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IN THE EYE OF THE
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JEREMIAH ECK.
THERE ARE A FEW BASIC
DESIGN RULES TO FOLLOW.

a pretty face

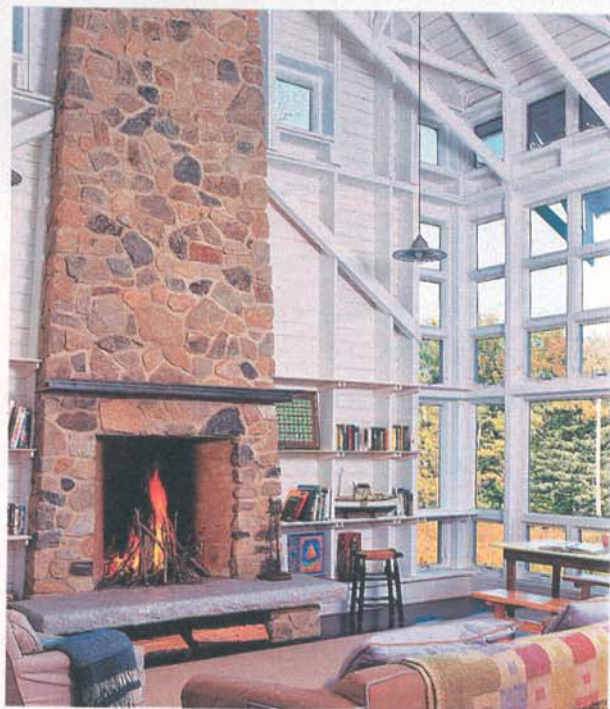
BY REGINA COLE

JEREMIAH ECK SEES A LOT OF BIG, ugly houses sprouting like malignant growths on America's suburban lots, and he's not afraid to tell you about it.

"These days, we like to talk about something called 'curb appeal,' but we don't really know what that means," says the Boston architect. "The exterior, in general, is the most abused aspect of a house. It's ironic. We're spending more money and building bigger houses than we ever have – half of all American single-family houses now standing have been built since the 1970s. Last year, 1.8 million single-family houses were built, and very few of them were designed in any way. So many of them are so ugly!"

These new houses, often labeled with misguided terms like "French modern chateau," says Eck, are overscaled, schizophrenic assemblages awkwardly plunked onto the site. Roof lines fight with one another. Gigantic entries offer no welcome. Siding materials are applied without rhyme or reason. Windows bear no relation to interior design. Yawning garage doors become focal points on the front facade.

"Beauty is not something that's solely in the eye of the beholder," he says. "There really are a few basic rules. The last time I checked, colors were still complementary. Rhythm and



GOOD DESIGN, says Jeremiah Eck, means a house suits its occupants and its site. This house, which he designed for clients in Maine, does both by creating a unified decorative language that starts with simple 2-foot-square windows. The home's facade harmonizes with the interior.

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THE ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE of Block Island is reflected in this house designed by Jim Estes. From the outside (top), a shed-roof connector casually ties the wings together. But inside the structure (bottom, left and right), the connector proves to be the heart of the house. Facing page: The home's porch offers refuge and a view.



proportion are real concepts. We know beauty when we see it. When we walk in Marblehead Old Town or on Beacon Hill, we know that what we see is beautiful." The problem, he says, is that we don't ask ourselves why we can't have that kind of beauty for our own homes. "We've lost our way."

Eck believes that he can help Americans find their way back. A well-designed house reveals itself as you approach it, he says. "A face is a good metaphor for a facade. When we look at a house, it's like looking at a person. First we get an overall impression of shape, and, as we get closer, we notice the details. Most of all, we see the face. It tells us a lot about what's going on within."

Eck expands on the concept his new book, *The Face of Home* (The Taunton Press, 2006). The rules for beauty are not complicated or arcane, he says, but follow simple precepts of scale and proportion. They treat the house as an organic whole that takes its shape from its rooms and their uses. Adherence to – or reactions against – historicism are not shortcuts to good design; a good house does not start as an attempt at a certain style.

"Labels like 'Georgian' or 'Dutch Colonial' help us to identify and understand historic house styles," he says, "but the best way to look at a house is not to label it. I have no prejudice against or preference for modernism. I'm an agnostic when it comes to style. When you design your own house, the style should come out of the design."

Good design, he says, is an outcome when a house suits its occupants and its site. It speaks a unified decorative language of its own, making stylistic labels beside the point.

He uses as examples several homes, mostly single-family houses, designed by his firm, Jeremiah Eck Architects Inc., or by colleagues he invited to the summer course he teaches at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Photographs show an appealing collection of buildings that range from a diminutive Maine cottage to a grandly formal Connecticut villa to an apartment complex hard by a San Diego freeway. Many nod to

BEAUTY MARKS

Checklist for a well-designed house.

The site and the house are one.

Whether near the ocean, on a suburban lot, or in a dense urban neighborhood, a house should appear to belong to the landscape. It should not seem to be perched like an uncomfortable guest. "You can't look at the face in isolation," says architect Jeremiah Eck. "It has to be considered in the context of its location."

Mass and scale are balanced.

"When I look at a house close up for the first time," says Eck, "I ask whether it feels right in the third dimension." A pleasing mass is not too big, too heavy, or too clunky; large houses can be made up of several smaller masses, like wings. Proper scale means that one feels comfortable standing next to it. "There is no ironclad rule or simple formula for this. For the most part, a house with good scale – the right size for its surroundings and occupants – will also have good massing."

The facade is a guide to the plan.

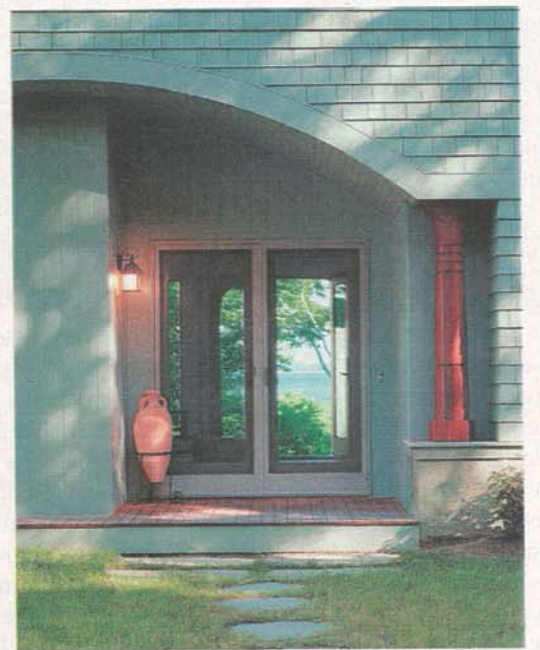
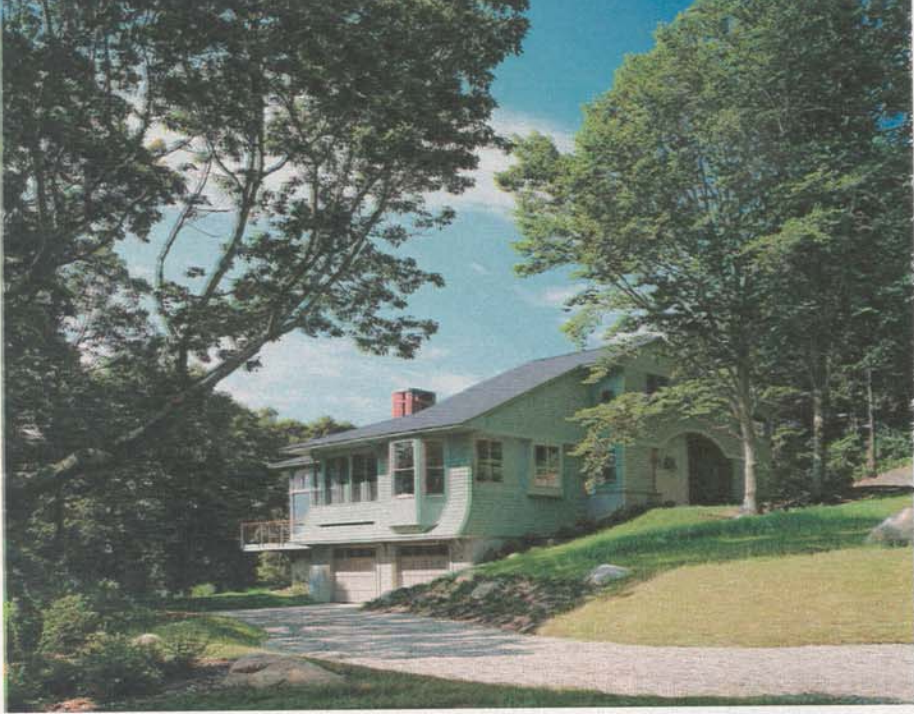
The exterior should reflect what's going on inside the house; a large window dominating one end of a small Maine cottage tells you that there's an important room inside. To treat exteriors and interiors as separate and in different realms, Eck says, makes for haphazard and arbitrary exteriors.

Parts are in harmony with one another.

Windows, doors, walls, colors – all elements must harmonize with one another. "One clue that the house parts are not working with each other is when you begin making mental alterations to the exterior," Eck says. "The house might seem to be missing a porch roof over the front door, a bay at the kitchen window, or a larger roof overhang. If these kinds of questions begin to nag at us, it suggests the house needs some adjustments."

Details spring from the whole.

Sharply focused details are the fine points of any house, the elements that give it character. "For instance, if a porch is an important feature of the exterior, then it should have distinctive details – such as delicate roof edges or an interesting siding material – that help it stand out from the rest of the house," Eck says. "I think of features like chimneys, brackets, columns, rails, and trellises as exclamation points on a house, almost like accessories you might wear." Eck cautions against applying trim randomly. "Exterior details should flow naturally from the other choices that have already been made. It's not an opportunity to try something completely new that doesn't relate to the larger house components."





historic design or to area building traditions, but none of these new houses is a period re-creation. They do, however, illustrate Eck's hallmarks of a well-designed and therefore beautiful house.

Eck points out a 2,000-plus-square-foot Block Island vacation home designed by Jim Estes of Estes/Twoimby of Newport, Rhode Island. The gray house faces distant water views from a slight rise in the scrubby landscape. It has the narrow, vertical massing of a humble 19th-century farmhouse, but with a twist.

"We paid homage to two local building traditions with this design, the plain farmhouse and the Victorian cottage," Estes says. "The house, from a distance, looks very much like the old houses you find in the area, with steeply pitched roofs, gray shingles, and white trim. But when you get close, you can see that we played with the forms and created two, two-story sections intersected by a shed-roofed connector that includes the entry, porches, and the living room. As you get close, you see that the house is not traditional at all."

Eck praises the "well-composed whole" of Estes's design, pointing out that its spare detailing "holds together well and contributes to the overall visual effect." Says Eck: "My goal is to try to help us have more beautiful houses. The ones I used in the book helped me to describe the issue. I wanted all of the pictures to be of houses that people will relate to. I wrote this book for a wide audience: for people trying to come to grips with design issues while building their own house, and for the professionals who need language to explain why things look the way they do."

Eck believes that a culture whose public education system neglects the arts has resulted in lowered standards and decreased aesthetic sensitivity. "That's the only way to bring back beauty on a large scale – it starts with art and art education," he says.

What if, heaven forbid, you find yourself living in an ugly house? Are you doomed? Not at all, says Eck. "Exterior changes are much easier to make than most interior ones." **BG**

A HILLTOP SETTING influenced Eck's design of this Woods Hole house. Above: The growlike living room and deck jut out over the hill. Facing page, clockwise from top left: The home's soft-green exterior helps preserve the site's woodsy appeal; a deck offers private outdoor space off a bedroom; the arched main entry frames a water view; a fireplace open to the living and dining areas reinforces the see-through quality of the house.