



Adding On

DUO DICKINSON

*An Artful Guide
to Affordable
Residential
Additions*

With an Introduction by Charles Moore, FAIA

THE COMPLETE OVERHAUL

When time, siting, or decay demand, existing homes must be thoroughly reworked if they are to be recycled. When bulldozing and building anew are not the answer, economics and contextual sensibilities dictate a responsive interplay between the bones that remain and the flesh to be applied.

INTRODUCTION

When prospective home owners read the words "Handyman Special" in the less than frank realtor's description of an existing home for sale, they are torn between excitement over the affordable price tag and fear of a potentially agonizing salvage project. The image that is conjured up by that descriptive phrase ranges from a collapsing barn to a sound home visually polluted by neglect. The raw material offered to the purchaser has all the physical limitations of an existing structure and all the headaches of a protracted building project.

What recommends these risky undertakings? First of all, the economics are frequently alluring. At the very least, the septic system, utility hookups, and foundation are usually adequate for reuse, and the price of these neglected relics is only marginally more than the cost of a naked building lot. Second, the location of older homes is frequently advantageous. The influx of affluence into an existing working-class area due to natural amenity or proximity to an urban center can create instant bargains where once good money might have been thrown after bad. Last, the latent charm of a battered building can shine poignantly through the thoughtless remodeling and rampant decay of its recent history.

It takes a special courage and vision to undertake a complete renewal of a desperately distressed structure. Often only an architect can see the latent promise and will serve as the owner-renovator. Frequently such projects do not make sense given the extreme cost of reconstruction, and only an engineer, architect, or competent builder can divine the

hidden early warning signs of irretrievable decay.

Given the high risk and high reward implicit in the undertaking of these projects, it is best to maintain a firm grip on the origins of each of the examples shown in this section. It is all too easy to view such work as a new home built on an old foundation.

Frequently the architect must anguish over the real economies of what can be saved and what must be rebuilt. To surgically reweave selected portions of a partially defective structure can cost several times as much as a simple gut-and-rebuild approach. On the other hand, deciding to restructure an existing building completely when there is adequate structure in place does not make economic sense.

In a sense, these projects represent the broadest test of an architect's skill and knowledge. He has the freedom to express himself without the powerful presence of an existing building demanding his respect and attention as it can in the projects shown in previous chapters. And yet, the complete success of a major overhaul depends on the designer's genuine knowledge of the existing context in which the structure exists, so the designer's criteria for success are multiplied.

The judicious utilization of the viable parts of an existing building must be balanced with the essential reason for hiring an architect for such a project: that in solving practical dilemmas he can also maintain and enhance a creative vision beyond the myriad minutiae screaming for attention.

Foreword

Architecture is the choreography of the familiar and the surprising, and if a building doesn't have any of the familiar in it, people just can't relate to it at all. If it's zoomy future space or superhistoric neo-Georgian, there is no way of touching it. On the other hand, if it's altogether familiar, it doesn't interest anybody either, for there's no reason to bother with it.

If architects succeed, it is when they make something that is basically familiar but that has surprises in it, whether they mean to or not. It's like seasoning in food, which at best brings out the basic tastes that are there. Perhaps this is the manner in which an addition brings out the qualities in a house. The worst kinds of surprises in addition design are the ones that mask or desperately distort the familiar qualities that are there in the first place.

What I seem to see in myself (and I think it goes for most architects as they grow older) is that the familiar seems more and more important and the amount of surprise that is required diminishes.

A great many of the best-known architects in North America got their start doing little houses for their relatives or, even more often, doing famous additions to other people's houses. Normally, when they have grown somewhat older and acquired a more expensive office, they either have other work to do or can't afford to take on the tiny jobs with their tiny fees. So most additions are the early work of people, some of whom became well known later for much grander buildings. One of the difficulties with this is that the scope for the young architect doing additions is not nearly so grand as his desire to excel or, if you will, his ego. A young architect is likely to put all the things that are in his mind into any one job—"It might be the only job I ever get; I don't want to leave out anything." In this case, the amount of what's new in the design is likely to be fairly large and the amount of what's familiar in it may be quite small or even too little. That's why people are always talking about "weird architects," almost always "weird young architects" (except in a few cases of arrested development), who have done some wild things they find interesting but can't relate to very well.

I think if you've done a body of work or just naturally simmered down, it might seem you have fewer ideas, or maybe I'd like to think you just get a more relaxed notion of how much more new you need in a job to spice it up and

how much of the familiar you need to make people feel comfortable with it.

What is so apparent in the additions shown in this book, and in any small architectural project, is that it isn't the architect's unbounded ego but the client's ego that's at stake; that's why the client is doing it. In addition to wanting to have hot water in the pipes, the client wants to have something that expresses himself, that is an extension of himself and not an extension of some architect that he just met.

The architect fresh from training in school has had no background of being sensitive to the problems of somebody else's ego. The student has had no background at all in changing things, for he is trained in school to come up with something to be criticized for, and that's the end of it.

The main process in doing anything from an addition on forward or backward is cutting and fitting, trying something and seeing what goes and what doesn't go, and then gracefully and usefully changing the notion to fit the images that are in the client's head.

The client is not trained to express and to describe what he wants and just cannot write a program that gives a fool-proof outline for making the right shapes and right space and right light coming in at the right time. I remember a woman for whom I did a house who appeared at one of the meetings at which we were presenting little cardboard models. She brought with her a huge kitchen knife and started stabbing holes in the walls where she wanted windows!

The danger in client input lies in the willingness to move parts of the house as if they were pieces of furniture. Moving furniture is not too horrible a way of expressing yourself in a house that doesn't fit you, because it doesn't cost too much and it is a way of laying on hands, trying to make the place your own.

One of the first questions an architect should ask the client with an addition or remodel is, "Are you really making this house do more better, or are you just moving around the parts at considerable expense to no special purpose?" The real answer is too often the latter.

In the period when my firm was doing mostly houses, I calculated that the average number of complete changes in the kitchen plan, in the hands of the person in charge of the kitchen, was twenty-six. These changes have expensive consequences.

For me the most interesting thing is to figure out how adding something can change everything. The whole notion of remodel is that with one new piece, the emphases, the rhythms, and the qualities of light and space in the whole house become all new. What does not interest me very much is the addition that just leaves your old house behind, forgets it, and builds a new piece of architecture as though it were out in the middle of a prairie.

A great many architects have done additions that have rather cavalierly cast aside the house to which they are adding in order to make something that would cause the world to sit up and take notice. These additions themselves are often very exciting, but they leave you wishing the old house would go away.

The excellence of additions, and one of the special qualities of the additions in this book, is that they don't cast aside the houses that they are a part of, but manage to do the things they do and make the experience of the houses more exciting, more interesting, more of an extension of the people who live in them. The ancients would have called it magic.

Certainly, part of the problem of our time is that we are the heirs of the 1950s, which are often cast as the villain these days. That decade had an attitude somewhere between embarrassment and hate toward existing buildings. So a perfectly standard remodeling of the 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s would yank off the loathed ornament and Band-Aid it over with whatever piece of plywood or Masonite was handy.

I think there are all sorts of qualities of existing houses that are familiar and become important, such as dignity. It is really very strange and not very satisfying to see a perfectly dignified house get tarted up like a middle-aged lady in a disco outfit. With age comes a set of qualities, and dignity is one of the nicer ones.

I sometimes wonder with terror what people are going to think of our remodelings, whether they will seem like enhancements or flat-out disfigurements.

Among the qualities of the American dream that have made a mysterious disappearance over the years since World War II are those clustered around thrift, economy, the maximum of means, all achieved with Yankee ingenuity. I'm fond of saying about a great many student designs, the work of colleagues, and even sometimes my own, that "the work would benefit from a 25 percent cut in the budget." One of the excellences of this book is that it revives the pleasures of those astringent virtues like economy as it shows additions that have greatly changed the mood and sense of excitement of existing houses, even more importantly than they have added to their accommodations. The best examples of these add-ons have made a whole new world mostly, and very efficiently, out of existing parts. In this book the designs are assembled (and they were assembled very carefully after a great number were examined) because they do accomplish something. They make interesting, even occasionally inspirational, reading.

—Charles W. Moore