

Dream Small

Architect Russell Versaci combines timeless 19th-century details with today's building techniques for this compact Virginia retreat. | *Article: Jennifer Kopf*



At only 550 square feet, this tiny house delivers Neoclassical grandeur in a pint-size package.

Photo: Erik Kvalsvik



Square post columns, Classical fascia, traditional window casings and operable shutters, and copper gutters and downspouts give this home historic charm.

Photo: Erik Kvalsvik

straight out of the 19th century.

This home's white clapboard walls and dark shutters are a classic combo. What are your go-to paint colors?

Colonial Williamsburg has really mastered the essential Southern color palette with its historical-colors collection by Pratt & Lambert. On this house, I used Williamsburg Courthouse White with Market Square Tavern Dark Green. (prattandlambert.com)

Most people don't give the roof much thought except when it's leaking. How important is the roofline?

If you use the wrong roof style for the look you're going for, your house will never look right. This cottage has a shallow, hipped roof, which is traditional for Southern homes. Unlike the New England colonists, Southerners didn't need their roofs to shed ice and snow, so they copied roof forms from the Classical temples of Greece and Rome. These led to the front porches that became emblems of Southern hospitality.

What makes a house Southern?

Southern architecture is distinguished by generous front porches, oversize windows and French doors, louvered wood shutters, and flickering gas lanterns.

You've coined the phrase "new old house." What makes the cut?

A new old house blends the psychic comforts of the past with creature comforts of the present. We love the look of old houses with classic windows and doors, shutters, front porches, telltale roofs, and all the molding details. But we also want a house that works for today—floor plans for modern family living, low-maintenance materials, and energy efficiency. Building new-old makes all of that possible.

What's the biggest mistake you see with newly built homes?

Too often, people opt for size alone and cheap out on the details. To get a historic look that rings true, study old houses and pick details to invest in, such as molding profiles that are verified by history, window shutters that actually work, columns that are well proportioned, and true divided-light windows without snap-in grilles. Do your homework first and you'll be much more satisfied.

As a Southerner, who is your all-time favorite architect from our region?

Thomas Jefferson, a gentleman architect and scholar who mastered Classicism and translated it into a personal style. Poplar Forest, his retreat near Lynchburg, Virginia, is his true masterpiece.

Russell Versaci knows new old houses. As the author of two books on the subject, he's an expert on the details that instill new buildings with historic charm. But he also understands the importance of modern materials and floor plans. Seeing a void in the new homes market, Russell designed a series of factory-built homes called Pennywise to deliver classic style at a lower cost and less build time than traditional construction. From cottage retreats to four-bedroom farmhouses, the collection offers a wide assortment of customizable homes that are rooted in traditional Southern architecture but designed for the cost-effective, convenient modular-build process. We sat down with Russell to learn more about his take on Southern architecture, the new old house, and the recently built Pennywise project shown above.

This little cottage is a charmer! What are the origins of its design?

The Southern Piedmont Retreat has its roots in the 19th century. English and Scots-Irish settlers migrated south along the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains from Virginia to Georgia and left cottages like this one all along the way. These early settlers' homes may have been simple and humble, but they were adorned with Classical details, such as temple-shaped front porches, cornices, columns, and crown moldings.

I can't believe this house is modular. How did you get a factory-built house that doesn't look prefab?

In the past, the term "prefab" always meant a mobile home, but it's used today to describe a house that's built in parts in a factory and then assembled on-site. Computer-aided manufacturing makes it possible to cut and assemble pieces with precision—in just a quarter of the time it would take by hand.

What role do materials play in balancing style with function?

I love using natural building materials such as cedar clapboard and handmade bricks, but they aren't always practical. Much of this cottage was built with synthetic materials that simulate the real McCoy, such as fiber-cement siding, solid PVC windows and doors, and recycled-plastic roof shingles. While I'm a stickler for authentic-looking details, I'm also convinced that the best of tradition can be re-created using modern methods and materials.

Tell me about the windows.

Double-hung windows flanked by shutters are a staple of American architecture. Even though they are made of PVC, these windows look