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# SouthernAccents

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## Roots of Home

In his latest book, architect Russell Versaci explores the influences that inspired American architecture

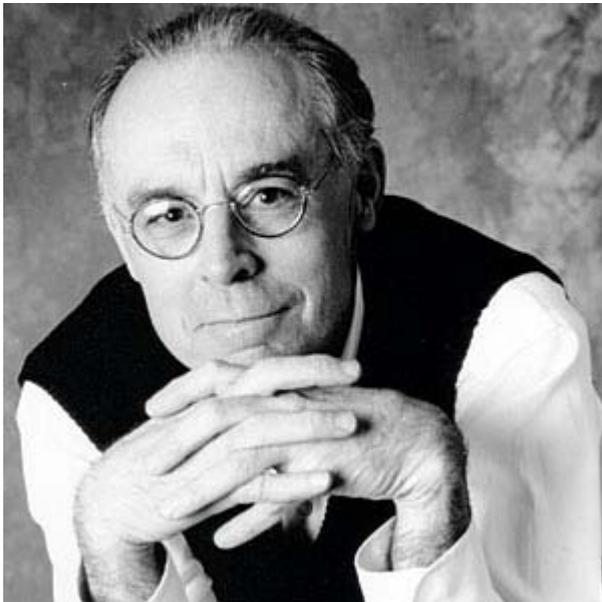


Photo: Sarah Huntington

Architect Russell Versaci's latest project is something of a prequel to his 2003 release, *Creating a New Old House* (The Taunton Press, \$40). The settlers of long ago were also the home builders and artisans who brought traditional construction methods to the New World and creatively translated their traditions to the topography, climate, and raw materials of America.

In *Roots of Home: Our Journey to a New Old House* (The Taunton Press, \$45), available in October, Versaci looks at this lineage and peels back the layers of influence for a beautiful and engaging look at the places we call home. With archival images, maps, and definitions sprinkled among lush new photographs by Erik Kvalsvik, this is a coffee table book with a larger mission.

***Southern Accents*: Your previous book, in which you tackle the concept of building houses that adhere to traditional design principles, really resonated with readers. What is it about old houses that intrigues us so?**

**Russell Versaci:** Old houses remind us of a time when life was simpler, less stressful, of places we lived in or visited where we felt safe and cared for. I think of them as grandmothers' houses. Because we yearn to feel secure and connected again in a shifting world, we are drawn to old houses and the feelings they evoke.

**You identify "colonial cradles of home," places that each nurtured a distinctive house form. Half are in the South. Since these are often house forms with which we're already familiar, do you find Southerners have a special affinity for your approach to building? And if we're attracted to the look, how can we steer clear of faux traditionalism?**

Tradition has never been forgotten in the South. The old architectural forms are alive and well here because we

revere our heritage as a living tradition rather than a dead end. We are drawn to the styles we know and love through memory and experience, and we are continually updating them for life in the present day. If a new house has traditional details that are not native to our area, that don't serve a purpose, or that seem arbitrarily added, then it is not authentic, not traditional. We know a fraud when we see it but are often unable to explain exactly why. Knowing our region's building customs and elements of style makes us more discerning.

**Maybe one of the biggest surprises is your debunking of the myth of the log cabin's frontier origins. You trace it back to the medieval cottages of Scandinavia. How did you discover this?**

*Roots of Home* required huge amounts of research to tease out the details of early building styles and ground them in the story of our country's founding. Working backward, we found that the iconic log cabin was adopted by William Penn for his Pennsylvania colonists from the short-lived colony of New Sweden in southern New Jersey and Delaware. There, the first log cabins had been built by settlers from the heavily forested areas of Sweden and Finland, where people had been building log houses for centuries. Each American tradition has built on a previous one, mostly imported from the Old World, and only a few have emerged independently. These connections are what is so intriguing about America's story of home.

**Within each category of influence, you show new houses that beautifully illustrate your points. How did you find these houses?**

We did a lot of Googling. We wanted to find examples of new old houses to show that the old traditions are still fresh, still evolving. We began by looking at the portfolios of firms that are members of the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America. We also looked at new traditional homes that had won design awards or had appeared in magazines that feature classic houses, such as Southern Accents. We contacted colleagues and posted on Listservs, and when those sources ran dry, we turned to the American Institute of Architects to look at the Web sites of hundreds of firms. It was a painstaking treasure hunt.

**You've been practicing architecture for more than two decades. How did you become interested in it?**

A flair for the artistic was hardwired in my family. My mother is an art historian and museum curator, my father is a plastic surgeon, and both parents are avid art collectors. My two sisters went into creative professions -- fashion design and the theater -- and I followed my brother into architecture, after starting as a sculptor, furnituremaker, and preservationist. I have approached architecture as a craftsman rather than as a theorist. I like to hold the making of a house in my hands, to feel what materials it's made of and how the artisans fashion the parts. Knowing the craft is what makes me a traditionalist.

**What is your own house like?**

I live in a tiny 1740s Virginia German stone farmhouse, the original home on an old farm that now sits right on the fairway of a golf course. It's 1,600 square feet with well-worn heart-pine floors, beamed ceilings, and cast-iron rim locks, and nothing is plumb or square. I'm in traditionalist heaven. When I moved there 10 years ago, I thought it would be a temporary roost until my fiancée and I could find a large, gracious old Southern home, or the right land on which to build. But that hasn't happened yet, and, actually, it's been a blessing. Our ideas of what we need and want in a house have changed a lot in the past decade.

**You advocate thinking globally and building locally. What do we gain by this?**

Building a new home in the style that is native to your area is really a green way to build. The old building traditions were developed by our forefathers with great respect for the natural world and the power of climate and weather. For years Americans behaved as if weather was merely an inconvenience; after all, we had air-conditioning and heating, cars and office jobs. But recently we have seen the realities of fossil fuel depletion and climate change; places have been leveled by huge natural disasters. As a result, we have begun to regain the respect for the natural world that guided our ancestors' lives. By using local building techniques, we create houses that stand up to the weather, use less energy, and take advantage of native materials. It's a natural way to build that's "traditional-green" rather than "techno-green." The result is homes that enhance the places we love.

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