

by Russell Versaci

The New Old House

The ninth of your ten favorite stories identifies the principles that make a new house traditional and timeless

In my architectural practice I have designed new old Southern homes for 17 years. In the process, I have developed some simple rules of thumb. I call these the Pillars of Traditional Design. They serve as creative guidelines that keep me focused while I design homes that are authentic and timeless but still work for today. The pillars are not exclusive to the South. They can be applied to design a genuine traditional home in any region of the country.

EIGHT PILLARS OF TRADITIONAL DESIGN

1. Invent within the rules. The language of every traditional style, whether Spanish Colonial, English Georgian, or Greek Revival, is recorded in a common set of rules that have guided generations of builders. These rules of style are tools that shape the outline of the house, govern the appropriate materials to use, and determine the way the details go together. You can create a new design by inventing clever arrangements for a floor plan or a distinctive detail--like a unique suite of rooms or a new interpretation of a front porch. When you invent within the rules, you build fresh ideas that push traditional forms in new direction.

2. Respect the character of place. A new old house should blend into its setting by working with the natural landscape and by fitting in with the neighboring houses. You should choose a place where the house will settle into the lay of the land rather than be perched on display. Look at local building traditions for clues about what to build. Notice the shapes, building materials, and decorative details of old houses, and then use them as a creative springboard. By taking the time to study the local architecture, you will discover themes to help you create a new house that looks like it has always been there.

3. Build for the ages. Most old houses were made of rugged materials that have withstood the test of time, and their permanence makes them genuine. Shoddy construction and cheap materials make even a well-designed house look fragile and inauthentic. In a new old house, every part should reassure you that it is solid and meant to last. Sturdy materials are more expensive, but they pay for themselves in building character and durability for the long run.

4. Tell a story over time. Every new old house should have a story to tell about where it came from and why it looks the way it does. Part of the charm of a real old house is that it tells a tale of changes over time. In a new house, you can script a story of growth over many years--a room that was remodeled, a wing that was added, or a screen porch that was glassed in--picturing the house as an accumulation of additions. With this fiction, you

enrich the experience of the house by covering its newness with a mantle of make-believe.

5. Detail for authenticity. For a new old house to look true to form, the characteristics of a traditional style must be faithfully reproduced. Details like the type of windows, the construction of the cornice, the finish materials, and the molding profiles are the elements that give a house character. Study these elements of style in period houses and history museums in your own community. Look at the distinctive parts of design, think about how they fit together, and build them in their proper place for an authentic look.

6. Craft with natural materials. Natural building materials like wood and stone have an organic beauty that cannot be reproduced in synthetic substitutes. Fieldstone walls and heart pine floors have textures that are rich and warm, while synthetics like paste-on stone and plastic laminate look homogenized, cold, and lifeless. When you build a new old house, craftsmanship should be worked into every detail for the tight fit of a stone wall or the crisp joinery of a mitered door frame.

7. Create the patina of age. To create the distinctive patina of age that mellows an old house, you can use new materials and let nature take its course. Exposure to wind and weather will buff a wall of painted clapboard to a satin sheen and mute handmade brick to soft earth tones after several years of rain and mildew. And antique building parts make the house look old from the beginning. Recycled pine floors and antique doorknobs will reveal marks of wear from years of handling and preserve a bit of history.

8. Incorporate modern convenience. Most of the essential creature comforts of modern living need to be woven unobtrusively into the fabric of a new old house. You can find places for modern spaces such as eat-in kitchens, family rooms, laundries, and home offices by reworking the plan or by designing them into a wing with the character of an old addition. New technology--air conditioning, computer systems, or the television--can be concealed in the structure of the house if considered in the planning stages.

By keeping these Pillars of Tradition in mind, you can create a new old house that passes the mantle of tradition to the next generation.

Source:

A. Russell Versaci, Versaci Neumann & Partners, 205 E. Washington St., P.O. Box 186, Middleburg, VA 20117, 540/687-3917.

© Copyright Southern Progress Corporation, 2008, All rights reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)

(<http://southernaccents.com/accents/homes/architecture/article/0,14743,410846,00.html>)