ADVICE TO THE APPRAISER

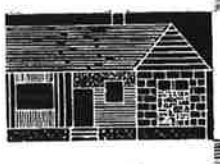
In April we reminded appraisers that FHA's rule book suggests a low rating for houses that suffer from the "banana split"—which it defines as "the so-called shirt front or one sided treatment . . . use of false effects, or the unusual combination of materials."

But that is no reason why builders and their architects should feel some compulsion to use only one facade material. Every builder knows that a little variety helps make sales. And the right use of different materials can actually improve the design instead of cheapening it.

To state it rather simply: If a facade is sliced *vertically* (or, worse than that, quartered or broken up like a sampler), the house will look short and squat; it will also look as if it had been designed by half a dozen different people who were not on speaking terms with one another.

Barrios

Blessed with a dozen different materials, window and door openings, this suburban idyll is floodlit by night



But if a facade is sliced *horizontally* (and if this is done well) it should look long, low-slung and sleek. It should also look expensive and big. And, finally, it might also fit better into the streetscape, especially if its neighbors have that horizontal look also. An appraiser, of course, should be concerned with such matters as the neighborliness of a house since this affects its value. This message to the FHA appraiser, then, deals with

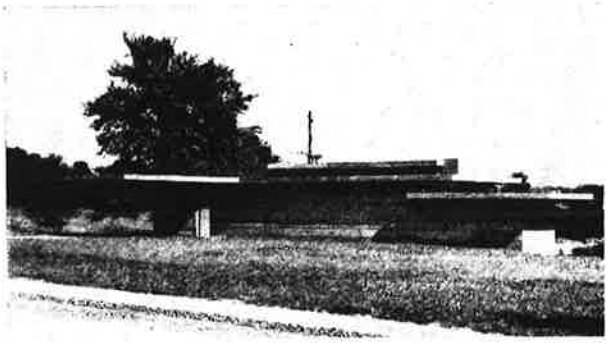
the horizontal look

or another way of slicing the banana

When you look at a house facade you should be able to answer several questions without trouble. They are:
—Where is the floor line?
—Where is the sill line—and is there one dominant sill line?
—Where are the window and door heads—and do they line up?
—And where is the roof line?
You would expect the answers to be fairly simple. Yet a glance at almost any development will indicate that it is anything but that: many facades look as if they were fronting for the most intricate, split-level maze ever conceived by the human mind. Appraisers can be pretty sure that a *simple-looking* facade indicates that a lot of designwork has gone into it—that a *complicated* facade has had practically no benefit of designer.

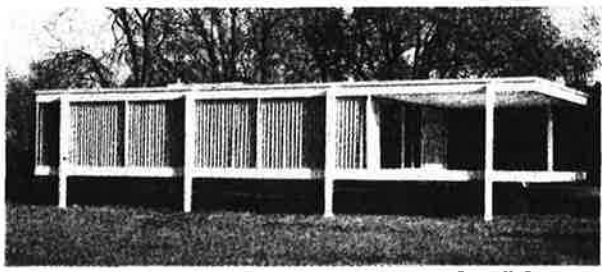
There is, for example, the apparently effortless house (right) of master architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the deceptively simple-looking glass and steel house of Mies van der Rohe (Oct. '51 issue). It is not suggested that builders ought to copy this house; neither should they spend five years on every design. But on the next few pages H&H hopes to show that competent architect-design pays off in terms of cleaner facades and more coherent streets—which means, of course, that it should also pay off in terms of higher FHA evaluation.

G. E.Kidder Smith



Rosenbaum House in Alabama, Frank Lloyd Wright, architect

Farnsworth House, Fox River, Ill. Mies van der Rohe, architect



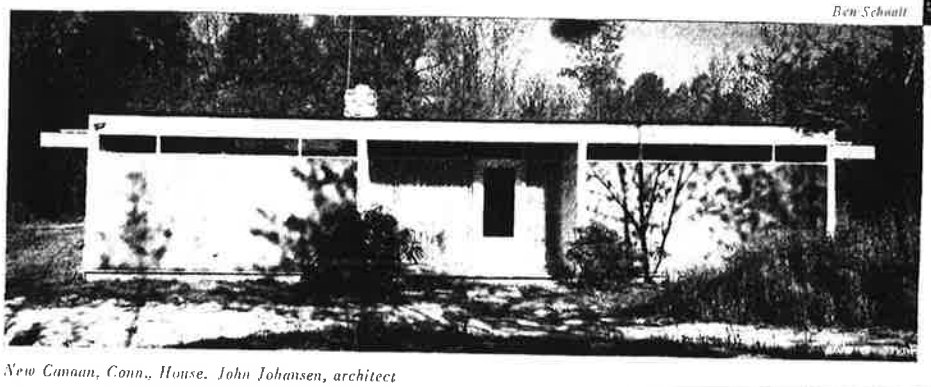
George H. Steuer

First, take a look at the floor line

Every sculptor knows that he has to put a figure on some kind of pedestal to make it count. The platform on which most builder houses are constructed is so clearly defined that it is actually a lot of trouble to conceal it: after all, most builder houses have a continuous footing all the way around, beneath the exterior wall. The footing may be of block or concrete; in any event, it has a sharp and clean sill line on top. Below that line is wet construction (including a slab, in most cases); above it is a wood-framed house.

Supposing the continuous footing were allowed to show on the exterior, with the frame wall projecting beyond it by a minimum of about 1½" (thickness of sheathing plus siding); there would then be a neat and crisp shadow line all the way around the base of the house—instead of the kind of ragged edge that is likely to result from having the exterior finishes come down to the grade. Architect Johansen's small house shows how effective a shadow line can be.

Ben Schnall



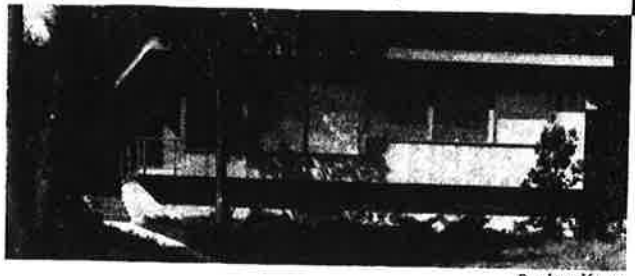
New Canaan, Conn., House. John Johansen, architect

Imandt

Dick House, Geyserville, Calif. Gardner Dailey, architect

Some other architects (such as Gardner Dailey and Chiarelli & Kirk) have demonstrated how a builder could make a very strong feature of that shadow line, at least on the two long sides of his house. The way he could do this is to recess his footings and cantilever his floor joists (if he is using floor joists) a foot or so outward. That kind of feature is especially helpful in a flat-top, where *parallel* base and fascia lines on all facades are a must to keep the house from looking lopsided.

Seattle, Wash., House. Chiarelli & Kirk, architects



Dearborn-Maxar

Second, check whether his sills line up

Most builders are faced with the problem of putting at least four very different types of openings into one facade:

—a high-sill bedroom window (bedrooms being so small that wall space under the windows is needed for furniture);

—a medium-sill bathroom and kitchen window (these two sill heights generally can be lined up without trouble);

—a low-sill living-room window (or glass wall); and

—a door (or a series of doors, including one for the garage).

There are at least two ways of bringing some order into this chaos. The first way is to slice your facade into three horizontal bands; the second is to divide it into two such bands.

1. A facade divided into three bands would give

a. a low sill line along the floor for the living-room window wall;

b. a 32″ high, medium sill line for kitchen windows (as well as *some* bedroom, bathroom and dining-room windows);

c. an 80″ high, high sill line for strip windows in the bathroom and in some bedroom areas. And

d. a head just under the lintels, which would produce a continuous transom above all windows and doors.

Assuming the ceiling height is what it ought to be—8′03⅜″, as urged by both the AIA and the NAHB—the transom height would come out to something around 12″. Architects Ain and Johansen (*see cuts*) have tried this with great success.

2. A facade divided into two bands would give

a. a low sill line along the floor of the living-room window wall;

b. a 42″ high, medium sill line for kitchen, bathroom and bedroom windows. This would conceal bathroom and kitchen equipment (including backsplash for sinks); would be fine for bathroom windows above the tub, if the glass were obscure; and work equally well in a bedroom, where it would conceal almost any furniture produced today. And you will also get

c. a head line that could be determined either by the door height (80″), or else by the AIA-NAHB ceiling height (8′03⅜″). If you take the head up to the ceiling plate, you might use extra-high exterior doors.

Ben Schnall

Sills and heads that don't line up make for incoherent facades

Julius Shulman

Mar Vista, Calif., Houses, Gregory Ain architect

If a builder accepts one of these methods of slicing his facade, the 32″ or the 12″ high sill line can become a kind of waistline for the house. An appraiser looking for coherent facade design should check how well the builder has watched this line. . . .

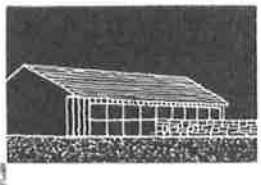
Check his waistline

Here are some ways used by architects and builders to accent the all-important waist of their houses:

Richards

Seattle, Wash., Houses by builder Albert La Pierre were designed by W. A. Wallander

1. Some have built a kind of "skirt" to reach from grade level up to the waistline (and have forgotten about the floor line altogether). To give the house a sense of being anchored to the ground this skirt is often made out of brick or stone. To give the house more horizontality—greater apparent length, in other words—the skirt can be extended beyond the end of one facade and turned into a low screening-retaining wall; and



Freeport, L. I., Houses. Huson Jackson, architect

Ben Schnall

Night view of the La Pierre House

2. The waistline can be continued in a horizontal muntin bar (or rail) in any floor-to-ceiling glass walls used in the living area. Some designers have even repeated this horizontal stripe on the doors—although this is very hard to achieve successfully.

Victor Meisel

Dallas, Texas, Houses by builders Lewis & Lambeith and Laughlin & Silver were designed by architects Marble & Barnum

Builder La Pierre's house shown on the previous page is a fine example of this approach. Architect Huson Jackson's very different facade shows the use of a strong horizontal—the brick screen wall—to make his house seem larger. The line of that wall is repeated in the muntin bar of an adjoining glass wall.

Target Photos

This New Jersey house shows an attempt in the right direction: a strong waistline, muntin rails and heads that line up

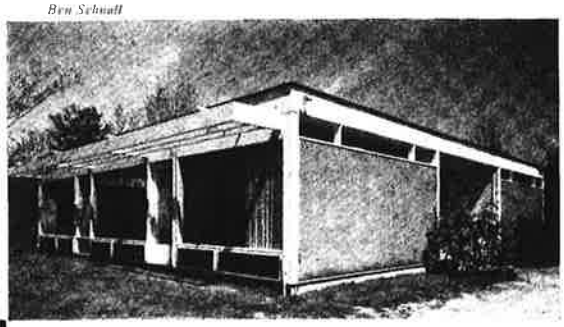
Rondal Partridge

San Francisco Houses by Builder Eichler were designed by architects Anshen & Allen. An excellent example of a strong waistline, uniform sills and heads

And check his head

Most builders understand the structural advantages of having all window and door heads (and thus all lintels) continuous and on the same level. The illustrations used here indicate that the advantage to the facade in terms of looks is at least as great. There is no real excuse to have a door that is shorter by a mere 6″ next to a floor-to-ceiling glass panel. Architect Landis Gores (Jan. issue, '52) used 8′ high doors throughout his house, found that, even with luxurious detailing and finishes, they cost only $22 apiece in the small quantities he required. On the other hand, his savings from avoiding the complicated framing and plastering needed around a 6′8″ door in an 8′ wall were hard to calculate, but probably made up more than the difference in cost of doors. As for looks, the pictures tell their own story.

Ben Schnall



Uniform lintels give Johansen's house an orderly look

Finally, check his roof line

In a future article we plan to discuss in some detail the importance of the roof line as a stabilizing element in any house or street facade. For the moment we will simply mention half a dozen points to watch in evaluating the design of a roof, for the way the roof looks has a lot to do with the apparent length of any house facade.

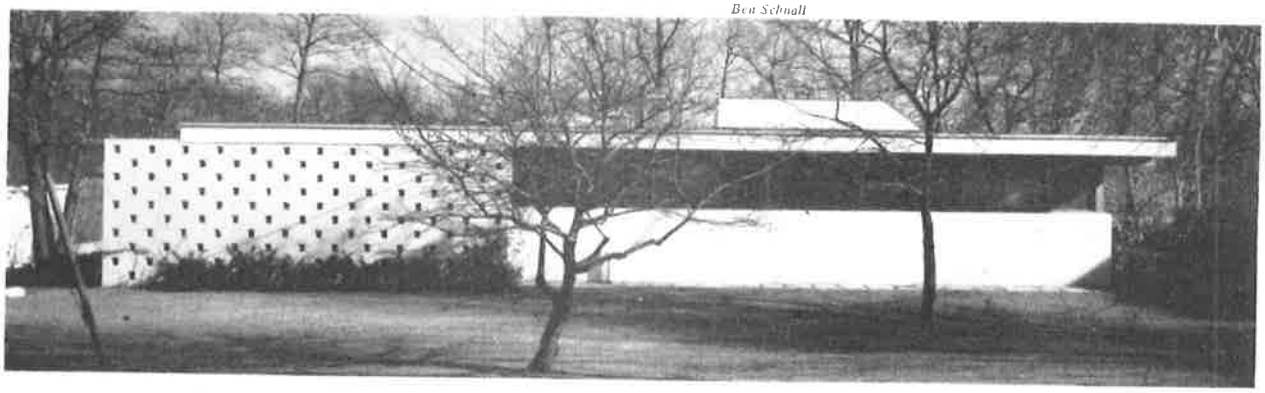
By its very nature, the roof is a horizontal element. To exploit that horizontality to the fullest should be the aim of any designer of builder houses. Here are various ways the designers have tried:

Ben Schnall

Broad fascias of architect Jackson's houses create street continuity

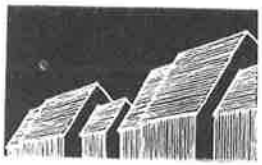
▶ In a flat roof, they will sometimes make the fascia as broad as possible, paint it a distinctive color (generally white) to contrast with the blue or gray of the sky (against which it will be seen) and with the wall materials below. Good designers also make the gravel stop and flashing as sharp and crisp as possible—a ragged silhouette seen against the sky can make the whole house look shoddy.

Ben Schnall



Pack House, Scarsdale, N. Y. Marcel Breuer, architect. Horizontality achieved with strong fascia, even sill line

▶ In flat or pitched roofs a deep overhang is often used to create a strong horizontal shadow line, helping further to accentuate the length of the facade. In a pitched roof, such overhangs may be stopped by broad fascias, but quite frequently razor-edge roof will be more effective, especially when seen from the side. (Note: Appraisers should look twice at overhangs of different depths along one facade; unless designed by a master, they are likely to chop up the facade as badly as any combination of different veneers.)



Even small jogs in a roof will decimate a facade

Barrios

▶ In pitched roofs over small houses, most good designers will keep the ridge even. If they don't, the silhouette of the street is likely to look like a rollercoaster, and each individual house will have as many humps as a camel.

▶ Finally, in a pitched roof a dark color may help to "hold down" the house and tie it to the ground, which is another way of making it look more horizontal. The pictures on these pages illustrate the effectiveness of broad fascias and simple roof lines.

Naturally, all these devices alone will not produce a better-looking facade or a better-looking street. But the devices listed here are sufficiently flexible (and suggest enough variations on the same basic house) that they can be used, incidentally, to overcome the monotony of identical houses set in rows, and without producing the kind of hodgepodge we were talking about in our April issue.

But, while the appraiser needs to know about these devices in order to understand and evaluate a facade, few nonarchitects are likely to be equipped to make use of these devices in *designing* a facade. These are not esthetic cure-alls; they are merely some of the tools an architect may (or may not) use to produce a good facade. It will also help if the architect happens to be a good designer.