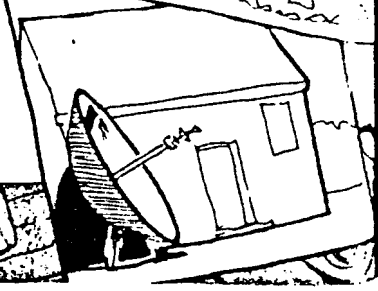


THE SIN OF INSENSITIVITY

A house is a personal expression, but you're not the only person affected by it. Even if your home is far from the nearest neighbor, I assume you'll still occasionally have guests, and someday may decide to sell the home. It won't kill you to think about these people, too, as you design your home.

• **Make all four sides of the house count!** This isn't theater, viewed from one side only. Your home is seen from many angles. Brick veneer on only the front wall is like bad makeup—a thick, cosmetic mask that looks cheap and artificial.

• **Conceal satellite dishes, TV antennae, etc.** Why do people take such pride in that big moonbeam dish perched proudly next to the house as if it were a flowering fruit tree? It may be handy but it's *ugly*. Hide it! Spend a little money on wire, so it doesn't become an eyesore that drops thousands from the value of your home.



• **Place septic system mounds properly.** If you'll be building in an area where sandhill septic fields are common, a little planning and a little extra sand to reduce the slope will work wonders.

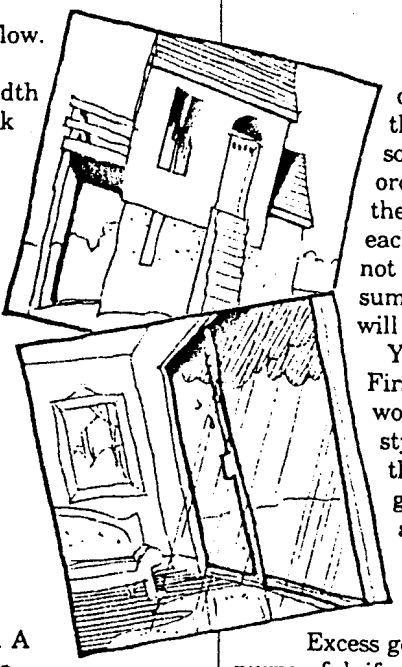
THE SIN OF SELF-ELEVATION

You can make a statement with a tower on a hilltop, but it won't be a peak of good design. Design grows from its environment, and with rare exceptions, this isn't a dominantly vertical world. We may have our ups and downs, but the world flows between left and right. Go with the flow.

• **Emphasize the horizontal.** Height is fine as long as you have width to give it visual stability. Study Frank Lloyd Wright for inspiration from a master whose name is easily remembered and whose work is readily available at your library.

• **Keep the exposed basement low to the ground.** Six *inches*, not 6 feet! This is probably the most important rule, because tall basements are such a common eyesore. If the basement must be exposed—say, on a hill—carry siding or brick or stone down over the masonry.

• **Use proper overhangs.** For many homes, that means 2 to 4 *feet*, not a notch of a few inches! Unless your home's historical style dictates shallow eaves, give them some depth. A roof implies shelter, so don't minimize it.



THE SIN OF CONFRONTATION

Design your home as an extension of its environment, not as an intruder on it. This may be a personal bias, but it's a good one. There's a reason our firm is called Natural Architecture: Nature is a great designer and a wonderful teacher. Follow her example.

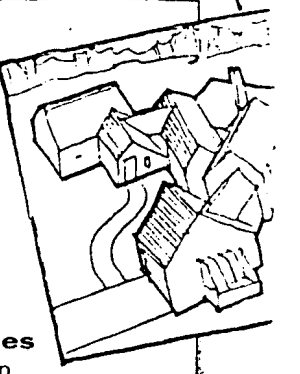
• **Use color effectively.** Earth tones, of course, look natural and are universally comfortable. Follow the hues of some heritage or environment, so your home looks like it belongs. Color is one of the hardest things to use properly; it's *not* the place to make your defiant statement of individuality.

• **Site the house properly.** Try to face it south and set it into, rather than upon, a hill.

THE SIN OF COMPLEXITY

Novice designers have had a lifetime to stockpile their great ideas, and the temptation to pack them all into the home of their dreams is almost irresistible.

• **Use simple, consistent shapes on plans.** Your module grid will help, but remind yourself as you analyze plans that good design is elegant in its simplicity. Complex shapes often make you proud when you imagine them, and sorry when you see them built.



• **Hire an architect.** An architect or other professional home designer can protect you from your own exuberance and ensure that your home follows some logical and consistent order. A homeowner gives the bank, say, 10 percent each year for 30 years. Why not pay an architect that sum just once, so the house will be properly designed?

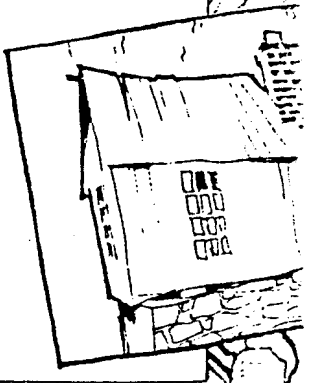
You'll find two types: First is the one who works in a particular, identifiable style. If that's the style you want, then this is the person to hire. Second is the generalist who has a flair for identifying and following the particular goals of each client.

THE SIN OF EXCESS

Excess goes beyond complexity. Complexity is purposeful, if misguided. Excess is simply conspicuous, sometimes even decadent, and the antithesis of good design. Excess consumes; good design conserves.

• **Make energy efficiency a priority.** Avoiding the sin of excess saves you money. It requires only some careful thought. For instance, put as much of your window area as possible on the south side of your home. Use glass moderately on the east and west and minimally on the north.

Make the house as tight as possible, then spring for an air-exchange system that will bring in fresh air without losing



heat. Also, berm where possible, especially on the north, for big dividends in energy conservation.

• **Build small, preserve nature, and use less toxic material.** A bigger house is not necessarily a better one. A more compact home costs less to build and maintain. Again, build with a sensitivity to the site—good design is minimally disruptive. Finally, read the labels on your building products and make selections with some sensitivity to the environment. That, too, is good design from a global perspective. It's also helpful at home.□

DESIGN POLICE: AUTHOR, ARTIST

Award-winning designer Charles G. Woods is the author of three books, and his work has appeared in more than 50 periodicals. A doctoral candidate in philosophy, Woods started his career as a designer with a 10-year apprenticeship under a student of Frank Lloyd Wright. Woods is a partner in Natural Architecture, headed by architect John J. Martin, in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. To discuss services or to order books, contact him at 717/253-5452.

Architect, author, and illustrator Malcolm Wells is a champion of earth-sheltered housing. His first book, *Underground Designs*, sold more than 90,000 copies. That was followed by eight other titles on subjects as diverse as solar heating and classic architectural birdhouses. Wells provides design and consultation services across the country by mail. "If you really care about the American land and want to help create a gentler architecture, we should get along very well," he says. You can reach Wells at The Underground Gallery, the Cape Cod studio and design center that he and his wife—also an artist—maintain in Brewster, Massachusetts; 508/896-6850.

Sin-free? Avoiding design's "deadly sins," writer-designer Charles G. Woods practices what he preaches—these Woods homes follow his rules faithfully. Both give an impression of being natural extensions of their environments. Designed to be energy-efficient and environmentally conscious, they create sophisticated designs from simple elements.