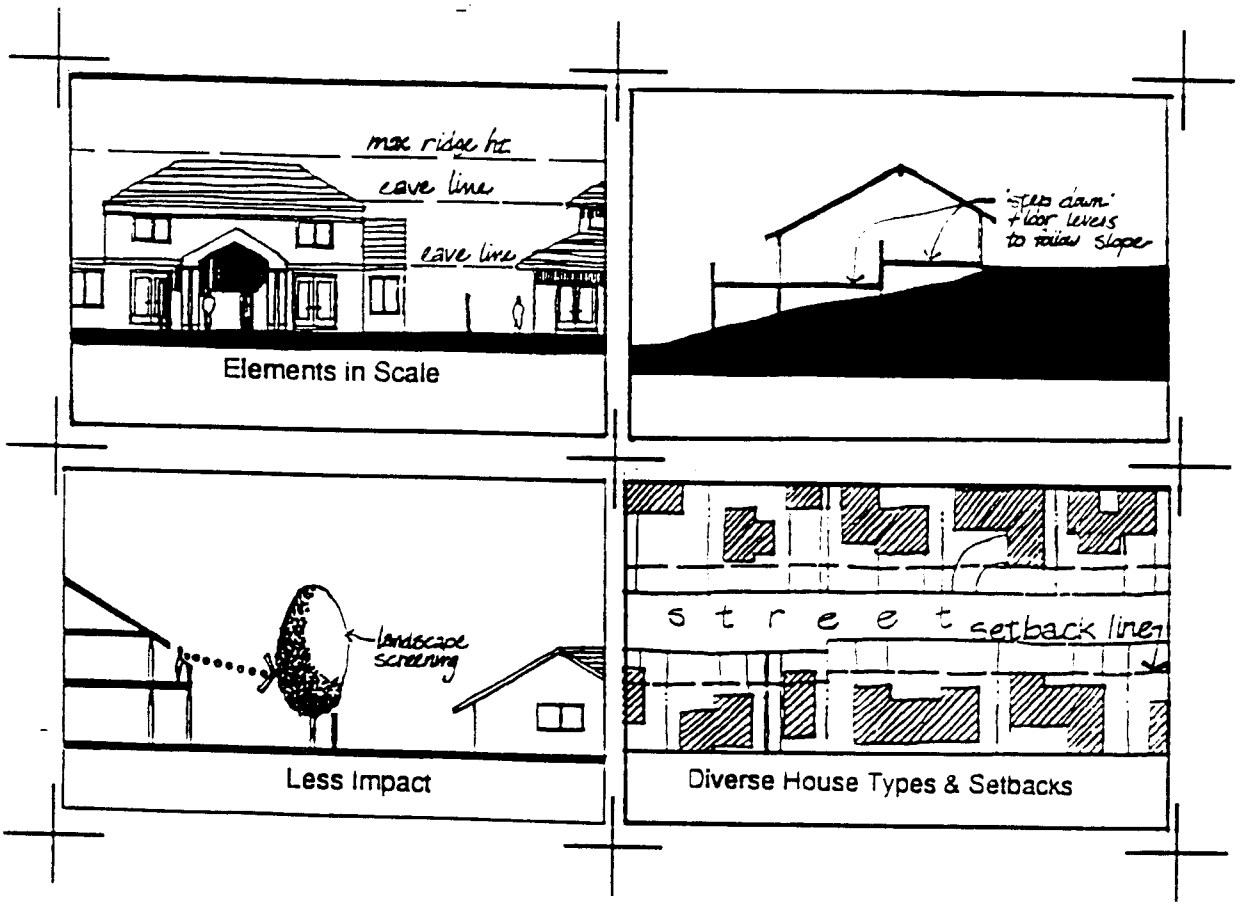
City of Los Altos



Single-Family Residential

DESIGN GUIDELINES

New Homes
&
Remodels

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

These guidelines were developed after an extensive community-wide look at the values and expectations that neighborhoods have for the housing that surrounds them. The purpose of this handbook is not meant to promote a specific type of design nor to establish a rigid set of guidelines. Instead, it is meant to guide the homeowner, architect, developer and builder in planning and executing a successful design of new and remodeled single-family dwellings. This handbook will also serve as a guide for the City Council, Planning Commission and City staff in the design review process.

Often, newly built homes have more complex plan and building forms than existing houses. This fact, along with stylistic and size issues, has reinforced perceptions of newer homes as being very different from older houses.

The design policies and implementation techniques in this handbook are not meant to discourage individual designs. Rather, they set forth the implementation of the findings that must be made for design review applications, serve as a basis on which decision-making bodies may base their design-review decisions, and assist in developing consistency in the approval process from neighborhood to neighborhood across the city. The primary purpose is to guide property owners toward successful solutions to their needs and to maintain the existing positive physical qualities and character of the residential neighborhoods of Los Altos.

These guidelines implement the goals and policies of the General Plan. They also identify the findings from the Los Altos Municipal Code which must be followed to gain approval of a project.

Los Altos requires design review on all residential construction. The majority of design review is performed by Planning Department staff. Applications for two-story construction or unusual architectural design are heard by the Architectural and Site Control Committee (A&S), a subcommittee of the Planning Commission. The functions of the A&S Committee are delineated in the Los Altos Municipal Code.

From a historical perspective, the character of neighborhoods in Los Altos relates back to the incorporation of the city in 1952. Decisions made at that time encouraged a rural-like atmosphere. Thus, Los Altos developed with spacious quarter acre lots, minimal use of curbs and gutters, extensive use of landscaping and large trees, openness of front yards to the street, and the relatively low profile and height of residences. Prior to the City's incorporation, housing had developed more in continuity with surrounding communities; thus, there are areas of town that have smaller lots, and the zoning regulations distinguish between these smaller lots and larger lots in terms of setbacks, height, etc. These design guidelines, however, apply to lots of all sizes.

Although most of the housing stock was developed during the 1950's and a predominant style is the "ranch", there is a vast diversity of design and style within Los Altos. Today, demands for housing are far different than they were at our incorporation. As a result, housing styles and home size have changed dramatically. Whereas, earlier there was an emphasis on "low profile", now there is a tendency to "build out" a lot. Whereas, before there was an emphasis on designing from the exterior inward now there is a tendency to design from the interior outward. At times this results in home designs that appear to overwhelm neighboring homes either in mass or complexity of design.

To monitor such changes, the City Council first amended the zoning regulations to lower height and to establish daylight planes and floor area to lot area ratios. After working with these new regulations for a period of time, it became evident that development standards alone are not sufficient to address such impacts as privacy invasion and change to neighborhood character. Thus, the next step involved the adoption of requirements for design review of all new homes and remodels. These guidelines have been developed with the expectation that their use will encourage creativity that will result in a high level of residential design quality.

It is recognized that guidelines do not encompass the full range of possibilities for excellence. For this reason, variation from these guidelines will be considered when compensated by a related improvement which contributes to the excellence of the project.

To use these guidelines, please refer to the Table of Contents. Chapter 1 is the Introduction, and Chapter 2 explains the intent of the guidelines as well as the design review process. Chapter 3 presents information on how ***design*** is viewed in relation to the design review process. Chapter 4 presents the basic philosophy of these guidelines and provides general guidance in meeting the findings required for design approval. Chapter 5 explains procedures and includes the basic ***"do's and don'ts"*** for design approval. There are three appendices: Appendix A presents the goals and policies from the General Plan that are applicable to these guidelines; Appendix B is a Glossary of Terms; and Appendix C provides a basic primer on Architectural Styles, and can assist you in identifying the style of your home.

We wish you well on your project!

2.0 OVERVIEW OF GUIDELINES

2.1 APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES

These guidelines apply to new single-family homes as well as additions and exterior remodeling of existing homes.

2.2 DESIGN GUIDELINE GOALS

The goals of the guidelines are as follows:

- **Improve and enhance the architectural quality and design integrity of single-family residential housing in Los Altos.**
- **Illustrate the goals of the General Plan, including those relating to privacy, bulk, neighborhood character, and landscaping.**
- **Provide a vision of single-family residential housing and neighborhoods that reflects the community values of Los Altos.**

2.3 DESIGN GUIDELINES AND THE CITY'S REVIEW PROCESS

The steps of designing your construction project which involve working with City staff are as follows:

1. Obtain from the Planning Department a copy of the zoning development standards for the zoning district in which you are located. Most Los Altos single-family residences are located in the R1-10 zoning district for which a Building Guide has been prepared. The Building Guide includes regulations for setbacks, lot coverage, floor area ratio, height restrictions, etc. for all R1-10 lots, including small lots (those under 9,000 sq. ft.). Zoning development standards are also available for the other R1 zoning districts: R1-H, R1-20, and R1-40. Since the Building Guide is typically provided at the same time you obtain this booklet, you may already have a copy.

2. Check your CC&R's (Covenants, Conditions & Restrictions), if any, for private subdivision restrictions relating to height, setbacks, and other design issues. If you do not have a copy with your deed, you may obtain one from a title company.

3. When preparing your plans, it is important that all development follow the zoning standards as well as the design guidelines. To find that a project is in compliance

with the design guidelines does not imply that it would have to follow every specific guideline. Instead, the appropriate review committee and staff will look first for general compliance, and second, for compliance with specific guidelines which address major impacts.

4. At this stage your plans (plot plan, building elevations, roof plan, floor plan) should contain sufficient detail to reflect the design of your project. It is to your advantage to submit plans at a preliminary stage since significant design changes can occur during the design review process. Construction drawings should not be prepared until after you have received design approval.

5. Once your plans have been prepared, we recommend (particularly with two-story construction) that you discuss them with your immediate neighbors (typically eight homes - two next door, three across the street and three behind). Quite often, a concern of the neighbors can be resolved in the early design stages.

6. The next step is to apply for design review. Detailed instructions are included in the Building Guide, along with an explanation of the design review process. All two-story projects will be considered at a public meeting before the Architectural and Site Control Committee, and the immediate neighbors will be invited to attend the meeting. One-story projects are typically not considered at a public meeting, and are reviewed by the Planning Department staff. Staff may, however, refer one-story applications to the Architectural and Site Control Committee when it is deemed appropriate. In order to grant design approval, the zoning regulations require positive findings to the following criteria:

- **The proposed structure or alteration follows all provisions of the Los Altos Municipal Code and Zoning Ordinance.**

- **The height, elevations, and placement on the site of the proposed main or accessory structure or addition, when considered with reference to the nature and location of residential structures on adjacent lots, will avoid unreasonable interference with views and privacy, and will consider the topographic and geologic constraints imposed by particular building site conditions.**

- **The natural landscape will be preserved where practical, by minimizing tree and soil removal; grade changes will be minimized and will be in keeping with the general appearance of neighboring developed areas.**

- **The orientation of the proposed main or accessory structure or addition in relation to the immediate neighborhood will minimize the perception of excessive bulk.**

- **General architectural considerations, including the character, size, scale and quality of the design, the architectural relationship with the site and other building materials, and similar elements have been incorporated in order to ensure the compatibility of the development with its design concept and the character of adjacent buildings.**

- **The proposed structures have been designed to follow the natural contours of the site with minimal grading, minimum impervious cover, and maximum erosion protection. A stepped foundation shall generally be required where the average slope beneath the proposed structure is 10% or greater.**

7. Either the applicant or the neighbor(s) may file an appeal once a design application has been either approved or denied by the Architectural and Site Control Committee. The process for filing an appeal is explained in the Building Guide. The City Council typically hears appeals, and the Council may either uphold or overrule a decision of the Architectural and Site Control Committee. As previously pointed out, it is important to meet with your neighbors early in the process and to resolve areas of concern, since the design review process involves judgment decisions which may be influenced by neighborhood reaction.

8. If your application has been approved and no appeal has been filed, you may prepare your construction drawings in order to apply for a building permit. Detailed instructions for this process are available in the Building Department.

9. Design approval is valid for one year. If an application for a building permit is not made within one year, the approval will expire.

2.4 HOW THE DESIGN GUIDELINES WERE DEVELOPED

In October, 1990 the City retained Architect/Urban Designer Mark R. Srebnik, AIA, who, along with an Advisory Committee, was charged with preparing single-family residential design guidelines. The Committee included residents, builders, architects, designers. and representatives from the Planning Commission.

To increase public input, a series of public committte meetings were held as well as a Community Meeting sponsored by the committee. In addition, two joint worksessions were held between the City Council and the Planning Commission as well as public hearings before both bodies.

3.0 DESIGN IN LOS ALTOS

Los Altos housing has developed from its notion of a community that is semi-rural in nature. Lack of curbs and gutters, large lots that are generally not built out, general lack of street lighting, and an abundance of mature landscaping all lend toward the feeling of spaciousness that is generated within our community.

One characteristic of the housing that can be considered as a strength of Los Altos, would be the abundant use of landscaping. This landscaping includes heritage and other tall trees, hedges, shrubs, green lawns, and flowers. In addition, there is a sense of privacy and individuality that has developed within each lot. Such landscaping, along with generous setbacks and under-development, all point toward a community heritage of openness, greenness, and lushness.

Housing design needs to address the relationship of dwellings to one another within a neighborhood and the quality of community that any new housing creates in aggregation. Whether your home has a specific "style" or is a mixture of architectural elements found in your neighborhood, its success depends upon how well it has been designed and how well the different design elements are unified into a single harmonious whole.

It is not necessarily good design to copy elements that already exist in a neighborhood just to make your design "fit in". It is more important to good design that your home has its own integrity. Good design should address an array of elements, including and not limited to setbacks, privacy, architectural elements, heights, landscaping, neighborhood relationship, etc.

Los Altos is made up of numerous individually built houses and subdivision tracts which have been developed during the past century. Some of the tracts are diverse in architectural style while others are homogenous. If the architectural style you have chosen is significantly different from neighboring homes, mitigation may be required in terms of and not limited to the following: ample landscaping or screening, smaller size, greater setbacks, design alterations and/or modified exterior building materials. In all cases quality design is required.

The bulk of a structure is related to its floor area, height, design and relationship to its surroundings. A structure is perceived to be bulky when these elements are combined in such a way as to create a residence that is out of scale, visually and structurally, with neighboring residences and its own natural setting. The residence then appears massive, blocky, and overwhelming to the eye. The emphasis should be on maximum integration of structures with their natural and constructed environments.

In summary, if you have designed your home in accordance with these guidelines and have a "good design" for your neighborhood, you can be reasonably assured that your design will be approved. If your home design deviates significantly from these guidelines and your neighborhood, you will either be required to provide mitigation or to redesign your project.

4.0 DESIGN GUIDELINES PHILOSOPHY

This chapter defines the philosophy of Los Altos with regard to how housing should develop within our neighborhoods. This chapter is general in nature and reflects the major concerns of neighborhood compatibility and site planning, including the relationship of your property to adjacent properties. The next chapter goes into greater detail regarding the *do's and don'ts* for all new construction and remodels.

These guidelines were developed from the belief that there can be a balance between the desires of the community to achieve neighborhood compatibility in house design and individuals' rights to build their "dream home". There is a need to be sensitive in crucial areas that govern the relationship of a home to its surroundings, e.g. existing homes, public streets, open spaces, privacy invasion, etc. These guidelines are not intended to prescribe a specific style, nor to limit development to one story in height.

4.1 NEIGHBORHOOD COMPATIBILITY

Before starting the design process, you should understand the character of your neighborhood and the impact your project will have on the neighborhood. Not all neighborhoods have clearly defined boundaries or character. Often, the boundaries of a neighborhood are delineated by arterial streets, topography and other non-architectural features.

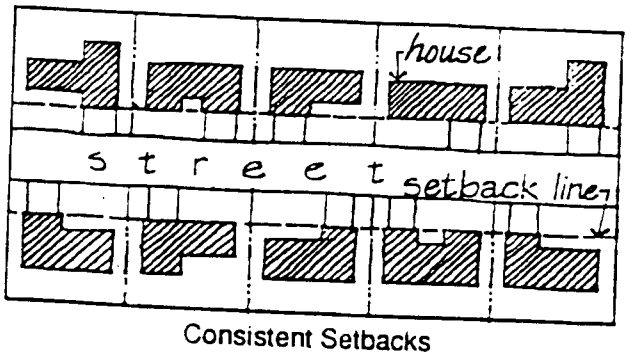
Neighborhood character within a subdivision may be a result of private CC&R's (Conditions, Covenants, and Restrictions). These CC&R's may contain restrictions on height, size, setbacks, and other design issues. Review your title report to see if there are any CC&R's that may apply to your project. Even though enforcement of CC&R's is a private civil matter, you will need to acknowledge on your design application whether your project follows all CC&R's. When the applicant indicates that a project deviates from the CC&R's, the neighbors will be notified.

Neighborhoods in our community fall into one of the following groups: consistent, diverse and transitional. Following is a discussion regarding each of these types of neighborhoods. One of the considerations for a project is the compatibility it has within the neighborhood. A project determined to be inconsistent with the neighborhood will not necessarily be denied. It may be that mitigation will be required in order for the project to be approved.

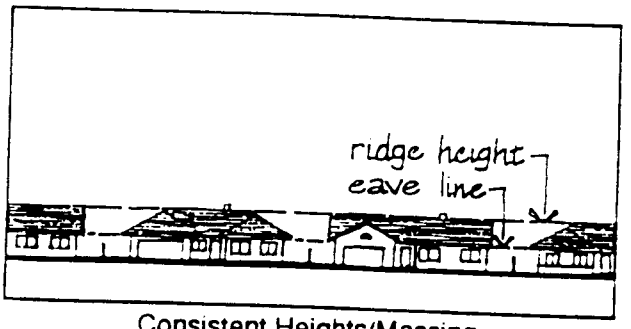
CONSISTENT CHARACTER NEIGHBORHOODS:

These neighborhoods have a similar style and character to the homes and streetscape. This does not mean that the homes are exactly alike, just that they share similar

characteristics of style, house type, setbacks, and streetscape character. Major renovation or new construction projects in these neighborhoods require more design sensitivity to the neighborhood than other neighborhood types when they depart from the neighborhood character.



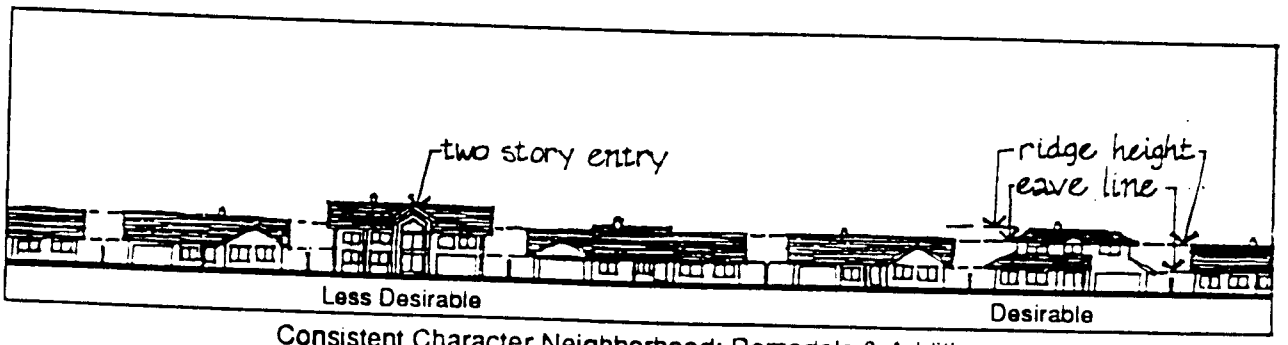
Consistent Setbacks



Consistent Heights/Massing

- **In consistent character neighborhoods, *good neighbor* design has design elements, material, and scale found within the neighborhood and sizes that are not significantly larger than other homes in the neighborhood.** The emphasis should be on designs that "fit in" and lessen abrupt changes.

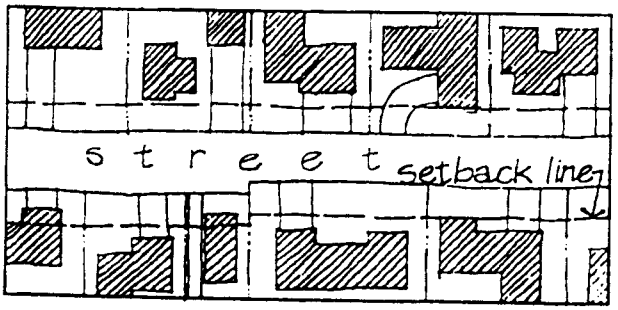
- **Approval of an inconsistent design will require mitigating design measures to lessen the neighborhood impact.** Mitigation may include change in size, increased setbacks, large trees or other landscape materials for screening and other changes in design to reduce impacts. The goal of mitigation is to soften the differences between the new construction and the existing homes.



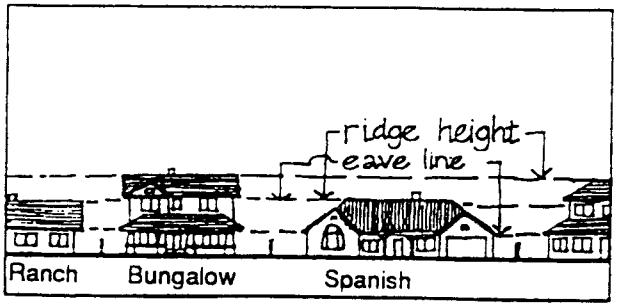
Consistent Character Neighborhood: Remodels & Additions

DIVERSE CHARACTER NEIGHBORHOODS:

In contrast, diverse character neighborhoods contain a variety of architectural styles and may have a varying streetscape as well. This can result from homes which were built in different eras or by individual homeowner/developers, or be a result of a neighborhood in transition.



Diverse House Types & Setbacks



Diverse Styles and/or Sizes

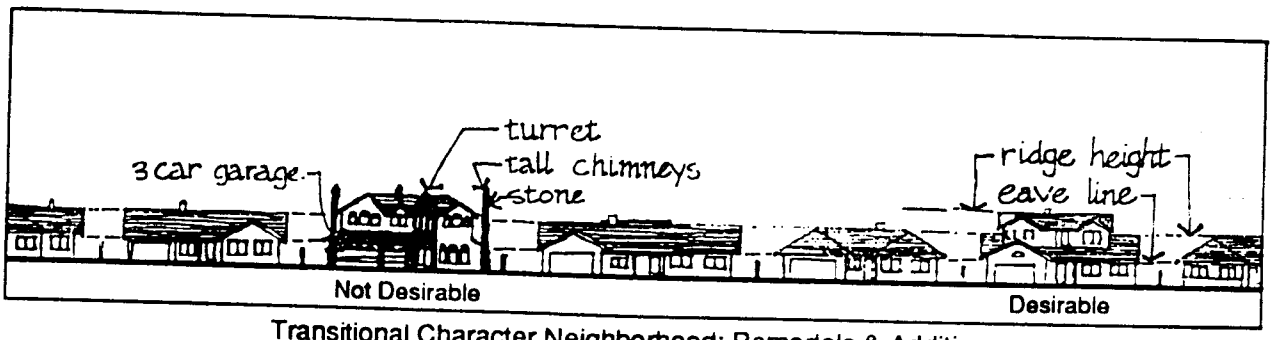
- **In a diverse character neighborhood, *good neighbor* design has its own design integrity while incorporating some design elements and materials found in the neighborhood.**

- **Mitigation for items such as size and bulk may be used for some designs depending on the relationship of a home to its neighbors.**

TRANSITIONAL CHARACTER NEIGHBORHOODS:

Transitional character neighborhoods are those that are in the process of changing their character and identity. Major changes include two-story additions in a one-story neighborhood, large homes in a neighborhood of small homes, and many upgraded homes in a neighborhood of older, smaller designs.

- **In a transitional character neighborhood, a *good neighbor* design reduces the abrupt changes that result from juxtaposing radically different designs or sizes of structures; proposed projects should not set the extreme and should be designed to soften the transition.** Significant deviations could be cause for mitigation.



Transitional Character Neighborhood: Remodels & Additions

4.2 SITE PLANNING

Integration of your home with the site is an important aspect to good design. How your home is sited on its lot in relation to your neighbors, the placement of the garage and

driveway, the amount of impervious pavement, landscaping, the relationship of outdoor activity areas to your neighbors, and setback patterns all contribute to the feeling of neighborliness of your home.

The following illustrates some areas that need to be considered when siting your home.

PRESERVE NATURAL FEATURES

The preservation of existing natural features, such as mature trees, shrubs and other landscape elements should be considered in your development. Particularly, when a house is torn down to allow new development, it is important to minimize the displacement of existing landscaping. A qualified arborist is suggested to review the health of existing mature landscaping and recommend care and treatment. These measures assist you in receiving design approval, particularly with a two-story project.

PLACEMENT OF STRUCTURES ON LOT - HOUSE, GARAGE, DRIVEWAY

The relative placement of the house, garage, and driveway play a major role in shaping the character of a house. When designing a home, it is important to be careful that the garage does not become the dominant feature. An example would be a three-car garage facing the street with a wide driveway. Too much hardscape in the front also dominates. Landscaping, on the other hand, softens the appearance. Consideration should also be given to the depth of setbacks, particularly the front yard setback, in relation to existing setbacks in the neighborhood.

RELATIONSHIP TO ADJACENT PROPERTIES

When designing your home, it is important to be conscious of your immediate neighbors, particularly their privacy. Consideration should also be given to the relative placement of your home to your neighbors' homes. Some areas to be considered include: second story windows and decks with direct views into neighbors' backyards and potential noise and privacy problems associated with the placement of pools, pool equipment, and other outdoor activity areas. When possible, place your outdoor activity areas adjacent to the neighbors' outdoor activity areas. Quite often, this takes special planning on corner lots.

5.0 ARCHITECTURAL GUIDELINES

This section delineates the specific areas in which your plans will be reviewed. It is not necessary to comply with each and every guideline listed - your project will be reviewed as to whether it complies with the overall spirit and intent of these guidelines.

5.1 NEW CONSTRUCTION

New homes can occur on newly created lots in large or small subdivisions or as a result of a tear down of an existing residence. The presence of a new home can create some anxiety in a neighborhood. Conversely, new homes present an opportunity to create a well-balanced, pleasing composition on raw land without existing constraints. The house should integrate site planning, neighborhood, and architectural issues.

Common areas of concern in new home construction include:

1. Fragmented plans resulting in building and roof forms that are more complex than adjacent homes.

2. Larger homes compared to adjacent homes. Designs may look more massive than those of their neighbors due to the size and design of the new home.

3. Lack of architectural compatibility with adjacent homes.

4. Use of oversimplified, incomplete traditional detailing (brackets, molding, window trim, columns) which can have a heavy, clumsy look.

The above are not all the issues related to new construction. A review of the following sections will likely reveal other areas that will apply to your project.

5.2 REMODELS AND ADDITIONS

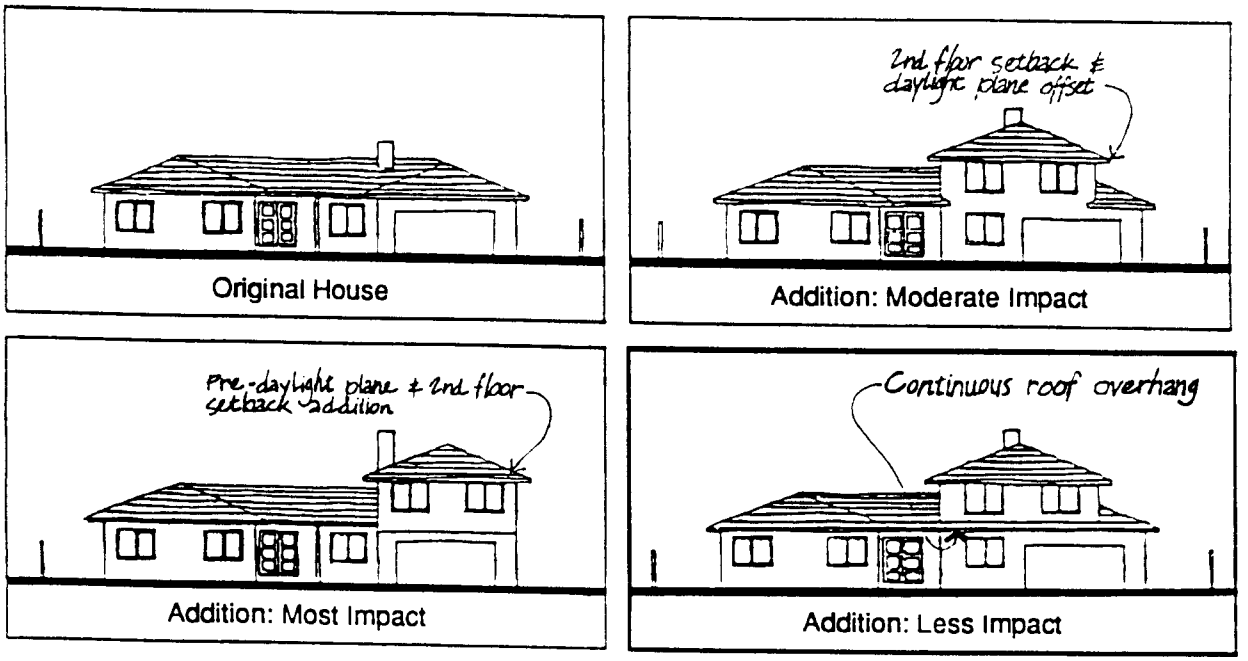
The goal in designing a house remodel or addition should be a home that looks as if the original house design included the addition. This means an integrated design, as opposed to one that looks as if an appendage had been grafted on the house. Some areas to consider:

1. One-story additions are usually easier to design with minimal impact on the neighborhood concerning privacy, bulk, and overall integration.

2. Two-story additions need care to integrate with the existing house. Give careful attention to issues of proportion, scale, composition and balance to avoid projects that look

poorly integrated. Small second-floor additions are especially difficult; without skillful design they can look as if a little box is stuck on top of the house.

3. Use the same type of materials and detailing found in the original house unless the entire facade is being changed. Usually, using different materials on an addition versus the original house makes the new work stand out, creating a visual patchwork look. (Refer to Section 5.8 for additional information on materials.)



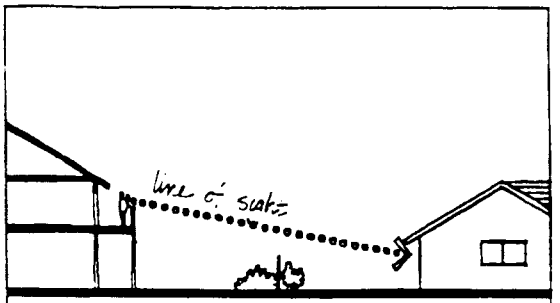
The above are not all the issues related to remodels. A review of the following sections will likely reveal other areas that will apply to your project.

5.3 PRIVACY

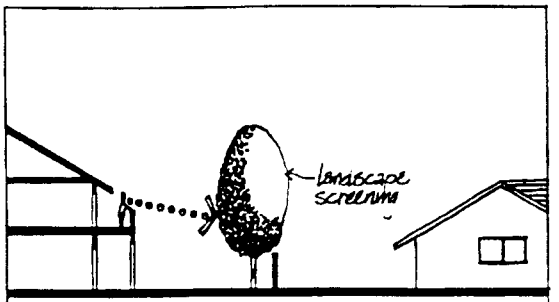
Carefully designing your house to prevent unreasonably invading your neighbors' privacy will lessen one of the greatest causes for their concerns about a project.

Sensitive areas include placement, location, and size of second floor decks, doors and windows. If properly designed, one can include these elements into the project while avoiding unreasonable privacy invasion. It may not be possible to insure complete privacy to all neighbors, but designs should lessen impacts as much as possible.

• **Study sight lines to locate windows and maintain privacy.** Carefully size and place windows and other forms of glazing so that sight lines into your neighbors' homes and yards is eliminated. Orient second story windows so that their egress (code required exit windows) is away from neighbors when privacy invasions may result.



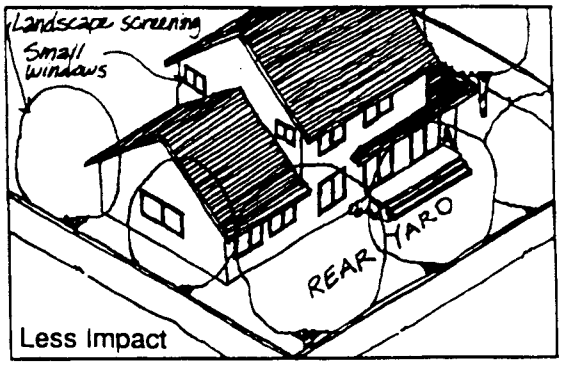
Most Impact



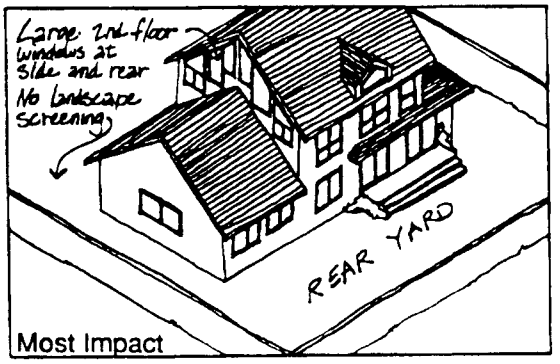
Less Impact

• **Second floor side yard windows should be no larger than UBC (Uniform Building Code) minimum sizes nor more than the number required for egress or light and ventilation requirements.** This mitigation may not be necessary when it can be determined that no privacy impacts will result.

• **Landscape screening will be required as mitigation when needed to protect a neighbor's privacy. (Refer to Section 5.5 for information regarding landscaping.)**



Less Impact

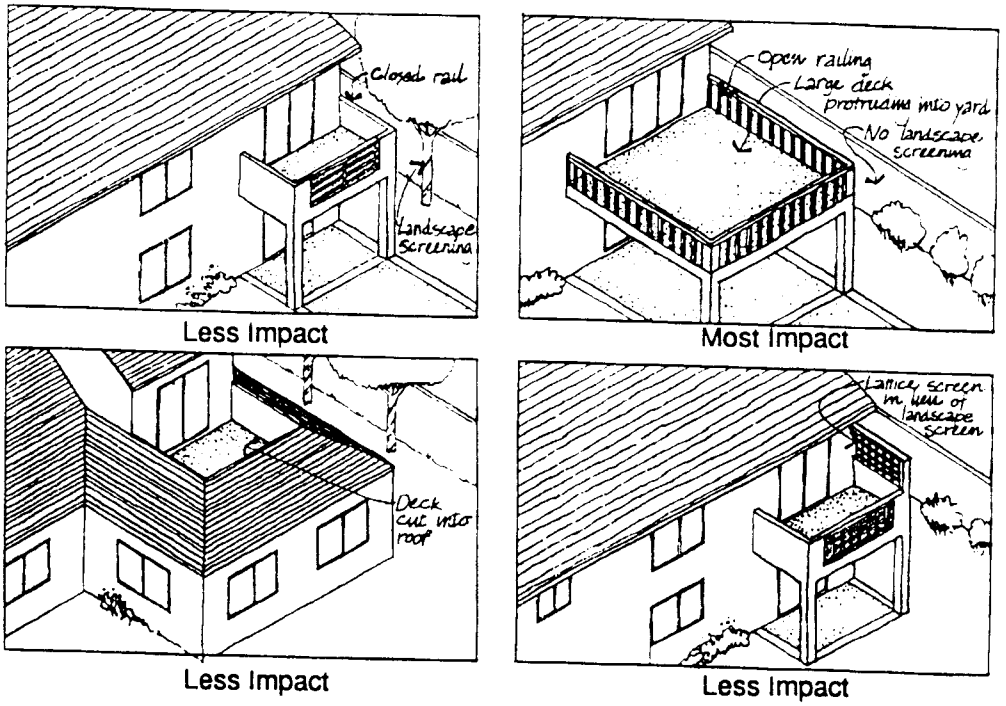


Most Impact

• **Consider the alternative of using skylights for light and air in order to reduce privacy invasion.**

• **Second floor decks oriented towards side or rear yards should use appropriate screening measures when privacy invasion would otherwise result.** They should be a size (generally four feet in depth) that limits the use of the deck to

passive uses unless no privacy invasion will result. Screening devices may include solid railing walls instead of open railings, latticework above the required railing height to obscure sight lines, and landscaping.



- **Locate first floor decks as close to grade as possible, to lessen privacy invasion to neighbors.**

- **Designing a one-story house addition on a lot that has a higher grade elevation than the neighbors requires the same design sensitivity as with a two-story house, since it can have the same privacy impact on the neighbors located at a lower elevation.**

- **Locate pools to allow for adequate in-ground landscape screening (generally five feet minimum width) at the edges of the property.**

- **Locate pool equipment as far away from your neighbors as possible.** See the Building Guide for noise mitigation requirements.

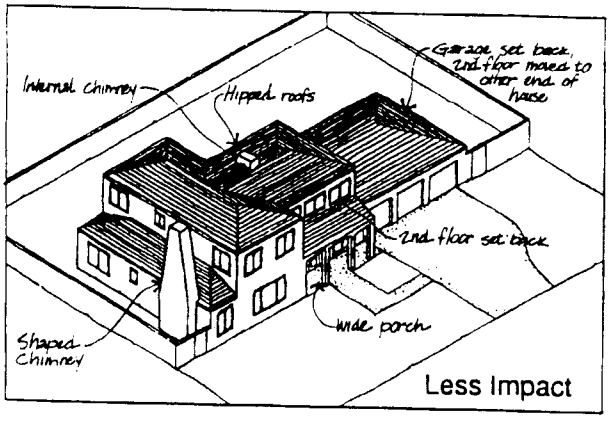
- **Attempt to locate your outdoor areas adjacent to neighbors' outdoor activity areas, rather than in close proximity to their quiet areas (bedrooms).**

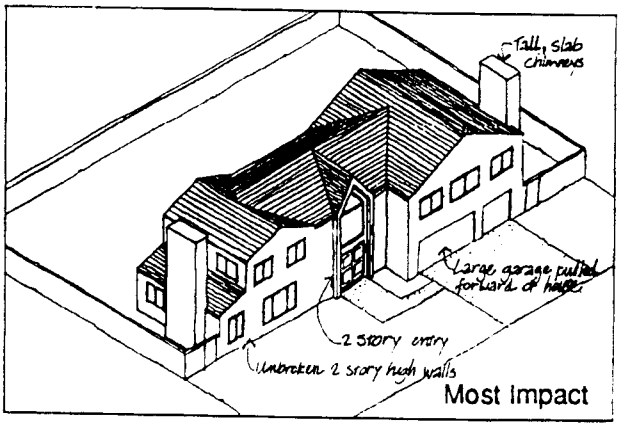
5.4 DESIGN TO MINIMIZE BULK

One of the biggest issues (other than privacy invasion) raised by residents concerning additions or new homes is that they are too massive or bulky, which may result in homes that stand out from the rest of the neighborhood.

Part of this perception is due to the size and mass of the house compared to the size of the property. Usually, the perception is that the home is too big for the lot.

A home should be designed to fit the lot and surroundings and with internal design integrity. Then, the elements you have chosen must lend themselves to reducing the perception of bulk.





There are many ways to reduce the perception of bulk. Some of these include:

- **Use of more than one material on an elevation is appropriate to break up the vertical mass of the house.** Sometimes an accent material such as a low horizontal band of brick or stone with stucco or wood siding above can be appropriate. However, too many elements can add to the appearance of bulk; good design must achieve balance.

- **Soften the elevation with the use of architectural elements** (porches, bays, overhangs, trellises) and detail (moldings, trim, brackets, etc.). Be careful not to overdo, though.

- **Use color changes to help visually break up the elevation.** For example, painting the triangle area in a gable end one color and using a shade (or color) lighter or darker below.

- **Provide some variation in large expanses of wall and roof planes.** For example, cantilever the second floor over the first floor.

• **Use horizontal elements to soften vertical ones in an elevation.** A change of direction in siding or adding moldings in stucco can achieve this.

• **In some cases, a simplification of shapes and materials will reduce bulk.** For example, too many different materials and changes in types of windows add to the complexity of the facade.

• **Minimize use of tall or two-story-high design elements.** This would include two-story entry ways, turrets, etc.

• **Use visually heavy materials sparingly, particularly on two-story designs.** Use stone or brick as an accent material or as a wainscot on an elevation.

• **Choose landscape materials to help soften the appearance of bulk.** This should not be a substitute for good design, however.

• **Keep second floor exterior wall heights as low as possible.**

• **Use roof forms that reduce bulk** (low to medium pitch, minimum number of hips and valleys).

• **Avoid massive, tall chimneys.** Locate them either on an internal wall or centered on a gable end when possible.

• **Design the house from the "outside-in".** Houses designed from the "inside-out" rather than the reverse tend to look lumpy and lack a clear overall design. This often adds to the perception of excessive bulk.

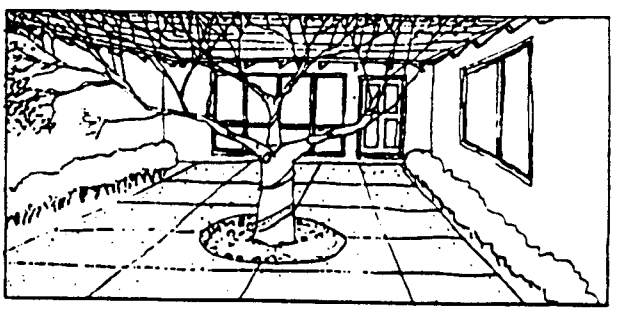
• **Lower the height of a two-story house below 27 feet maximum to mitigate other design issues.**

Keep in mind that overdoing anything can result in added bulk.

5.5 LANDSCAPING

Natural features, such as mature trees, rock outcroppings, and other landscape elements should be retained; quite often they can serve as design inspiration.

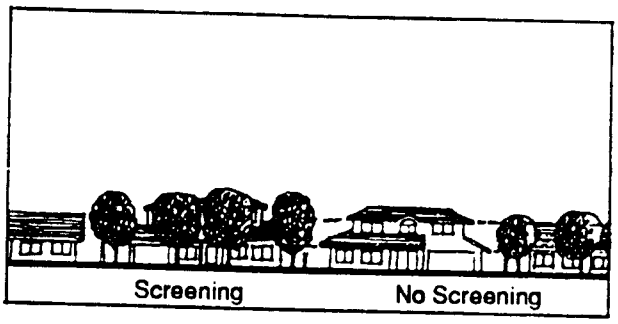
• **Designs should take advantage of natural features found on site.** Natural features include mature trees and other landscape materials (hedges, tall shrubs), rock outcroppings, and creeks.



Design around existing landscape features

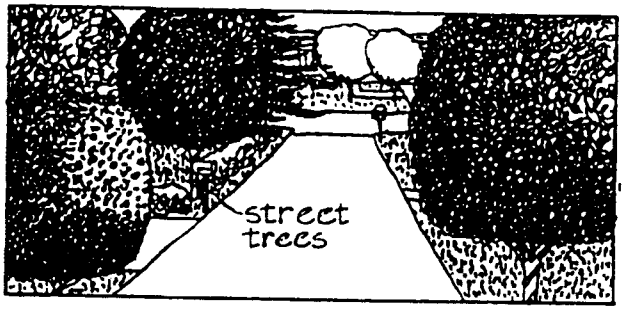
• **Mature landscape features should be preserved when possible, especially if they will screen your project from your neighbors.** This works to maintain privacy protection for two-story designs. The landscape will visually soften your house, and it will look as if it has been there for a long time. To reduce the potential loss of trees and other landscape materials, check with a certified arborist for the minimum distance needed from new construction.

• **Plant nondeciduous trees or shrubs for screening.** This lessens privacy invasion with two-story designs along side and rear property lines. The goal of mitigation is to have two-story high trees next to two-story houses. Trees planted for mitigation shall be 15 gallon size or larger.



• **Plant trees in the front yard to soften the impact and view of new construction.** This is especially important with two-story designs, in which case a minimum of one to two trees which will achieve sufficient height in five years to buffer the house shall be required.

• **Plant in the street right of way area in front of your property where possible.** Check with the City Engineering Department about underground utilities and on-street parking needs that would affect planting in this area. If planting can occur in this area, an encroachment permit must be obtained from the Engineering Department prior to installation.



• **Plant drought tolerant landscape materials where possible.**

• **Use a water-conserving irrigation system on your property.**

5.6 HOUSE, GARAGE, and DRIVEWAY PLACEMENT

The relative placement of the house, garage, and driveway plays a major role in shaping the character of a house. A streetscape dominated by garage doors at the setback line, with the house further back will have a very different character than the reverse. Three car or larger garages require a lot of design attention to avoid dominating the house design.

The shape, size, and material of a driveway will have a large impact on the property's character. As the area of pavement increases, there is a corresponding decrease in landscape area. This can have a very detrimental impact on the neighborhood character and is contrary to the desired semi-rural Los Altos streetscape image.

In order to present a well designed and friendly facade:

1. Orient the front of the house parallel with the street.
2. Avoid designs that make the garage the focal point of the house.
3. Reduce the amount of front yard setback area devoted to vehicular parking to allow for more landscaping.

DRIVEWAYS

With respect to driveways, the following *do's and don'ts* should be observed:

• **Avoid circular driveways as they increase the amount of paved area in the front yard.** However, they may be appropriate on properties entering onto busy streets (they allow cars to avoid backing into the street) or on streets with minimal on-street parking. Mitigate circular driveways by heavily planting the "inner circle" with shrubs and tall trees to screen and soften the view of vehicles in the driveway. Other options include using berms or fences, along with planting. Keep the driveway width to a minimum.

• **Consider using paving materials other than plain concrete or asphalt, as the driveway paving material has a big impact on the visual character of the property.** Many of these materials allow water to run down into the ground instead of running off into the street. Suggestions are as follows: brick pavers, stone, gravel, interlocking pavers, special concrete (exposed aggregate, colored concrete, salt textured, simulated brick, and cobblestone). One can combine these materials to provide visual interest and sometimes obtain lower construction costs.

GARAGE PLACEMENT

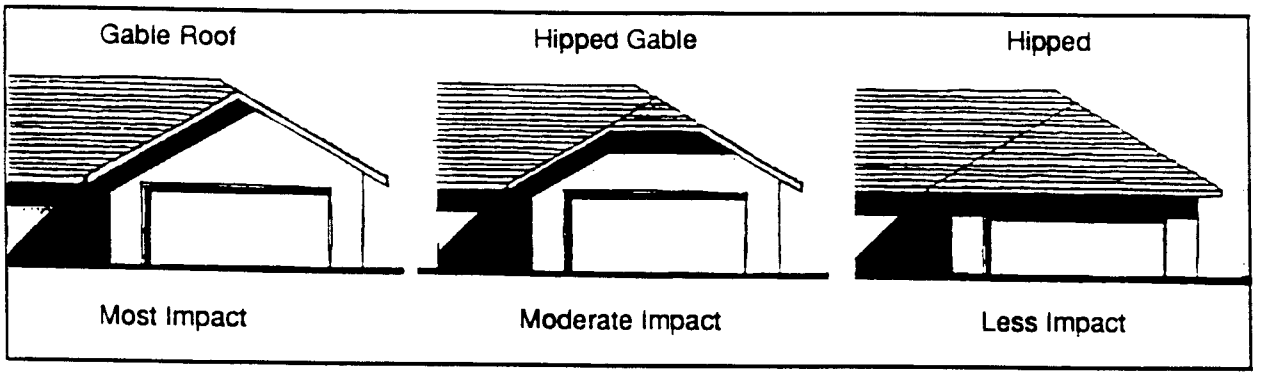
Desired approaches to making the garage less prominent include:

• **Set garages back from the front of the house.** A setback of three feet can make a difference.

• **Turn the entry to the garage away from the street.** This will allow for the facade to look more like a house and not a garage.

• **If neither of the above is possible, set the garage doors back from the face of the garage at least one foot.** Another option is to add a trellis or other architectural feature across the top of the garage doors. Check the Building Guide (Accessory structure section) for setback and other regulations for trellises.

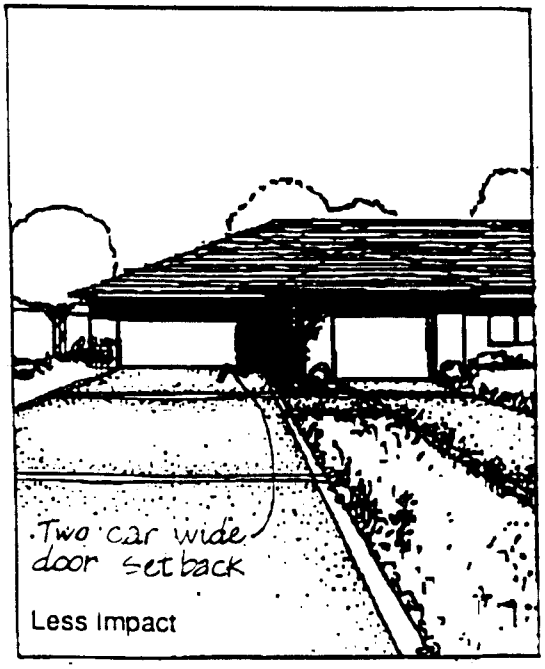
- **Another technique to make the garage less dominant visually is to use a hipped or hipped gable roof instead of a full gable roof.**

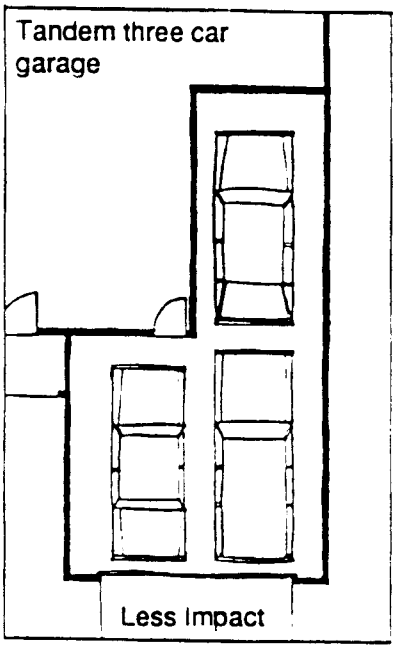


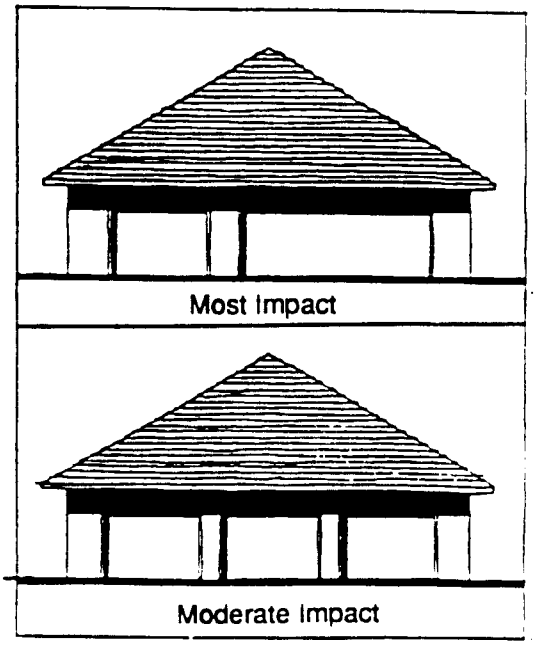
- **Reduce the visual impact of a three-car garage by the following:**

  1. Use a tandem parking layout inside a two-car-wide garage.
  2. Use three single-car-wide garage doors instead of a double and a single.
  3. Set back one of the doors from the others.

- **Design the garage with a well balanced facade.**







5.7 ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

The palette of design elements in architectural facade and building form compositions includes the following:

- Walls/corners
- Base: wainscots
- Roof: slopes, flat roofs, parapets, cupolas, dormers
- Projections: bays, overhangs, brackets, decks
- Appendages: columns, porches, trellises, decks, balconies
- Windows and doors
- Architectural detail and trim
- Materials
- Staircases

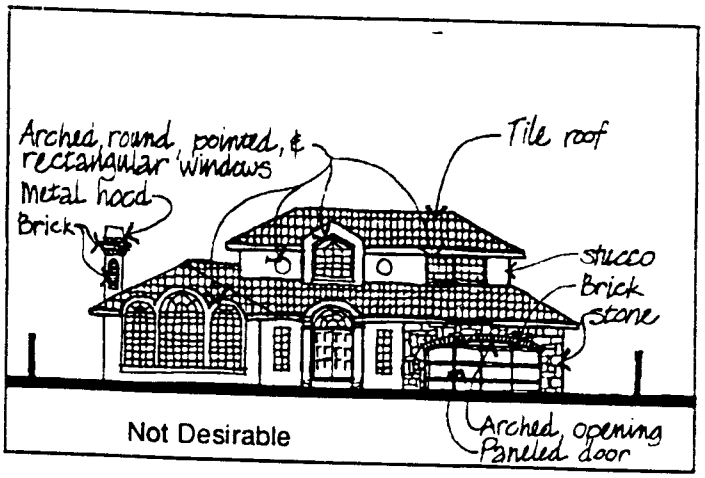
Each of the above elements, if properly used, can make a pleasing architectural composition. The skill of the designer is in knowing when to use particular elements and in what combinations. Also, the scale of elements and their proportions are critical to good design.

Some common mistakes are:

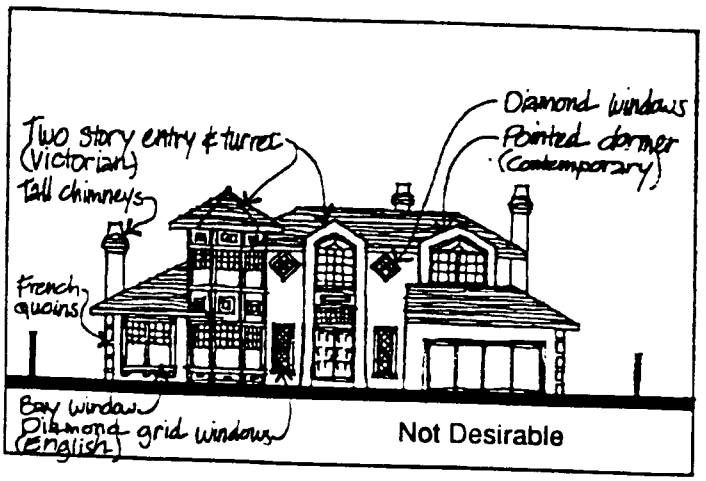
- Using too many different materials.
- Using too many different elements.
- Using too many different window types and shapes.
- Mixing elements from different styles.
- Using too many vertical elements.

(See next page for illustrations of common mistakes in the use of architectural design elements.)

The two pictures below represent all of these common mistakes:



- **Uses too many materials**
- **Uses too many elements**
- **Uses too many different window types and shapes**



- **Mixes elements from different architectural styles**
- **Uses too many vertical elements**

5.8 BUILDING MATERIALS

Each traditional architectural style has specific materials that belong to that style. The proper use of materials is very important to a successful design.

- **Use materials appropriate to your style of house and/or neighborhood.**

- **Avoid using too many types of materials on an elevation.** Usually, no more than two siding materials are recommended to add visual interest. Be careful in mixing stone and brick on an elevation, or mixing metal and wood windows.

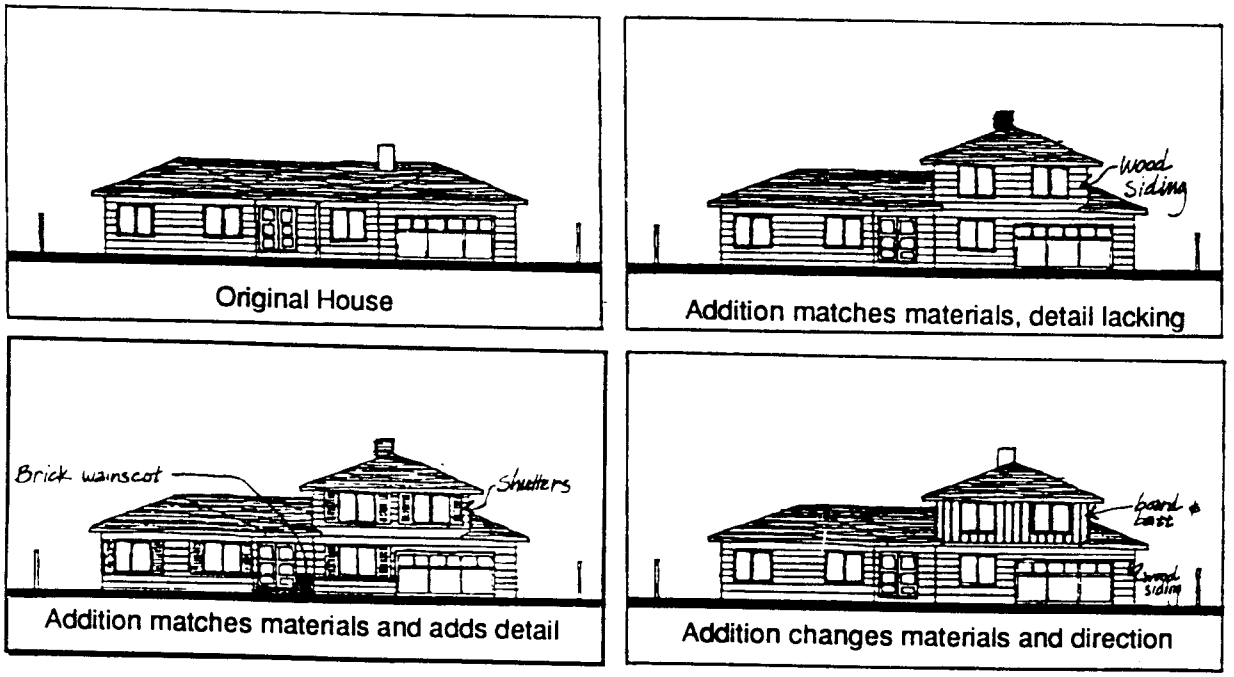
- **Mixing roof materials is not desirable except in limited situations.** For example, a curved top dormer may need a metal roof on a house with tile or shake roofing. A pitched roof may have an addition with a flat roof section.

- **Use nonreflective roof materials** (e.g., anodized bronze skylight frames and glazing, terra-cotta or painted metal chimney hoods, etc.).

- **Select skylight glazing material to avoid excessive glare at night.**

- **Avoid overusing visually heavy materials such as brick or stone on walls,** as they can make a house look very massive and bulky. Some traditional architectural styles may use a lot of heavy materials. These styles must carefully integrate the materials into the overall design through proper detailing and to avoid a heavy look.

Following are examples of how building materials can be used satisfactorily in a remodel and addition project.



5.9 FACADE AND PLAN COMPOSITION

The word facade derives from the Latin word *facies* which means face or appearance. Until the 1940's, making pleasing, beautiful facades was a very important aspect to architectural design. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in facades.

Intertwined with facades is the issue of the floor plan layout. A well-designed plan gives one a headstart in making a good facade. Historically, facade-making relied on the notion of subordinating the interior design to the look of the exterior. This meant aligning a window over a doorway or centering it within a gable roof even if it were off-center inside the room.

Newer homes have often reversed this idea and are often designed from the inside out. This results in elevations where windows and doors do not relate visually to one another, nor look as if they are part of a larger design composition. Other common problems are the use of too many varieties of window shapes or types, or the use of a complex roof line.

As the name suggests, a facade makes the house face to the street, and in turn sets the tone of the neighborhood. A house can either make a gesture of greeting or can turn its back on the street. The facade can present a friendly or unfriendly face, or a balanced or unbalanced look.

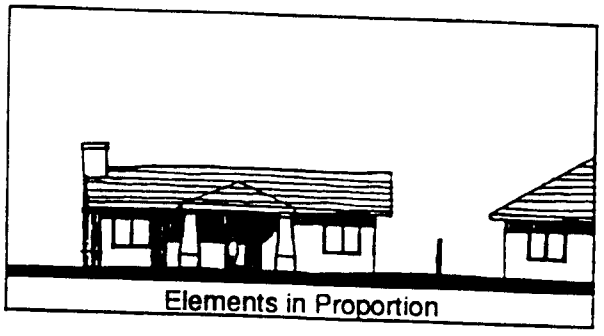
A friendly street has facades that relate directly to it. Even on busy streets where it is tempting to turn inward away from the street it is possible to design a face that addresses the public.

5.10 ARCHITECTURAL PROPORTION AND SCALE

The proper use of architectural proportion and scale has a major impact on the visual quality and perception of a home. The architectural term ***proportion*** refers to the relative size (or ratio) of one dimension to another, as in height to width. Lack of proportion can be seen in columns that are either too skinny or too fat or windows that look like slits.

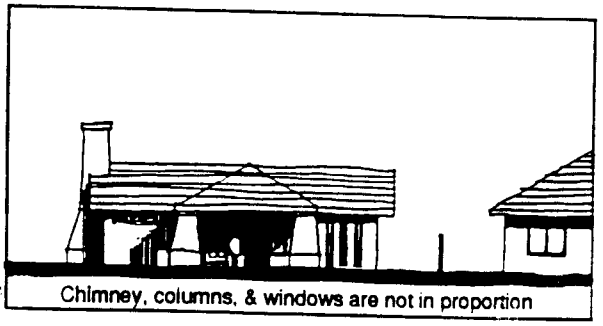
Scale in architectural terms refers to the size of the object itself compared to another object or person. When something is "out of scale", it means it is not in proper proportion with something else around it. Problems with scale can include entries that are too tall or too squat, roofs that are too large for the house, and chimneys that are too massive.

Desirable

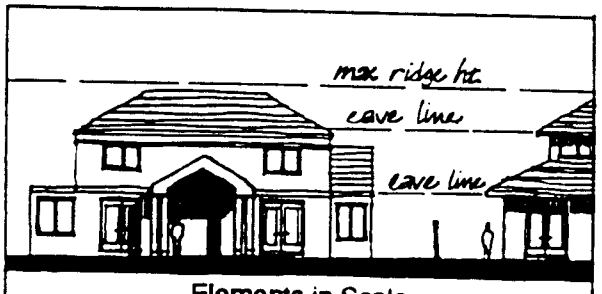


Elements in Proportion

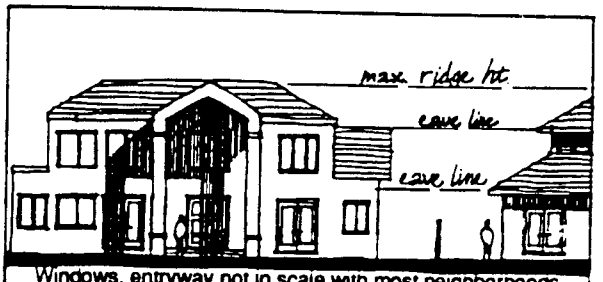
Not Desirable



Chimney, columns, & windows are not in proportion



Elements in Scale



Windows, entryway not in scale with most neighborhoods in Los Altos

5.11 HILLSIDE LOTS

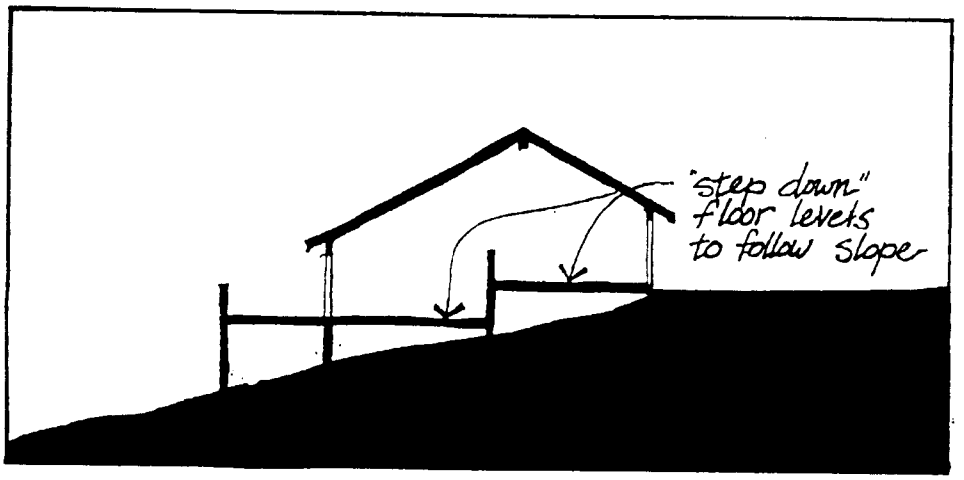
In order to preserve views on hillside lots, there is often a lack of mature, tall landscape materials to soften the visual impact of the houses. This makes the quality of the house design even more important. The lack of screening also creates a condition where one neighbor can look into another neighbor's yard more readily than in a flatland situation.

Some traditional architectural styles may not lend themselves to a hillside lot without adaptation.

- **Dwellings on hillside lots should reflect the topography in their designs by following the natural contours of the site, with minimal grading.** They should neither look like "flatland houses" put on stilts, nor three-story homes.

- **Use landscaping that softens the view of the house and reduces privacy invasion, while not cutting off views entirely.**

- **Use split-level and multi-level plans.**



Upslope Lots

Houses on upslope lots tend to look more massive due to the viewing angle. Therefore, attention should be given to reducing the perception of excessive bulk.

- **Avoid tall walls under the first floor by stepping the floor level with the grade.**

- **Screen any open space under the living space above with either lattice or solid wall infill.** To soften these areas, plant landscaping in front of them.

- **Avoid tall unbroken expanses of wall.**

Downslope Lots

Houses on downslope lots may look smaller from the street than they really are due to the viewing angle. Also, the roof is much more prominent visually than on other lots. The house may appear massive as viewed from lower neighboring properties to the rear and sides.

- **Avoid tall walls that support the first floor by stepping the floor level with the grade.**

- **Screen any open space under the living space above with either lattice or solid wall infill.**

- **Avoid tall unbroken expanses of wall.**

- **Study the design of the house with an emphasis on how the house will appear in perspective from the street.** Pay close attention to the roof shape, materials, and detailing since this will be a dominant architectural feature. Avoid looking down onto tar and gravel or membrane roofs.

- **For rear and side elevations that present an upslope appearance to lower, neighboring properties, use the guidelines for upslope lots.**

5.12 HISTORIC HOUSES

Adding to or remodeling a historic home presents a very special challenge to maintain the historic features. Consideration of the site as well as the house itself is very important in preserving the design integrity of the historic house.

A building project next to a historic home also presents a unique design condition. You need to be sensitive to the historic neighbor and not diminish its design integrity. Alterations to historic properties will involve review by the Historical Commission. Check with the Building Department to see if your property is on the list of historic properties.

5.13 BASEMENTS

Under some circumstances basements provide an opportunity to add more square footage than allowed by the FAR regulations. However, a basement can have the effect of adding abulky appearance to an elevation. For example, an underground garage with two floors of living space above could appear as a three-story house to the street.

- **First floor elevations should be no more than 16-22 inches above existing natural grade with a basement below.** This will prevent the perception of additional bulk and/or height as well as any associated privacy impacts.

- **Avoid designing a two-story home above a daylight basement (with an exposed wall) when the house would appear from the street to be three stories in height.**

- **Hillside homes with basements are a different situation than those described above.** The intent here is to avoid an unbroken three-story wall.