

Creating a House with Built-In

Discover the details that bring a home to life

A house isn't really a home unless it is filled with the personality of its inhabitants. Most homeowners assume this means filling the space you have with things that have meaning to you, and certainly this is an important step in the right direction. But a house that really sings has character that's built in, so that even if the house were completely emptied of furniture and objects collected over a lifetime, the house would still feel warm and inviting. It would still have a character all its own.

Sadly, too many of the new houses and remodels built today would fail this test. To keep construction costs down, all the money available goes into square footage, leaving little or no money for the special details that can really make a house a beautiful place. The key to creating a home with intrinsic character is to keep the overall size down so that you can reapportion some dollars out of square footage and into the details that make the house a delight to live in. While such details do not have to break the bank, they still add to the cost of a home. A handy rule of thumb is that if you strive to reduce the square footage you were originally planning by about one third and make these savings available for personalizing your home, you'll have enough money to do the kind of detailing that will make a difference.

Most people assume it's a building's age that gives it its charm, when in fact it's the attention to details that makes it feel so good. Although these small touches often go unnoticed, they have a huge effect on our experience of a place.

God is in the details

We've all heard architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's assertion that "God is in the details," but what are details anyway? Details are the special features of house design that are permanently attached to the interior and will remain there as the house passes to future owners. If you were able to turn your house upside down and shake it, these inside details are the ones that wouldn't come off. They're designed in from the beginning, to help personalize the house and make it function more efficiently.

To architects, the word "detail" implies the marriage of materials to create design elements or combinations that are built in during the construction or remodeling process. The connection of one part to another is, strictly speaking, a detail, and



THE SMALLEST DETAILS, like the way the flutes on the vertical window trim echo the horizontal lines of the top molding, reverberate throughout the room.

BY SARAH SUSANKA AND MARC VASSALLO

Character



MULTIPLE LEVELS OF DETAIL combine to make a home with intrinsic character. In this house, wide curved openings allow adjacent rooms to appear larger because they visually borrow space from one another. The sage green color used for all painted wood trim and surfaces throughout the house helps tie together otherwise disparate elements. Thin lines are also used as a unifying motif, repeated in window trim, table legs, slatted chair backs, and picture frames.

when all these interconnections are considered together they become one larger detail. So the word itself implies multiple levels of design.

Details in context Most people think of a detail as a relatively small thing—a doorknob, a newel post, a shelf bracket—but the word detail can also refer to larger elements such as window seats, breakfast nooks, hearths, accent walls, built-in cabinets, and kitchen islands.

Details in combination The word detail can also be used to describe **materials** and how they are used—concrete for countertops, hand-rubbed fir for ceiling beams, stainless steel for the stair rails—as well as how they come together, such as the marriage of wood and slate on a floor.

Details can also refer to design elements that are not objects at all but rather **qualities** that carry throughout the house, such as a palette of colors, a surface texture, or a type of glass that creates a particular quality of light.

And details can also refer to design elements that perform a certain **function**, such as defining the shape of something—for example, the casing or trim that runs around all the doors and windows in a house.

Details in focus Sometimes, the details that can have the biggest impact are very small things indeed. For example, using glass to reinterpret a traditional wood newel post or wrapping round trim around the outside corners of wainscoting to soften the edges.

What it all adds up to

Appreciating details is really just a process of learning to zoom in and focus on what's important at this smaller scale of consideration. Some details are so simple they're hardly noticeable, and they blend in perfectly. Other details intentionally draw attention to themselves as they perform their tasks.

As reflected in William Blake's words "To see a world in a grain of sand," a home that's designed well at every scale truly reflects its owners, whether you look at it from a distance or observe its smallest detail. The following examples incorporate multiple levels of details. Use these ideas for inspiration. Then build into your home some personal details that will delight you daily and allow even the smallest elements to embody the character of your house as a whole.

Details make the difference

What makes this modest 1920s-era house so special is the way the homeowners, David and Sukie Amory, handled color, light, and scale to unify the spaces; used curves and small details to add interest; and framed interior views to create a sense of spaciousness. Multiple levels of detail embody the character of the house as a whole.

Large elements in a room can be considered details





Attention to the small
gives character
to the whole.

Reading nook

The alcove in the reading nook was created by adding bookshelves within a room just big enough for an overstuffed chair and ottoman. The desk appears to be set into the extra space within a thick wall, giving the illusion of more space even though there is less floor area than before.

Entry

Even a small room like this entry is an opportunity to work with the colors, materials, and details established in the main spaces. The painted floor and ceiling mark this as a less formal outdoor-to-indoor space. The wainscoting is higher than elsewhere in the house, allowing the top trim band to function as a coat rail.

Kitchen island

The cooking peninsula is one of the most attention-getting elements in the house, and yet it's a surprisingly simple construction. The real impact comes from the brackets holding up the counter and forming sides for a display shelf. Each bracket is simply a 1-inch-thick piece of plywood, but the power is in how thoughtfully the plywood has been shaped and in the concentrated repetition of the curves.



Combined details give a cohesive look

Repeating elements

By repeating certain qualities and design elements throughout, the whole house gains a heightened sense of cohesiveness. For example, the homeowners introduced graceful curves throughout the house to break up the somewhat boxy lines of the little rooms. The curves occur at many levels of scale. They are generous, like the double arches between the kitchen and dining room; whimsical, like the squiggled brackets supporting the kitchen island counter (below left) and garden-room desk (below center); or subtle, like the slight sweep of the window seat in the dining room (below right).

Other repeating elements used throughout the house include the color palette (sage green for trim, cream for walls, and natural hardwood floors), the thin lines embellishing the woodwork, and the wide openings between rooms.



Small details have big impact



Defining shapes

In the garden room, the wide frame around the beadboard on the ceiling helps define the shape of the room and keep the look crisp.



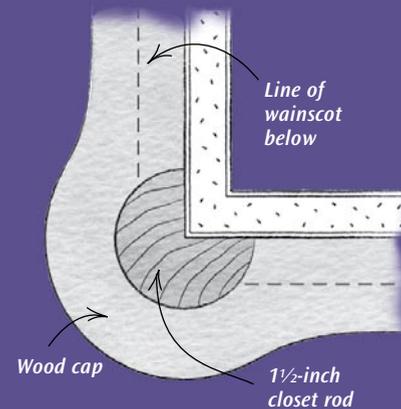
Marrying materials

The plastic laminate countertop of this cooking peninsula is softened and spruced up on its edges with wood trim.



Round trim

Round trim, made from ordinary wood closet rods, is notched to fit the hearth corner, as shown in the drawing below. The same closet rod detail is used on the outside corners of the wainscoting (above), which helps give the rooms charm.



Adapted from *Inside the Not So Big House* by Sarah Susanka and Marc Vassallo (The Taunton Press, 2005).

For more information, see Resources, page 84.