



Architectural shingles resemble slate

Fypon finial and window dividers

Aluminum-wrapped window frames

Columns painted with baked-on enamel

Cultured Stone foundation

Hassle-Free House

Achieving a low-maintenance new Victorian home means using the best modern materials and techniques—then throwing in a few surprises.

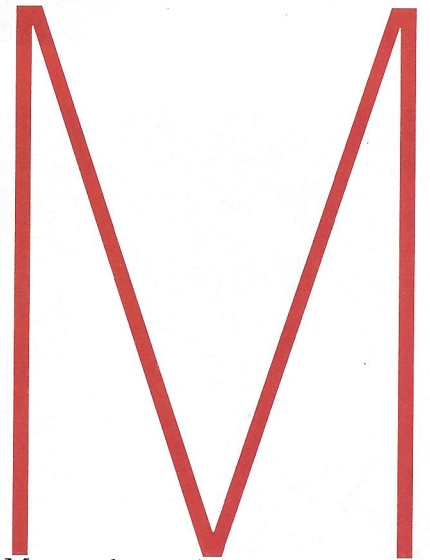
By Dominick Caccavella
Photographs by Bradley Olman



Fypon trim

Varied vinyl siding

Concrete porch floor



More and more homeowners are requesting the elegant lines of Victorian houses from their builders. But the reality today is that no one has the time (or desire) to spend their weekends painting woodwork, replacing bricks or stones or caulking windows. They want the look without the labor. Is it possible?

Recently, we had the opportunity to build a 4,000-square-foot Queen Anne-style residence in Millstone, New Jersey. Owners Frank and Claire Ferraro had done their research and came up with the design, layout and even color schemes they wanted; then their architect drew up a blueprint based on a design in a 19th-century houseplan book. But they wanted all of this without an extremely high amount of ongoing maintenance. So it was up to me and my crew to make this wish come true.

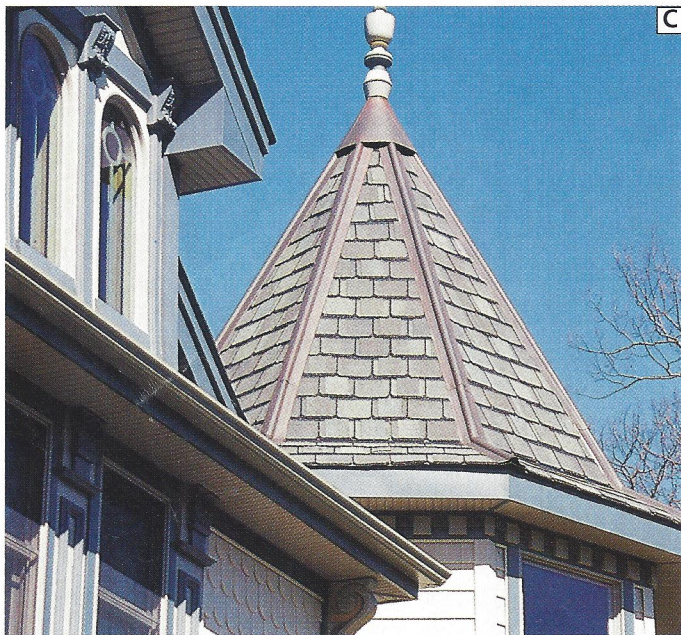
Of course, the biggest part of the solution was using vinyl siding, making sure we used the most appropriate sizes and styles available. We chose three different



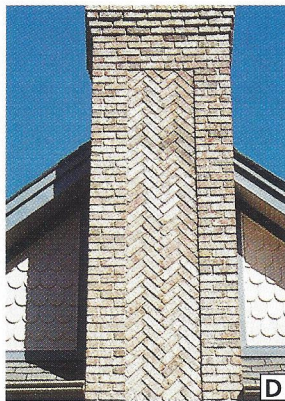
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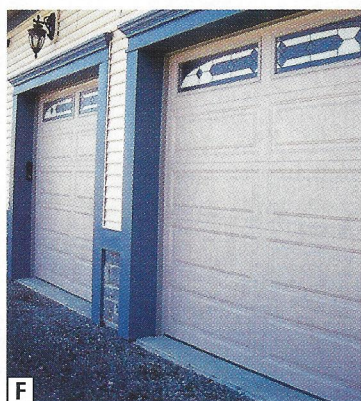
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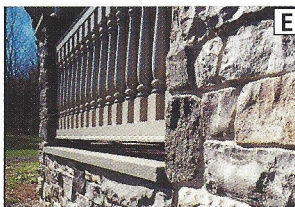
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E

kinds of vinyl in a four-color palette in order to get the colorful, fanciful effect of the period style. The horizontal siding has a subtle pattern that simulates paintbrush strokes.

Like the original Queen Anne homes, this one has lots of trim and detail. Normally that would all be made of wood, but in order to avoid all of the upkeep required by wood, we decided to use *Fypon* instead. *Fypon*, a material made from compressed Styrofoam, is extremely strong and lasts virtually forever. Rick Pinto, my siding specialist, had to mix and modify the available designs to get what we wanted. *Fypon* is very hard, but it can be cut with a router just like wood.

We still had to paint all of the balusters and columns, and thought about ways to make the paint last longer than normal. This time, it

was the homeowner who had a brilliant idea. Frank, the owner of an auto body shop, took the unfinished pieces to his shop and painted them with urethane enamel (car paint) that was literally baked on. The finish should last about 20 years without needing a touch-up.

The porch wall (i.e. the exposed foundation) is concrete with a *Cultured Stone* finish; all of the treads on the front steps are capped with bluestone. The top of the porch floor is finished in a pre-colored charcoal concrete. The chimney was one thing we did just like the old days—it is a masonry chimney made of brick with a nice herringbone pattern down the middle. Copper was used for the roof valleys and some of the trim, as well as the gutters and leaders on the porch. The roof was covered with *Grand Manor*

A: Three kinds of vinyl products were used on the Ferraro house: *Certain-Teed* horizontal base siding, shake-style siding and fish-scale siding.

B: Every corner has a 6-inch vertical vinyl siding in blue, with a rounded camel-colored insert down the center that nicely finishes the edges. Using the different colors helped achieve a Victorian-looking color scheme.

C: Copper valleys on the turret give the architectural shingles more of a slate-like appearance. Because of its appeal with an old-looking patina, untreated copper is actually a low-maintenance material.

D: This masonry chimney has the best of all worlds—it's handsome, authentic-looking and requires little maintenance.

E: *Cultured Stone*, a veneer made of concrete with special coloring, was used on the exposed foundation. The porch floor is colored concrete.

F: The garage doors are made of insulated aluminum and decorated with leaded glass windows.



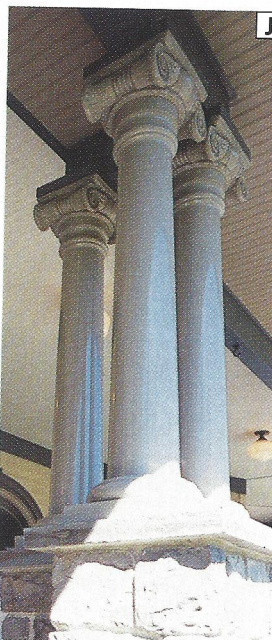
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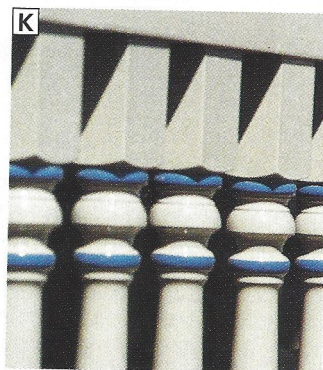
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I



J



K

architectural shingles from CertainTeed that resemble slate.

Inside Techniques

When working on the interior of this large home, our goal was not so much to provide lower maintenance as to achieve a period look with modern materials or techniques. Nothing looks better than real wood molding, trim and flooring on the inside of the house. Because we wanted custom dimensions for our trim, we had a special tool made to create it.

All the flooring, except in the kitchen, is a 4-inch oak plank. The curved stairway in the foyer features two newel posts that were laser-cut in a grapevine design. This same design was repeated in a floor medallion

nearby, as well as on the columns of the family room fireplace. The kitchen has a tile floor and custom cabinetry. Its period-style tin ceiling was also painted at the auto body shop with a baked-on urethane enamel paint that should last for years.

Some of the designs on the house—such as the box ceiling in the foyer and much of the detail work—were created as we went along. We made many changes along the way, but when everything was done I think we captured exactly what our clients wanted: a dream house that almost takes care of itself. ❧

Dominick Caccavella is co-owner with Vito LoChiatto of Heartstone Properties, a custom building and design company in Metuchen, New Jersey.

Hassle-Free House

G: Rolled copper was used on the pediment to give an old look to the house. Windows are framed in prefinished pine that is wrapped in blue aluminum. The ornamental trim is made of Fypon.

H: The front door is made of oak with leaded glass windows. The homeowner got the design from a period houseplan book.

I: Double-insulated Anderson windows are metal clad; decorative Fypon dividers were added by the builders.

J and K: Porch columns, railing and balusters are painted with baked-on enamel paint for a long-lasting, smooth-as-glass finish.

Building Smart

Some people say, "Never again," after building their own home, and with good reason. Like any life transition such as getting married or having a child, having a home built involves significant stress that can have a profound impact on you and those around you. However, some of the negative experiences can be minimized by careful planning and wise decision-making along the way.

1. Know Your Builder

Although it is often said that a builder is only as good as his sub-contractors, this is only partially true. A good builder tries his hardest to find reputable contractors to get the job done. He is also more likely to insist on something being done to your satisfaction when his own standards are high. Look closely at both the interior and exterior of a home that your builder has built. Does the home appear to be structurally sound? What is the quality of the workmanship found there?

Drive through a development where homes he has built are located, and if possible, stop and speak to at least one homeowner. Ask the homeowner if he is happy, and if so, why. Was the builder available after construction of the home to fix any problems that may have arisen after move-in? Find out what he would have done differently with his home next time around, or if he would go with the same builder again.

2. Get a Real Estate Agent...Fast

In some states, like Ohio, the law states that every buyer of a home must have what is known as a "buying agent," that is, someone who will represent you during the entire real estate transaction. Find one before you work on the plans, location and builder; the last thing you want is to be stuck with a buying agent who works at the same agency as the selling agent.

Take Alex and Nathan, who recently bought their first home, which they had built. Alex wondered why there were two realtors present at the first couple of meetings she attended with the builder. Their buying agent was a placid woman, while the selling agent took control of every situation. "Sometimes she would call me and the telephone number of the selling agent would appear on my telephone," says Alex. "I could hear him in the background telling her what to say to me and she would simply repeat his words like a parrot. I was horrified. It felt like he

was controlling the entire show and we were just his puppets."

3. Get It in Writing

If the builder or selling agent says a certain thing will get taken care of, get it in writing. Even if you have to do it yourself, write a list of things you would like done or changed, and then get the builder to initial or sign after every item he agrees to do. Keep a copy of it for yourself, and give him a copy. Do the same for verbal quotes on how much something extra is going to cost you. Otherwise, things you had originally wanted may not get done, or if they do, you will be charged more than originally quoted.

4. Keep a Journal

Buy a spiral notepad that is bound (loose-leaf paper is not always legally admissible as evidence in court as it can be added to or deleted from at random). In that notebook, make it a habit to write down a date, time, person spoken to and what was said each and every time you talk to someone about your house. Note who called whom, who left messages for whom, and what their responses to your questions were. Well-documented journals are legally binding in court.

5. Opt out of Landscaping, Lighting Packages

Sometimes a builder has a contract with a lighting store or landscaper. But whenever possible, ask to opt out of such packages and do your own work behind the scenes with the money you are credited back. You can probably find beautiful and much more reasonably priced lights at the source of your choice, which the builder can still install for you.

Even if you don't have a green thumb or don't like to garden, you can select your own shrubs and trees more inexpensively at a home improvement store, nursery or catalog. Then either plant them yourself or find a student or a local landscaper to plant them for you. You can even have extra topsoil or mulch delivered to your home from a local nursery or farm at a fraction of the cost the builder's landscaper will charge you.

6. Get (and Stay) Organized

Buy a binder and dividers or a file folder and label it "House." Immediately place all receipts, contracts, lists and other correspondence pertaining to your new home together in one place so you'll know where to find it before, during, and after construction is completed. If possible, get a photocopy of all handwritten lists, diagrams and notes you give to the builder or realtors before you hand them over. It is important to keep written documentation of all exchanges you make and to know where to access these, if need be.

7. Resist Small Upgrades

It is well known that builders make their money on upgrades. Unless it is a substantial item, like an extra window, thicker carpet underlay, higher quality kitchen cabinets, or a bathroom hook-up in the

basement, beware. Oftentimes, upgrades under \$50 are simply not worth it. And they can add up.

Claire's house, which was built two years ago, went up in price by \$10,000 because of small upgrades she made as she went along. "I didn't think \$5 here or \$10 there would make such a difference," she says. Keep things simple and add or change things yourself later on at a fraction of the cost.

8. Speak Up Promptly

If you have paid to have something done and it doesn't look right to you or you don't like the way it looks, call attention to it right away—and keep insisting upon it. Chantal paid \$1,600 to have a bay window put into the kitchen of her new home. The realtor said it would add another two and a half feet onto her kitchen—it didn't, nor did it create a peak in her roofline the way it was supposed to. However, nothing was done to change it or give credit back to Chantal for her substandard bay window because she didn't speak up about her dissatisfaction with it as soon as it had been put in. "I thought I would be charged extra," she said.

9. Visit House Frequently

Try to visit the new construction every evening and look closely at what, if anything, has been done that day. If you wait two or three days or longer between visits, sometimes things that you do not want or like are already too far along to be easily undone, changed or repaired.

One caution, however, is to avoid becoming too involved in the actual building process. Darwin, a builder, stated that one man he worked for would bring a lawn chair every single morning and watch him work from dawn until dusk. It was annoying, to the point of being ridiculous. "He would just sit there and watch me for hours. It was as if the guy did not trust my building capabilities," Darwin recalls.

Visiting in the evenings, after the contractors have left for the day, allows you to go over the new home on your own without feeling as though you're peering over their shoulders.

10. Meet Monthly with Builder

When speaking through realtors during the home building process, even the simplest of instructions can become muddled. To avoid misunderstandings, arrange to meet with the builder of your home at least once a month so you can consult with him directly and go over any concerns or questions that may have arisen.

Lastly, remember that, for peace of mind's sake, you may occasionally have to lower your standards a bit on some things, as nothing is or will ever be absolutely perfect, including your new house. Learn that you cannot control every aspect of the end result, but you can do much along the way to improve the process. Good luck, and enjoy your new adventure, as well as your new home!

—Susan Dabulskis-Hunter

Here are some bonus building tips:

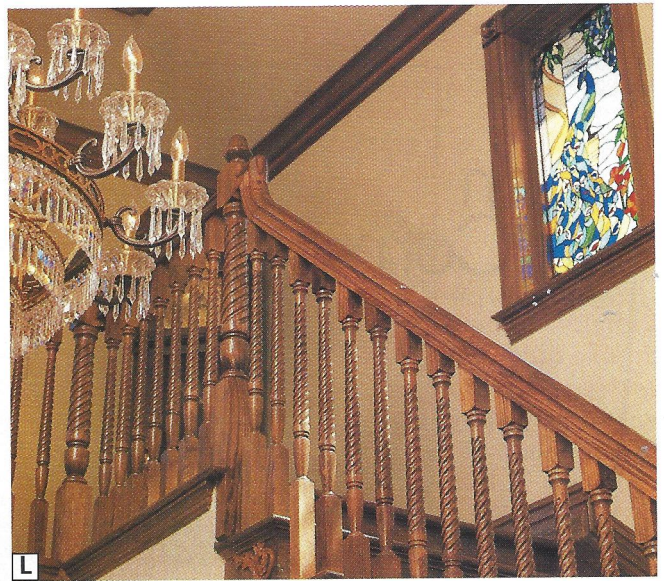
- Try to get as much done to the home as possible before closing. Builders, like the rest of us, are motivated primarily by money. Once paid in full for their work, there is less incentive for them to return to continue work on a home. If you feel the job might not get done after close, hold back part of payment at close from the builder, known as retention money or escrow account, until it is complete.
- Call a meeting specifically designed to go over the placement of such things as air vents, electrical sockets, electrical switch plates and television hook-ups in your new home. Otherwise, these may be placed in inconvenient places that can seriously affect how you place furniture, watch TV or turn on lights. Changes are usually possible after the home is built, but they can be costly at a time when you need the cash.
- If you plan on having extensive window treatments installed at a later date, consider having wood reinforcements placed on either side of the top of the window frames. These are simply pieces of two-by-fours put in under the drywall before it is installed.
- Remember that oftentimes you will need additional funds once you move into a new home. Be sure to not "max out" on your mortgage payments so that you can afford to buy things for your new home or still spend money on yourself now and then. Being "house poor"—that is, making enough money only to cover your mortgage payments and some bills—is no fun for anyone, especially you.

L: A grand curved staircase made with turned balusters and laser-carved wood punctuates the home's foyer.

M and N: The Ferraro house has many decorative details such as carved wood embellishments, turned millwork, inlaid floor borders and an elaborate floor medallion.

O: A mix of patterned and plain tile complements the family room's oak fire-place mantel.

P and Q: Much of the millwork had to be done with a custom-made tool—these dimensions cannot be found in a lumber store.



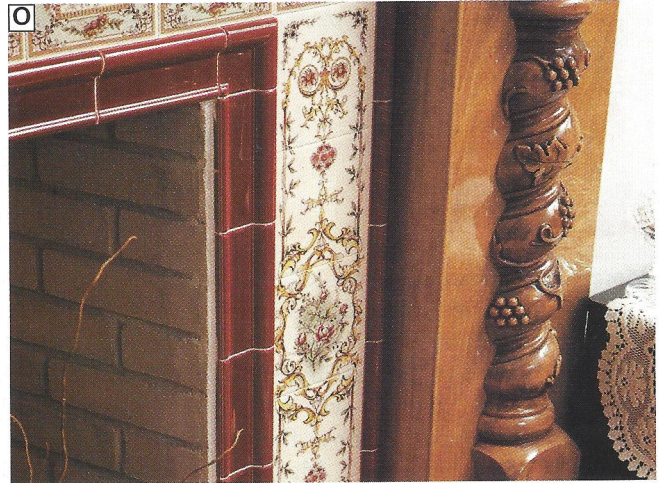
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M



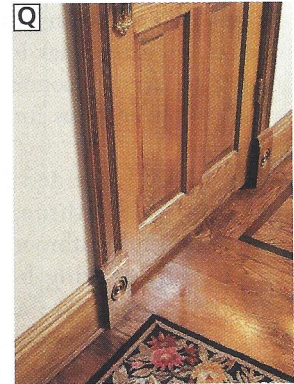
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O



P



Q

Hassle-Free House