

Section 9 House Design

The aim of this chapter is to encourage and promote modern, innovative and contemporary design that will marry the success of our vernacular building forms with modern living requirements. The Council is committed to improving the quality of new development in the County and particularly to facilitating development which pays due regard to its setting, especially in rural landscapes.

Design is a material consideration in determining a planning application and the main components of successful rural design include selection of a location which facilitates sympathetic integration, the positioning of buildings on the site [siting], and detailed design of the appearance of the building, including choice and use of materials, form, landscaping and boundary definition.

The impact of new buildings on the character of an area varies with the prominence of the site, the sensitivity of the setting and the environmental capacity of the locality to absorb further development. For this reason, the Council acknowledges that flexibility in employing the Design Guide may be appropriate in certain circumstances and at certain locations where the impact of more diversity in design solutions (individually or collectively) would not result in unacceptable impact on the character of an area. Such locations could include undulating, well treed landscapes (such as drumlin landscapes) where it is possible to place a dwelling into the "folds" of the landscape in a manner which uses the topography to minimise public perspectives or intrusive or strident siting with their consequent visual impact.

Other situations where more flexibility in design may be acceptable could include mature sites with substantial existing boundary vegetation which is capable of retention, or proposed developments which would benefit from their incorporation into a cluster of buildings such as a larger farm complex.

Similarly, while the Council has set an objective of contributing to the erection of the highest quality built environment, respecting the landscape character, there may be specific locations where there is a design feature which is not recommended in the Design Guide but which is particularly common at that location and where the use of that design feature as part of a cohesive scheme, would not strike a discordant note. This is unlikely to arise in localities where the settlement pattern is one of dispersed housing but may be relevant where there is a tightly defined cluster or grouping with more than a few houses in close proximity to each other and to the site, and that cluster exhibits similarity in the use of the design feature. Elsewhere, the Council encourages agents to champion the more timeless traditions which underpin the rural character in Donegal and the Council, in these locations, would commend the Best Practice featured in the Design Guidance. **It has become increasingly popular in recent times to include unsuitable and even alien design features in new house designs.**

Many of these architectural "fads", for example the use of Grecian columns, quickly date resulting in new rural housing that fails to sit comfortably in our landscapes. This is an undesirable but increasingly prevalent characteristic of new rural dwellings and one that is at odds with our traditional building and siting methods.

County Donegal Development Plan 2006-2012 (as varied)

The continued popularity and evocative nature of our vernacular buildings should be a source of pride and inspiration. The simple strong style of these buildings provides pertinent lessons on how to build to ensure **quality, longevity, staying power and continuity.** Vernacular dwellings are testimonial to a style and method of building that is unique, timeless and ultimately ours.

AVOID FADS — THEY WILL DATE.



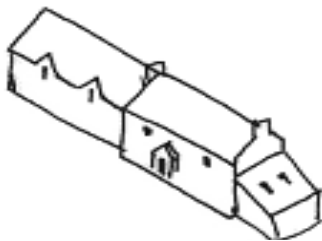
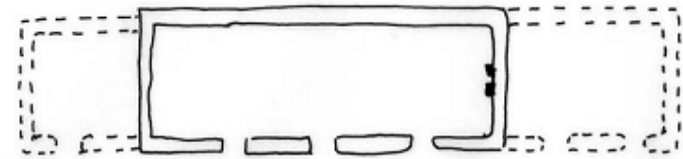
9.1 Characteristics of Traditional Rural Dwellings

It is hoped that by promoting an understanding of those successful design elements of our vernacular buildings, those who are responsible for the design, creation, and permitting of rural dwellings will embrace a new style, one which is modern, contemporary and uniquely ours, reflective of and in sympathy with that which has gone before

Balance
Proportion
Simplicity
Solidity
Moderate Scale & Size
Flat Fronted
Steep Roof Pitch and Use of Attic Space
Little Modeling to Roof
Narrow Plan
Vertical Openings
Quality Construction



Traditional dwellings followed a rectangular, linear **Narrow Plan Form** with single storey, one and a half and two storey dwellings rarely being more than single room depth. Ancillary rooms were added to the wings of the house, as additional space was required; this further reinforced the linear plan, resulting in the vernacular Donegal "long house". Outbuildings formed informal courtyards around the main building, allowing for shelter and privacy.



Vernacular buildings integrated easily into their associated landscapes due to the **low impact** they exerted upon them. The narrow plan allowed for the breaking up and slimming down of built elements.

Due to this such buildings appear to "snuggle into" the landscape in direct opposition to modern wide plan dwellings, which require extensive site manipulation and appear to be "dropped onto" landscapes.





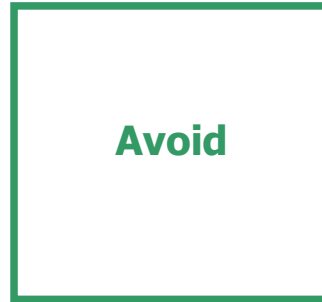
Gable ends and pitched roofs with a steep pitch (35-55 degrees) were prevalent with thatch eventually being replaced by corrugated metal and slate. The breaking down of built elements and roofs of varying heights ensured that large bulky forms were avoided. Often two or three differing roofs with a mixture of materials, such as slate for the main house and thatch or metal for additional byres and sheds unconsciously created visually interesting contrasts and further served to break up built forms.

Vernacular buildings were of a human scale, which can simply be said to mean that the building and height of the eaves did not dwarf humans standing beside them. Elements within the buildings such as door openings and windows were vertical emphasis and of a uniform size and symmetry. This ensured balance, proportion and solidity of form.



9.2 Unsuccessful Suburban Characteristics - History repeating itself?

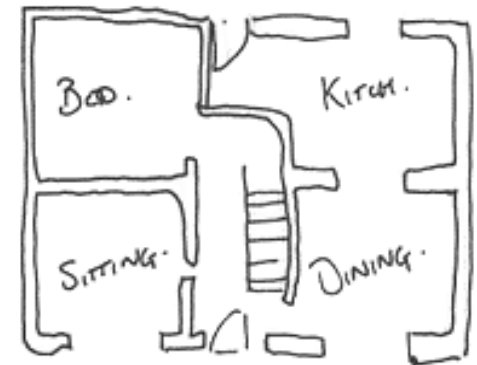
Wide Plan
Poor Balance
Badly Proportioned
Add on Projections
Inappropriate Pitch and Modeling of Roof
Dominant, Out-Sized Roof and Attic spaces
Massive Scale & Size
Horizontal Openings
Synthetic/False Construction Methods



During the 1960's and 1970's the wide plan bungalow became popular. This form of building appears incongruous within rural Donegal landscapes and has aged poorly, with the result that many of these buildings appear dated. Such buildings have not enjoyed the appeal or retained the character of their traditional counterparts.

New Donegal rural houses have not moved away from the wide plan layout of the 1970's bungalow. Higher, wider, deeper and quite simply much bigger all round, the scale of the problem is quite literally being increased!

Deep Plan houses are presented in unsuitably large single blocks, the larger the house, the harder it is to integrate, the stronger the impact within a rural setting.



Poor design responses are necessary with such house plans in order to accommodate large mass; gable walls become stretched horizontally out of scale in order to accommodate double room depths and internal corridors, which results in a graceless squat appearance.

Eave and Ridge heights have to be raised disproportionately high in order to try and recapture a semblance of good proportioning and to avoid the front wallplate and body of the house appearing exaggerated and over long.



Roofs become massive in scale and it is necessary to employ too shallow/too steep a pitch or an unsuitably exaggerated hip in order to "cap" the house. Doors and windows become outsized in order to avoid being swamped within the overall bulk of the house or are utilized to break up the form. Suburban front wall gable projections and add-ons are used to provide decorative detail and as a means of breaking up over-long and exaggerated front wall plates.

The end result is a **high impact** dwelling of bulky, overweight mass bearing no relation to the human scale and often out of scale and keeping with neighbouring buildings.



Individually and cumulatively such houses can dominate and permanently alter landscapes, out of scale and out of keeping with their landscape and neighboring dwellings they will age poorly and remain a permanent detraction from rural areas.

9.3 The Solution

9.3.1 Achieving Proportion within Rural Landscapes

Proportion is fundamental to integration.

In architecture a well-proportioned house is one which has achieved an harmonious arrangement of parts, with the correct balance of sizes and individual elements **and** is proportioned to suit it's setting. The end result is a design of pleasing and deceptive simplicity, easily integrated into the Donegal landscape.

Attempts to squeeze larger rooms and more mass under a single roof have resulted in large high impact houses within small, individual, and often roadside sites. A house must be developed to be in proportion with its surroundings. Large classical style houses will appear incongruous within small, enclosed sites and landscapes.

Large houses need to be set in large mature sites within landscapes that dominate the appearance of the house as in the featured photograph. They will appear bulky and out of proportion in any other type of landscape or site.

When deciding on the scale and design of your home be aware that it will remain a permanent feature in the landscape, even if tastes change and move on. Do not permanently impose an out of keeping and out of scale building on your neighbours and locality.

It is an objective of the Council to actively discourage the development of unsuitably designed or proportioned buildings in rural areas.



9.3.2 Achieving Proportion in Design

Proportion is fundamental to successful design

Vernacular architecture displays a seemingly effortless overall balance and harmonious arrangement of parts. The means and methods of achieving this should be emulated and encouraged by today's house designers.

Balanced Proportions in vernacular design are achieved through a proper combination of Scale and Solidity.



9.3.3 Scale

The scale of a dwelling refers to its height and mass. Our vernacular building methods, in particular the use of the **Narrow Plan** and **Human Scale**, hold the key to settling new buildings in the landscape and ensuring correct and suitable design.

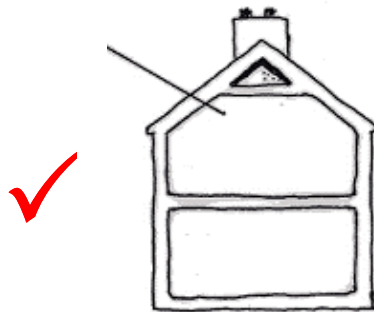
New buildings can be brought closer to an appropriate scale through reducing height and breaking down bulky mass.

(i) Reducing Height

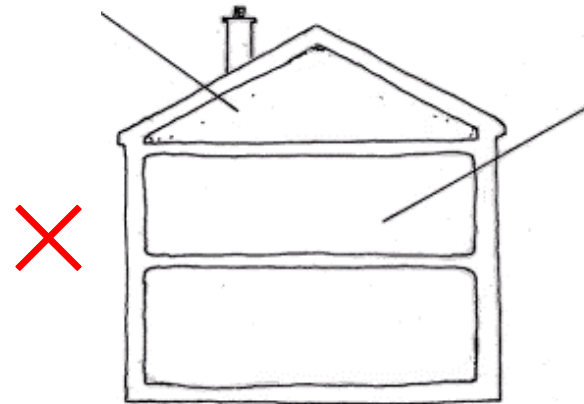
New housing must comply with building regulations; as such achieving the exact proportions and heights of traditional buildings is no longer possible. However the overall height may be reduced through

- Reducing overall ridge height
- Raising first floor ceilings to utilise roof space.

Utilising Roof Space Allows for Reduction in Ridge



Large Shallow Roof Space Created – Raises Overall Ridge Height



Full Height First Floor Necessitates Capping with Ceiling - Results in Creation Large Roof Space - Raises Ridge Height

(ii) Reducing Height

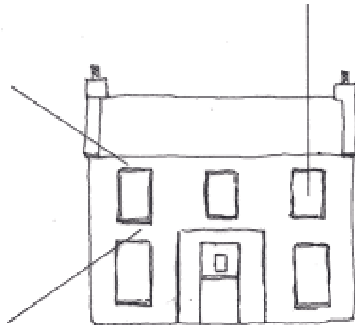
- Lowering eaves
- Reducing the distances between first floor window sills and the top of the ground floor windows



Lowered Eaves Reduce Height

Reducing Space between First Floor and Ground Floor Windows Lowers Height

Vertical Emphasis Windows & Openings Ensure Solidity



Horizontal Windows Reduce Wall Space – Weakens Structure and Emphasises Size



High Eaves Level - Increases Height

Large Space Between Windows - Increases Height



Undertaking height reduction measures will bring your home closer to the human scale; it will also **lower the impact** your house exerts on its surrounds.

Two storey with attic development and three storey dwellings are suburban in nature and are not suitable in rural areas.

It is an objective of the Council to actively discourage any such unsuitable suburban style development within rural areas.

(iii) Reducing Mass and Bulk

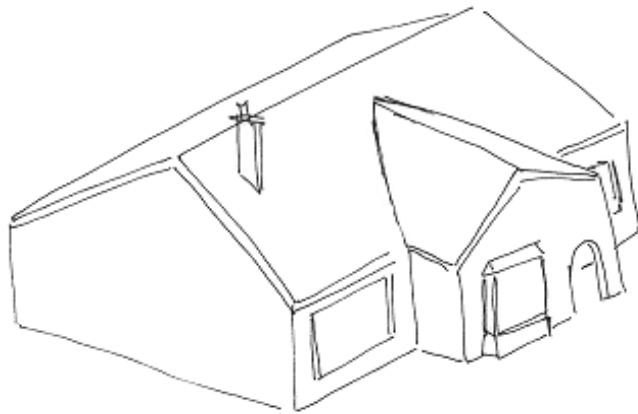
The incremental “adding on” of new living spaces is a traditional building method that ensured elegant, slimmed-down built forms. This method should be consciously revised and utilised by today’s house designers in order to reduce the bulky and awkward appearance of new buildings.

Unsuitably large new design elements e.g. oversized side elevations; roofs etc and overall bulk can be reduced through

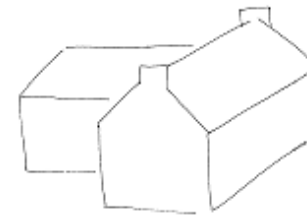
- Reducing depth to a depth more reflective of Narrow Plan houses
- Breaking down single, weighty mass into a collection of slimmed down built forms

Single Storey

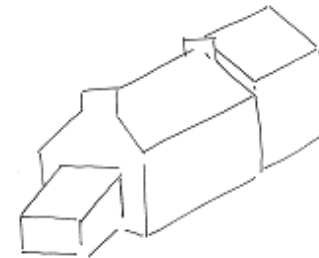
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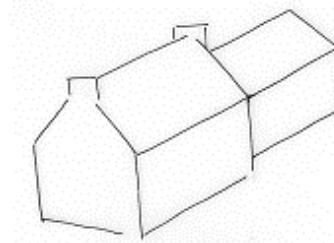
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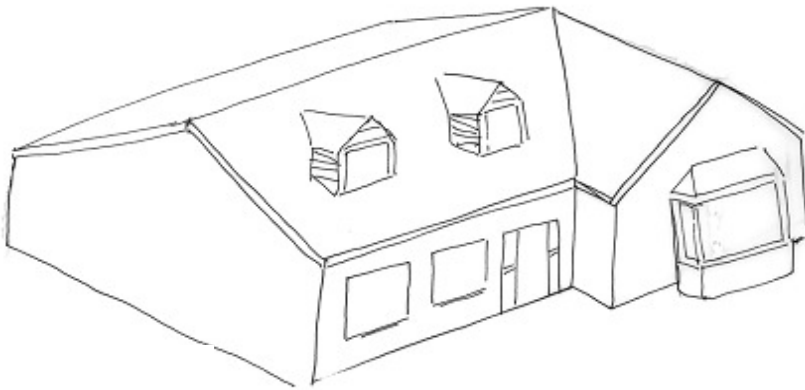


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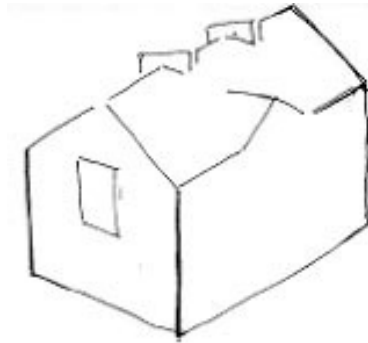


1 + Half Storey

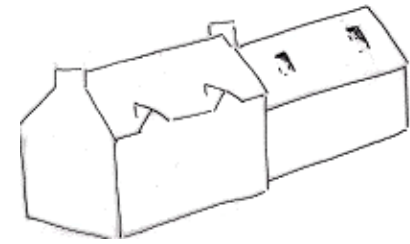
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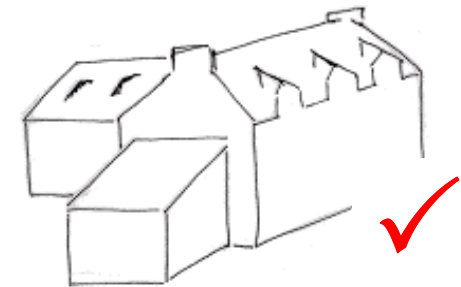
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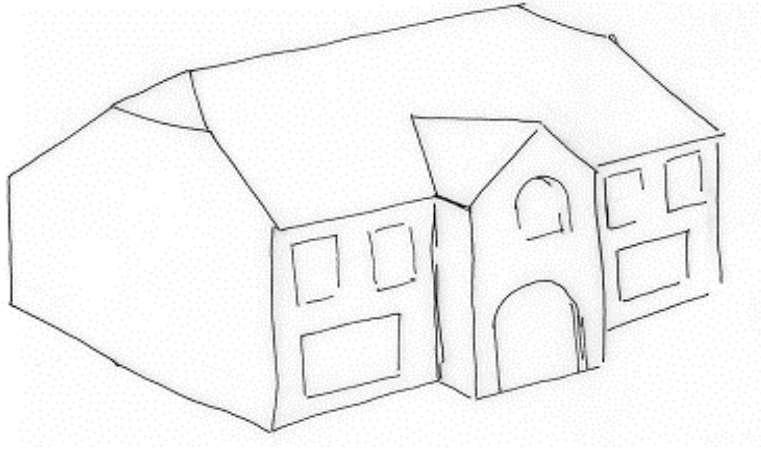


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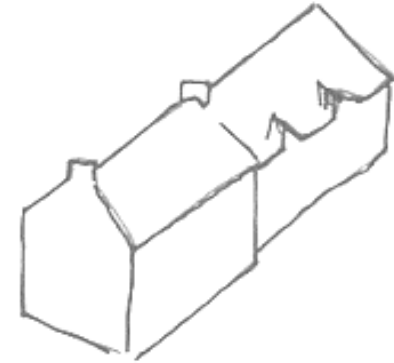


Two Storey

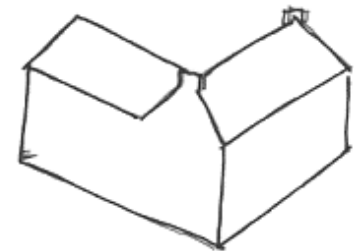
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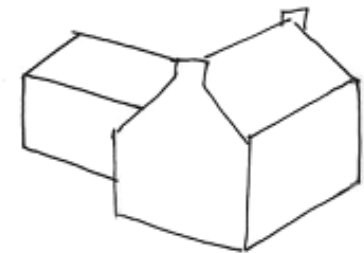
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9.3.4 Solidity

Solidity of form is inherent in vernacular architecture. The strong, simple style of our vernacular buildings can be utilized in new buildings to ensure solid, attractive forms. The achievement of this form relies heavily on a high **solid to void relationship** and a correct **horizontal to vertical relationship**.

(i) Solid: Void Relationship

Donegal traditional houses inherently display a **high solid wall to low void opening** relationship. This is achieved through the use of vertical door and window openings set within large surface areas of solid wall.

Wall Area should Always Dominate.



Should the **high solid to void ratio be reversed**, as happens when horizontal openings are utilised and window space dominates, the structure **loses strength and balance**.

Window Space should Never Dominate.



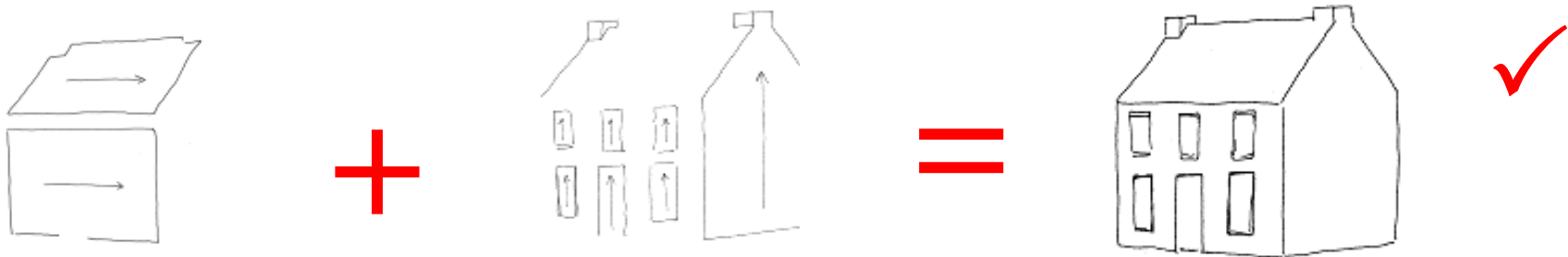
(ii) Horizontal: Vertical Relationship

The use of vertical door and window openings set within large areas of solid wall also plays an important role in ensuring a correct horizontal to vertical relationship. Traditional buildings achieved solid, elegant, slimmed down proportions through an assembly of strongly vertical and strongly horizontal elements.

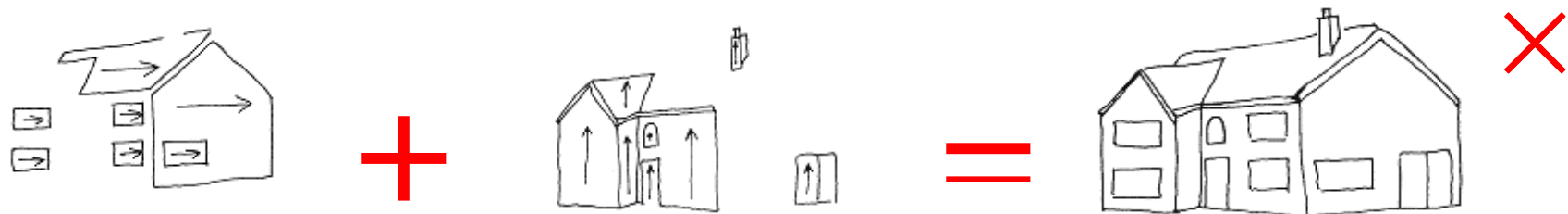
The aim for new home designers is to ensure the correct balance of

- Vertical Elements: Door and Window Openings, Chimneys and Gables
- Horizontal Elements: Roof, Front and Rear Wall Plates

Horizontal Emphasis Roof + Horizontal Emphasis Wallplates + Vertical Emphasis Gables, Windows, Doors and Chimneys = Solid Form



Horizontal + Vertical Roof Elements + Vertical Emphasis Front Gable Add On + Vertical Wallplate + Horizontal Emphasis Windows + Horizontal Gable = Jumble of Emphases + Elements = Balance Destroyed



Ensure that both the Solid: Void and Horizontal: Vertical relationships are maintained and solidity of form will result, diverge from it and the balance will be destroyed.

9.4 Encouraging Quality & Longevity

- **The repetition of adjacent house designs and types along roads in rural areas should always be avoided; development of this kind is particularly unattractive, monotonous and suburban in appearance.**

The Council strongly discourages this type of development in rural areas.

- **The Council encourages all new house owners to consider incorporating Lifetime Adaptable construction methods into the design of their home. For more information on this type of design see Section 5.9 in the Urban Design Guidance part of this guide.**