

CLOSE 

Build Your House The Custom House



Beyond McMansions: Fresh Takes on Early American Designs



Russell Versaci Architecture

Viewed from the front, the Chesapeake Tidewater Cottage — updated by Russell Versaci — appears smaller than it actually is, giving the home an approachable and friendly scale. This house type was common in Virginia and Maryland from the earliest colonial times until about 1820.

The end of the housing bubble may also signal the end of the McMansion, that much-maligned symbol of suburban American excess.

Its demise cannot be attributed to the critics' constant harping on the huge size, overdone glitz and mish-mash of historic styles associated with the McMansion, a derogatory term that can cover just about any house an observer considers big and ugly. The public was oblivious, and millions of people bought these houses anyway.

Rather, the shift is largely a matter of practicality, said Middleburg, Va., architect Russell Versaci, who has had many clients seeking alternatives. "The Gen X and Boomers who snapped them up have finally concluded that owning all that space that needed to be furnished, heated and maintained but was rarely used was illogical."

What will take the McMansion's place?

There's no one solution, but there are sensible premises that many homeowners forgot during the McMansion era, Versaci said.

His advice to clients: Build only rooms that you will use everyday and make your house as energy efficient as you can afford.

What would such a house look like? Versaci would urge you to take some cues from America's rich cultural heritage in domestic architecture, which he describes in his recent book "Roots of Home: Our Journey to a New Old House" (Taunton, \$45).

During the first 200 years of settlement, immigrants from six regions of Europe settled in virgin territory along the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific Coasts and the Southwest, Versaci said. Each European region had many architectural traditions; across the newly settled lands there were as many as 24 distinct house types, and some are better known than you might think. The Swedes, who settled in what is now Delaware, built what eventually became the quintessential symbol of the American frontier, the log cabin.

There have been some misattributions as well. The "Dutch Colonial," with its angled, gambrel roof, was actually introduced by English settlers in Connecticut. But, Versaci said, the door style with glass panes that is known as a "French door" really did come from France.

Despite the many differences in the appearance of the houses, they shared a common thread, Versaci said. Most of the early settlers were from farming villages where house forms had evolved

slowly over centuries. Building traditions were based on practicality rather than aesthetics. A homeowner might change a roof detail because it made the roof shed water better, not because it looked better. After his neighbors observed that the modification was an improvement, they altered their roofs, too. Eventually everyone did so, and it became simply "the way we build roofs." Subsequent generations often had no idea why their roofs had a particular profile, they just knew it kept the rain out.

In the New World, the houses continued to evolve, but some details that were no longer needed remained because of custom.

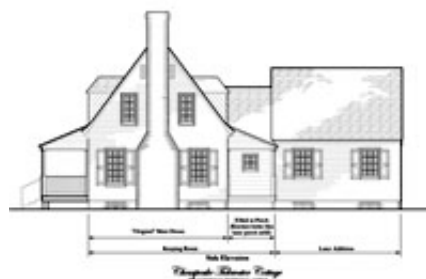
A good example of this, Versaci said, were the houses of the Flemish farmers who settled in the Hudson River Valley and northern New Jersey. Their roofs had a bell curve at the drip edge along the eave line that projected three to four feet beyond the exterior wall. The roof's curve was an embellishment, but back in Flanders, its projection protected the mud walls below from water damage caused by heavy rain.

In the areas where these Flemish farmers settled, they found an abundance of stone to use for their walls. The projecting bell curve became extraneous, but it continues to this day in an abbreviated form, as a sentimental reminder of this old tradition, Versaci said.

Another example of sentiment trumping function is window shutters. These were once operable and could be folded in to protect window openings. The ones on new houses are nailed on and too small to cover anything, Versaci said, but homeowners want them anyway.

While I found this history fascinating, eventually I had to ask: How do you adopt centuries-old house forms to 21st century living?

Versaci explained the process by describing one of his current designs that is based on a Chesapeake Tidewater-style house. This house type was widely built in Maryland and Virginia from the earliest Colonial times until about 1820, and many can still be found in those areas as well as in Colonial Williamsburg.



Russell Versaci Architecture

Chesapeake Tidewater homes had two parts – the "original" main house and later additions strung out the back. Versaci has retained the historic footprint but reconfigured the interior.

The first cue Versaci took from this historical model was its size.

A typical Chesapeake Tidewater house that might have belonged to a shop owner in Williamsburg or the nearly identical house of a farmer in the surrounding countryside was about 1,000 square feet, divided between two floors.

Although the house is small by today's standards, a modern observer would note that the spaces feel comfortable, not cramped. Over time, most households added rooms. In some cases the additions doubled the usable floor area to a size that would suit many homeowners today, Versaci said.

The second cue Versaci would take from this historical model is its massing, that is, the arrangement of shapes.

The area of a typical Chesapeake Tidewater house was not incorporated into a single box, as most houses are today. It had a hierarchy of parts. The biggest one was the original house; the later additions were always off the back and, in most cases, each one was progressively smaller. From the street the additions are hidden; only the oldest part of the house can be seen. As a result, the house appears to be smaller than it actually is and, more important to a visitor, the scale is very inviting.

Versaci takes his third cue from the simplicity of his historical model's floor plan.



The basic building block and the oldest part of the Chesapeake Tidewater house was 1 1/2 stories. The first floor had a central hall with a room on each side. The far end of each room had a



Russell Versaci Architecture

First-floor plan of the updated Chesapeake Tidewater Cottage. In the old days the front porch was the center of household activity during the hot and humid summer months. The "keeping room" was where all household activities took place when it was colder.

large fireplace and chimney. One of the rooms was a "best parlor," used for entertaining visitors. The other was a "keeping room," where all the household activities took place during the colder months. During summer, everyone migrated to the front porch. The small attic on the second floor was used for sleeping. The space in the later additions was variously used for storage, as a workroom or kitchen, for servants' quarters or to house livestock.

Versaci's 2008 version of the Chesapeake Tidewater house is somewhat bigger than the original, with 2,450 square feet, but the proportions and the basic layout are the same. The main part of the house is divided between a first-floor master suite and an updated "keeping room" that includes a modern kitchen.



Russell Versaci Architecture

Second-floor sleeping areas are tucked under the roof, as in Colonial times.

To make the house work for a modern household, he plays some visual tricks. The updated keeping room needed more area than he could get into his updated "main part," so he extended it out the back. From the outside, the kitchen area of the keeping room appears to be a later addition. A second wing off the back, which might have housed livestock in an earlier era, has a second bedroom and bath that could also be a home office. Two more bedrooms are on the second floor of the main part. A porch runs across the front of the house.

Although Versaci focused on a single historical house type, he said that a sensibly designed house can borrow from many eras and that homeowners "should pick and choose and not put themselves in an architectural, historical straitjacket."

For more Versaci designs: www.russellversaci.com

November 2008

CLOSE

© 2003-2009 Katherine Salant