SCALE, SHAPE, PROPORTIONS AND EXTERNAL FINISHES

Scale, shape and proportions are complicated technical issues of architecture, so the summary of advice to applicants is placed at the beginning of this section, and the paragraphs which follow are explanations of these terms and advice which is more applicable to the agents or professionals advising the applicant: ie for the designers of the house to be built.

SUMMARY

Scale, form, proportion and external finishes collectively create a house design. Failure to deal sufficiently with each can result in an unsuccessful solution. All are intertwined.

Applicants should recognise where skill in subjects are required and subsequently seek advice either from the Local Authority or from other professional agents long before taking final decisions.

Taking advice early in the design process will save an applicant money, time and potential disappointment at a later date.

It is difficult to prescribe good design for rural housing but the general rule "keep it simple" is a worthy maxim.

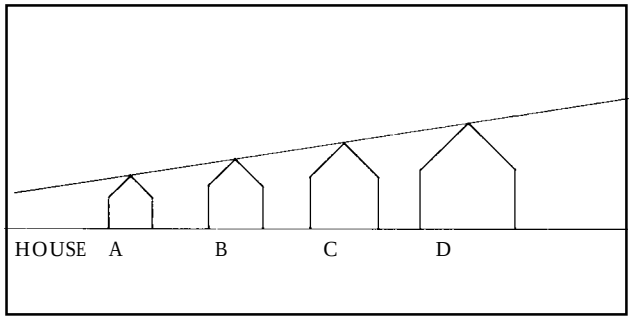
SCALE

An appreciation of scale is one of, if not the key, element in the design consideration for new houses in the countryside, unfortunately often disregarded: a building's size must be relative to its surroundings. Skilled designers are trained to take cognisance of scale as part of the design process and will need no advice on the matter other than perhaps a reminder of its importance.

Firstly, scale as: "size relative to landscape". As a general rule, large buildings are unlikely to be compatible with small enclosed landscapes due to their impact. The larger the house, the greater the impact hence careful siting is vital.

Applicants seeking large houses may therefore have difficulty finding a suitable site. In a large open area, a large house can sometimes be accommodated where views are not blocked out and the house is absorbed by the landscape. For a large house, the solution would be to either locate it in a situation where the view of landscape is preserved or to change to a smaller scale house.

Secondly, scale in terms of the "size of the house relative to neighbouring buildings".

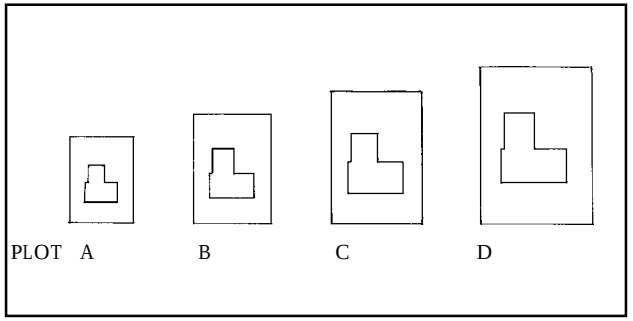


Scale relative to neighbouring buildings - Does the building intrude and dominate its neighbours in the same way as house D would dominate house A ?

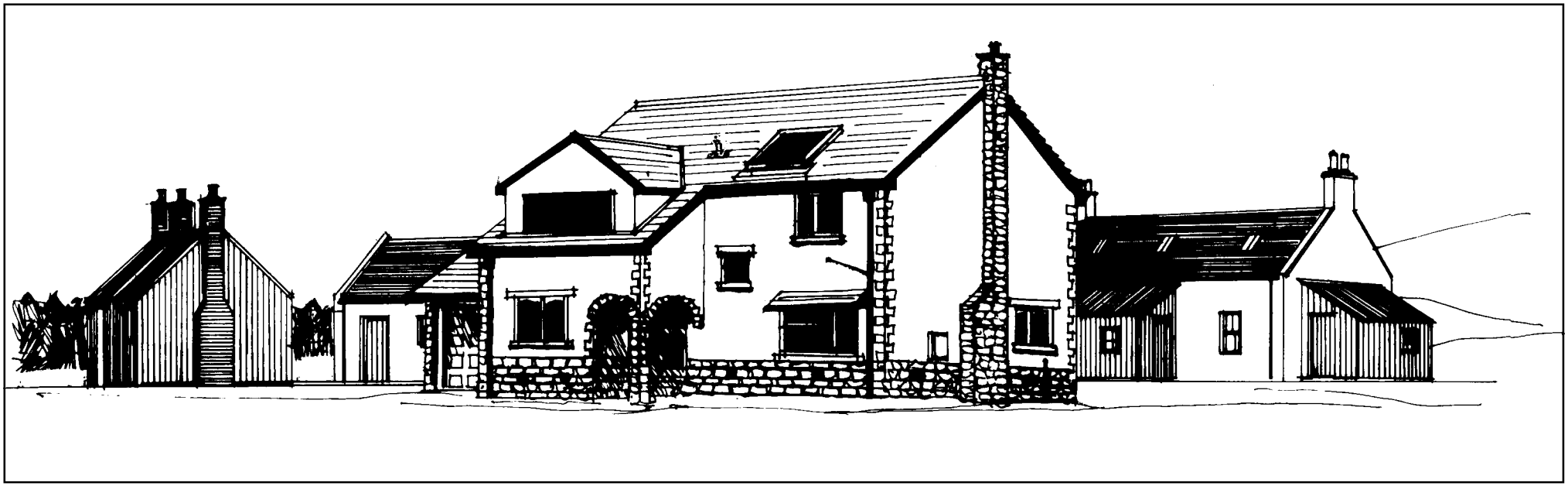
There can be visual, physical or simply "bad neighbour" problems caused by mixing out-of-scale housing. House 'D' (below, left) for example would have an intimidating impact if placed alongside a cluster of House 'A' type (see also the sketch on the page opposite).

Thirdly, scale as "the size of the house relative to plot size".

Rural buildings have traditionally enjoyed spacious grounds in comparison with town buildings. However, modern accommodation needs, and construction techniques, and increased wealth, has resulted in a larger scale of housing than traditionally found in the countryside. Nevertheless the spirit of spacious grounds ought to be upheld in order to retain the very character of the countryside. For example, placing House 'D' into Plot 'A' (below) would be deemed as being "out of scale" for a rural situation. The solution would therefore be to increase the plot size or to decrease the house size.



Scale relative to plot size - Is the building the right size for the site? House D would not be suitable in plot A.



Where the rules of scale, form and proportion are disregarded the result is an arrogant piece of architecture. This is a frequent occurance in rural communities and small villages where large new houses, adorned with balconies and picture windows, are introduced amidst modest traditional buildings of simple elegance and scale.

SHAPE

The shape (or form) of a house is derived from (a) its plan, (b) its elevations. When combined, these create a three dimensional object.

Within rural Moray, comparatively low buildings with a horizontal emphasis are generally sympathetic to the lines of the landscape. Occasionally, (as a reflection of a local tradition), a simply designed two storey house is acceptable. Plans based on rectangles with gabled (or occasionally hipped) roofs tend to be more satisfactory than those approaching a square form with shallow pitched roofs, which reflect more of the traits of suburban architecture rather than those of countryside architecture.

This is shown graphically on the preceding pages which illustrated "The Evolutionary Process", and the contrast of urban and rural house shapes.

While modern technology will permit us to build virtually any shape we can imagine, the importance of shape remains rooted in its relationship with its surroundings. Like houses which are out-of-scale, a house shape which is misplaced amongst other shapes will cause a similar effect of "bad neighbourliness". Inspiration should be taken from the nature of the landscape and the surrounding buildings. Innovative shapes are possible but only in sites where the unity between the landscape and buildings will not be compromised and only where designers are able to demonstrate skilled ability.

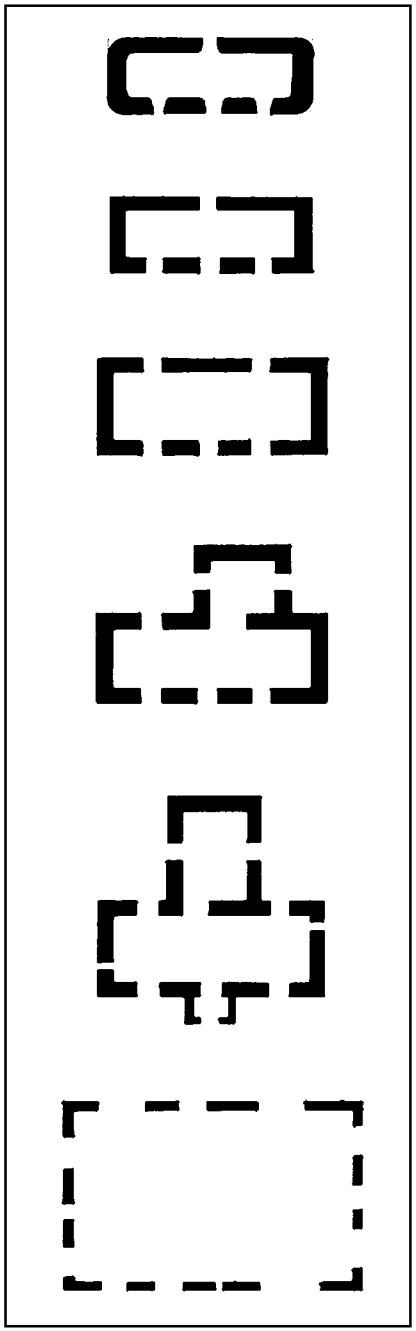
PROPORTIONS

Proportion is the effect on the shape created by varying heights and widths of walls and roofs, along with the size and positioning of openings and projections (ie windows, doors, chimneys, dormers etc).

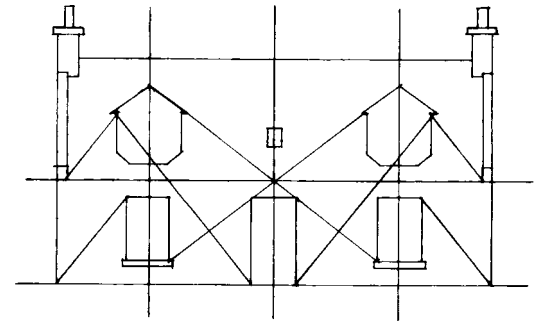
The term “bad design” is often used in day to day language - invariably this is referring to “poor proportions”. A “bad design” has often given undue emphasis to the internal arrangement of a house, the client’s individual tastes, and the statutory requirements of the building regulations, with proportion forgotten about.

The simplest approach to proportions is to study the existing buildings. In the main, the proportions are simple and invariably based on symmetry. An understanding of these proportions will reveal that while individuality is achievable, unity is still maintained.

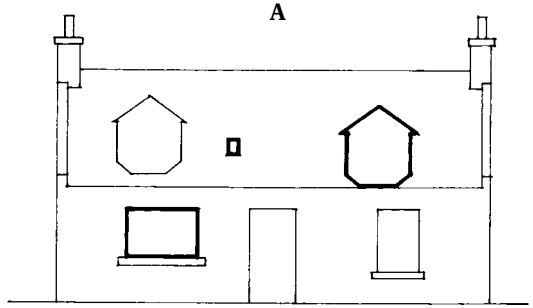
The traditional rural dwelling has evolved and grown but the rectangular form has maintained an almost constant proportion. Current dwellings maintain the basic rectangular shape but the proportions (relationship of length to depth) have greatly changed. The association with tradition becomes less obvious.



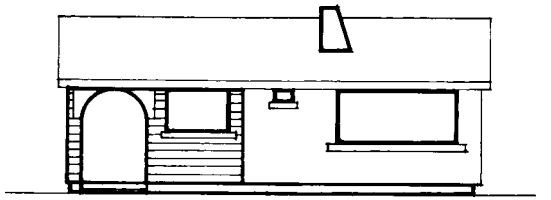
Studies have demonstrated that there are clear mathematical relationships to traditional building. A trained eye can instantly discern when this mathematical relationship is disturbed.



A



B



C

The above sketches indicate that where the proportions of walls, roofs, windows etc have been disregarded the result is ‘bad design’. In ‘A’, the perfect balance of the traditional building is clear. In ‘B’, this has been disturbed by alterations which are out of proportion with the original symmetry and in 'C' there is great confusion created by a jumbled mix of elements with no composition.

A useful analogy is that a building whose proportions are wrong, is as offensive to the eye, as a musical note played out of key is to the ear.

Since they are normally the main openings of a building, the positioning and shape of windows are key elements in achieving balance and good proportions.

As with the building itself, windows should maintain a disciplined proportion to each other, both in terms of the opening's relationship to the shape of the building, and the individual glass pane's relationship to the opening.

Balanced fenestration in all types and sizes of houses was perfected in windows of the Georgian period. Victorian period windows continued the vertical emphasis of the Georgian window opening but with many of the finer details missing. These basic shapes were found in traditional cottages and croft houses. (See page 28)

Appropriate modern windows should maintain these simple design standards and good proportions. Rural buildings are of a simple form therefore windows should be likewise and not decorative features.

EXTERNAL FINISHES

The materials and colours of a building are the part of design most easily understood. They are the 'clothes' of a house and are all too easily changed to display an image which the occupier wishes to convey.

In situations where a house is secluded there is more scope for different types of finish. In an open area or an area of particular character, it is important that the effect of a house is not to erode such character.

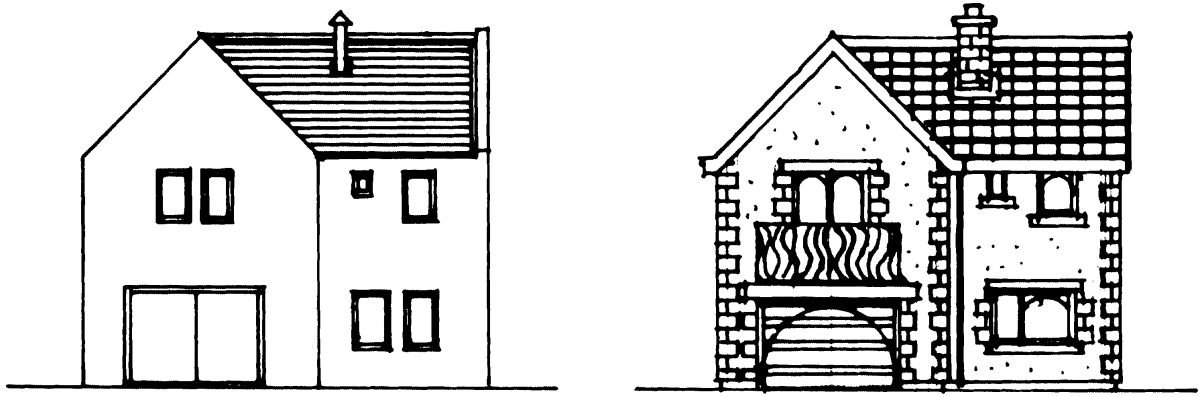
Traditional finishes in Moray are buff sandstone, (sometimes red sandstone, grey granite, blue whinstone, mica schist), stone or dark blue slate, white lime harling, dark red pantiles, painted wood and even painted corrugated iron.

Chiefly local finishes were always used and this created a local character. Imported finishes which differ in colour and texture may be too striking in contrast to traditional buildings and may not integrate with ease.

Discretion in the use of materials, and colour, can greatly enhance design. A mix of materials can draw undue attention to a house and fragment its overall appearance unless skilfully combined to highlight a particularly good design.

The overall colour, tone and texture in main walls and roofs should have a general harmony and relate, in their total effect, to the prevailing tints of buildings in the area (see following pages of collages).

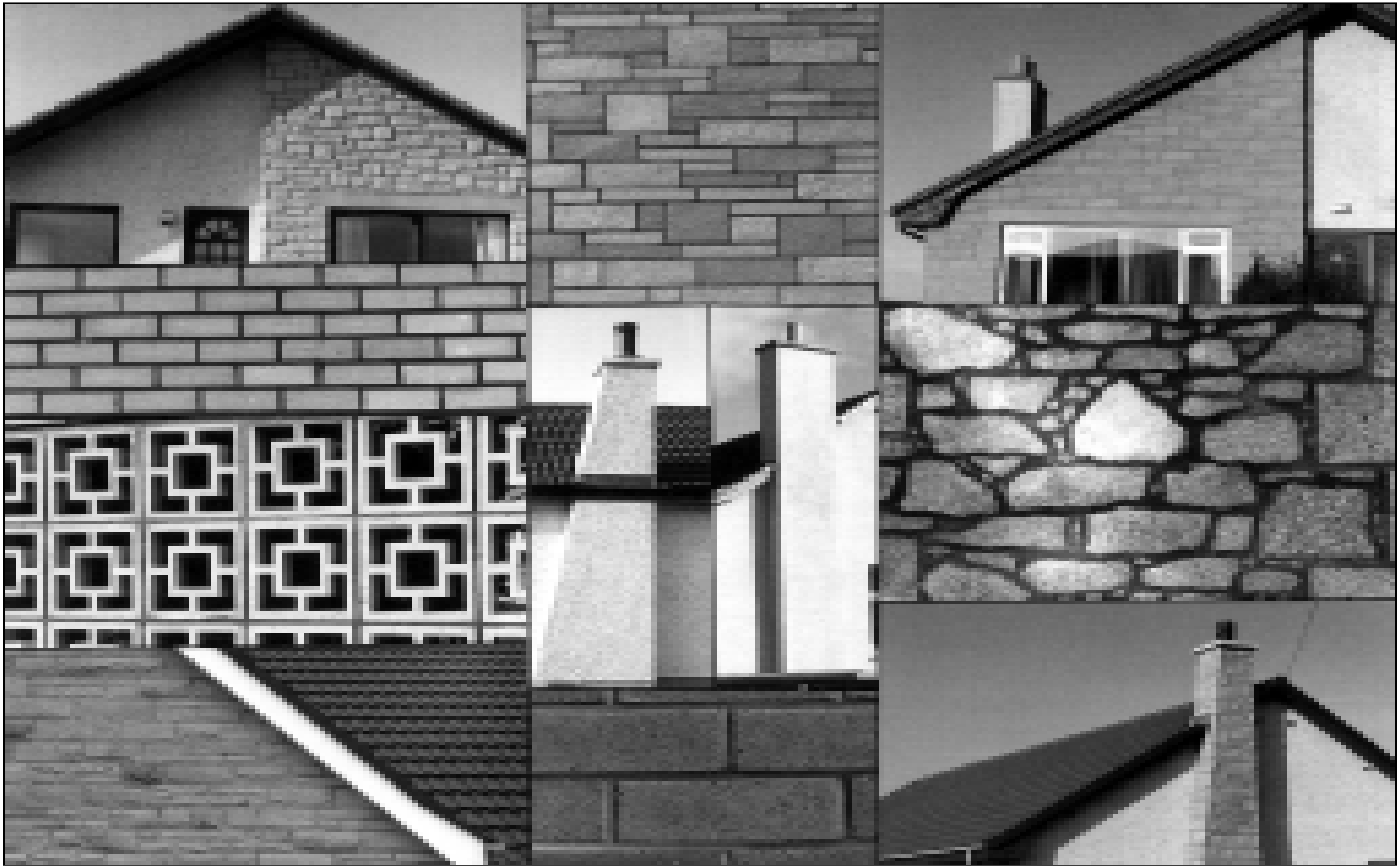
There can sometimes be a tendency to "adorn" new houses with eye catching embellishments such as heavy barge boards, fake stone panels, and wrought iron "features", and these can result in drawing unwarranted attention to the house. Applied features which are dishonestly used in respect of the structure and design of the building, should be avoided. For instance, an arch which has no load to carry or, an imitation stone facade incorporating a wide opening, which could not possibly be achieved if the facade was constructed of real stone. Clean, simple and uncluttered lines are often the distinguishing characteristics of a successful design approach to rural building.



Clean, simple and uncluttered lines are often distinguishing characteristics of a successful rural design.

Forms and Materials traditional to Moray.

Related contemporary equivalents

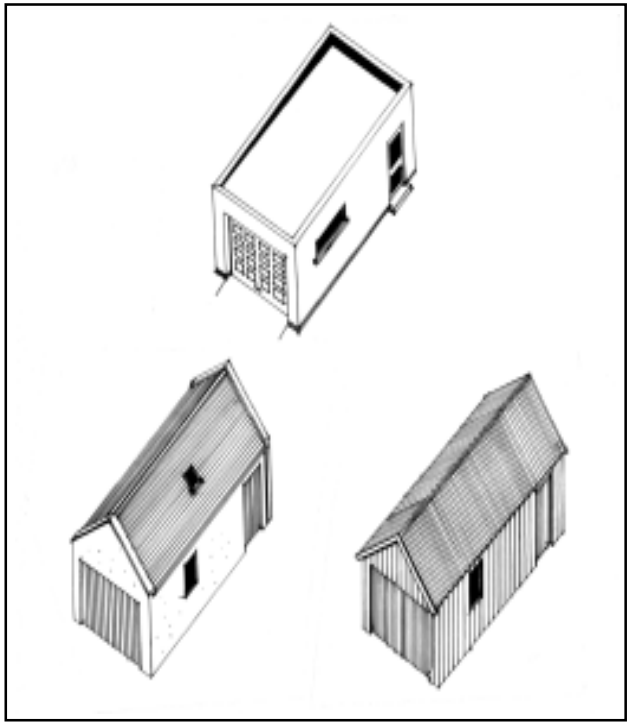


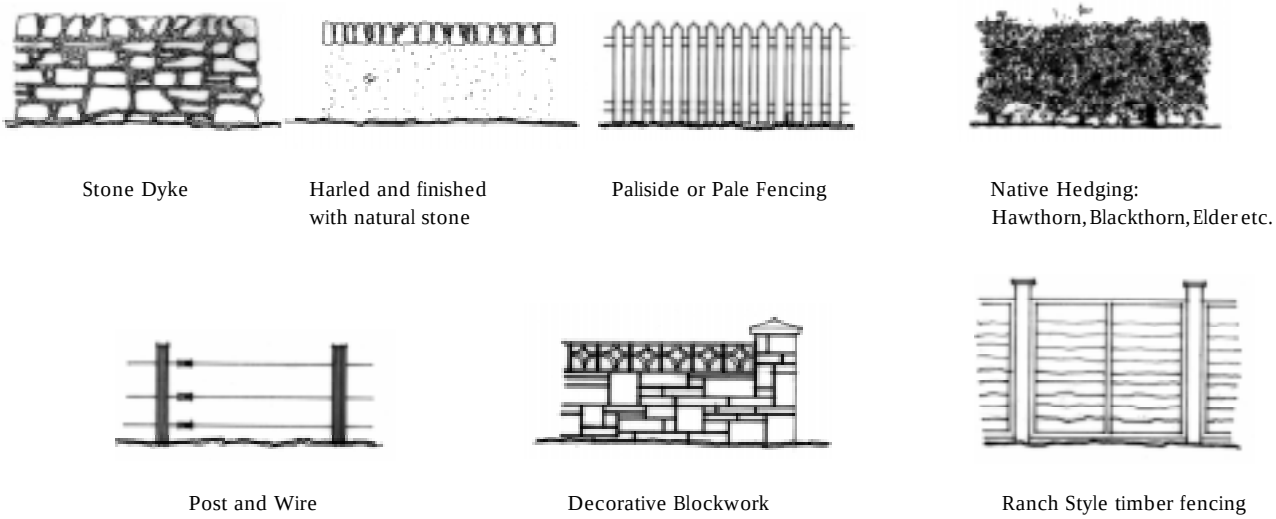
Inappropriate forms and materials for the rural area.

Other Design Considerations

Attention must also be paid to the ancillary features of a new house - subsidiary buildings (garages etc.); road entrance, ground surfaces and site boundaries in particular.

Access and Boundaries
Access to the site must be provided to a safe standard, but every effort should be made to preserve as much of the natural boundaries and features of the road frontage as is consistent with traffic and sight line requirements. The extent and treatment of the "break" in the road verge will govern how much attention is drawn to a new dwelling in the countryside. (For instance, low concrete block walls, ranch fences etc. clearly indicate the boundaries of residential development characteristic of many urban houses and are to be avoided).





Garages
Poor positioning of a garage in relation to the main elevation of the house can make the requirements of the car appear to be dominant to those of the household. Integral garages with complimentary roof pitches can be successful and in most cases the garage should be sited away from the front elevation. Detached garages can provide shelter to the main house if sited carefully.

External Fittings and Lighting.
Outside lighting is often an essential requirement of rural housing for reason of accessibility and security, but it can also be responsible for light pollution, energy wastage and blindness for road users if not used wisely. External lighting should, therefore, be directed downwards and make effective use of sensor switches. Permanent lighting, e.g. floodlit entrances, driveways and buildings, is to be discouraged. Light fittings themselves should be simple and plain in design. Fitting to buildings, such as lights, aerials, satellite dishes, should be located at unobtrusive positions.

Walls and Fences
The design and type of materials used for means of enclosure and boundary demarcation is an important design element for ensuring that new house sites successfully integrate with their locations in the countryside.

Simple post and rail or post and wire fencing is suitable for most rural locations and painted or stained palisade fencing can suit a 'rural community' location. Ranch style timber fencing generally looks out of place and in Moray should be avoided.

Walls are best in natural stone (particularly to the east and south of the area) but can be of harled blockwork. Ornate concrete screen walling is a feature of modern suburban areas and should be avoided.