

The Seven Deadly Sins of Home Design

By Charles G. Woods

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. 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. Hiring a competent professional should safeguard you from the wretched mistakes so easily made by amateurs. Regardless of who plans your home, you can protect yourself by understanding the perils and pitfalls of architectural design.

The worst offenses fit into seven categories: disproportion, inconsistency, insensitivity, self-elevation, confrontation, complexity, and excess. Here are the most important of our tips to help you avoid The Seven Deadly Sins of Home Design

1. The Sin of Disproportion

You've seen them—houses that seem as if they don't quite fit together. 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.

- Design on a module: Use a grid, like graph paper. I often use a 4-foot design grid. If you keep your walls on the grid lines, it's almost impossible to design a truly horrible house.
- Pay attention to massing and scale: One of the most common errors is the addition of a huge garage. A garage should not be wider than the house.
- Relate the chimney: Keep the chimney close to the center of the building to avoid the appearance that the whole structure is in peril of tipping over.
- Avoid high front steps: They look dumb, are inconvenient, and often dangerous.
- Integrate ells (wings): A wing is a limb and shouldn't rival the body of your new home.



2. The Sin of Inconsistency

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.
- Use windows consistently: If you have double-hung windows, they should be everywhere, not mixed with awning and casement windows.
- Use very few different materials: Don't put cedar on the front and vinyl on the sides. Don't mix brick, stone, and stucco.
- Make the garage match: Be sure its style, roof angles, and siding complement the residence.



3. The Sin of Insensitivity

A house is a personal expression, but you're not the only person affected by it.

- Make all four sides count: 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.
- Conceal eyesores: Hide satellite dishes and TV antennae.
- Place septic system mounds properly: A little planning and extra sand to reduce the slope will work wonders.



4. The Sin of Self-Elevation

Design grows from its environment, and with rare exceptions, this isn't a dominantly vertical world.

- Emphasize the horizontal: Height is fine as long as you have width to give it visual stability.
- Keep exposed basements low: Six inches, not 6 feet!. Tall basements are a common eyesore.
- Use proper overhangs: For many homes, that means 2 to 4 feet. A roof implies shelter, so don't minimize it.



5. The Sin of Confrontation

Design your home as an extension of its environment, not as an intruder on it. Follow nature's example; she is a great designer and a wonderful teacher.



6. The Sin of Complexity

The temptation to pack every "great idea" into the home of your dreams is almost irresistible.

- Use simple, consistent shapes: Good design is elegant in its simplicity.
- Hire an architect: A professional can protect you from your own exuberance and ensure the home follows a logical order.



7. The Sin of Excess

Excess consumes; good design conserves.

- Prioritize energy efficiency: Put as much window area as possible on the south side. Use glass minimally on the north.

- Use color effectively: Earth tones look natural and are universally comfortable. Follow the hues of the environment so your home looks like it belongs.
- Build small: A bigger house is not necessarily a better one. A more compact home costs less to build and maintain.