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Architects Take a Page From the Past For Inspiration in Designing New Houses That Have A Touch of Nostalgia.

Old Look, Modern Living



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE REY — THE WASHINGTON POST

By SCOTT SOWERS
Special to The Washington Post

Customers routinely stumble into architects' offices carrying pictures of houses cut out of magazines and catalogues. The designers find themselves staring into the images of homes built before their parents were born while trying to figure how they would work a Sub-Zero refrigerator into a 19th-century kitchen. There's a reason people are drawn to old houses. The new ones just don't have the character, the lines or the look that says they have been there for 100 years or so. Logic says that if you could find the right set of plans and stay true to them, you could build a house that looks the way they used to -- a house that fits in the neighborhood and appears as if it has always been there.

But at what cost, and who would do it? The builders, architects and homeowners who are successful at looking to the past for inspiration are using the proportions and scale of a bygone era and modifying floor plans to accommodate modern life. The results are new-construction houses that routinely pass for period bungalows, farmhouses and stone-clad vernacular Georgians.

"As Americans, we're heavy consumers and everything is mass-produced. We're not trying to be the design police, but I think houses that are built back to scale and the spirit of the neighborhood gives you a sense of connectiveness," said Eleanor Griffin, editor-in-chief of Cottage Living magazine. In the brutally competitive publishing industry, her magazine is considered a success with 900,000 subscribers. Its most popular column is called "New Old House."

Going back to the past to find inspiration for present-day home design may be born out of dismay for what's available. "What we didn't want was a typical Northern Virginia Colonial," said Daphne Hendricks, a stay-at-home mother with three children. "We didn't want a McMansion. We like the simple lines and character of older homes."

Jim and Daphne Hendricks Wanted a design that resembled a New England farmhouse. Their house in Vienna includes, below, a kitchen-family room, a linear living room and a large front porch. At top, older houses that served as inspiration.



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Marta Hansen-Allbright, architect, Allbright Hansen Architects of Annapolis



PHOTO COURTESY MARTA HANSEN-ALLBRIGHT

This Edgewater, Md., house, designed by Allbright Hansen Architects of Annapolis for the Riera family, is patterned after an architectural archetype known as a Five Part Maryland Colonial House Type, which dates back to the 1770s.

A Blast From the Past for Today's New-Home Owners

NOSTALGIA, From F1

Her quest landed her and her husband, Jim, who is a mortgage analyst, in the office of architect Gretchen Ginnerty, whose firm Design Department is in McLean. "They came to me and said, 'Do you know anything about New England farmhouses?'" Ginnerty said. Ginnerty grew up in Connecticut and had a strong background in American architectural history. The Hendrickses bought a chunk of land in Vienna that had an expendable rambler on it and began kicking around designs. The challenge was squeezing modern life into the sitting rooms and parlors of turn-of-the-century, rural American architecture. "That did come up and we had a hard time fitting it in," Ginnerty said.

To blend the old into the new, the Hendrickses' floor plan opens into a two-story entrance with a staircase running up the exterior side wall. A linear living room plays the role of parlor, which leads to a not-extravagant dining room. The dining room connects to a large kitchen-family room that stretches across the back of the house. "It's almost a surprise," Ginnerty said. "When you walk in, the spaces are tight and predictable, but as you move to the back of the house it breaks free." The 4,000-square-foot, four-bedroom plan includes a not overly large master suite, a mud room off the kitchen, a downstairs powder room, a full basement and three full baths.

Construction took six months and cost \$400,000 to \$450,000, excluding land costs. Lots in the neighborhood are selling for at least \$600,000, which usually includes an aging rancher, a fact that shakes the illusion of seeing a New England farmhouse suddenly appearing in Northern Virginia. But that may be changing.

"If you look at our street, they were all post-war ramblers that are getting knocked down, and there is another new farmhouse-style here, so we were not the trendsetters," Hendricks said. The attraction of building history from scratch is strong, said Clark Simpson, owner of Mickey Simpson Ltd., an architectural and building firm in Arlington. "I sell them at full price before I finish them," he said. "They fit into the neighborhood because of the styling and the detailing."

Simpson's big seller is a model he calls the Highland because the first one he built was on Highland Avenue in Arlington. The inspiration for the design was a Sears, Roebuck catalogue from 1926. "We have a reprint of the catalogue and we can find houses in that catalogue right in this neighborhood," Simpson said. Rather than trying to pull off a half-hearted attempt at fakery, he said, the company pays attention to the fine points. "We have looked at so many houses built in the '20s and the catalogues, especially proportions, trim details like beaded porch ceilings, two-over-two window grids, and we put an intense amount of detail into the exteriors." The model has been so successful that Simpson now offers it in three different sizes from 2,700 to 5,400



PHOTO COURTESY MICKEY SIMPSON LTD.

This Arlington house was inspired by a 1926 Sears catalogue, but with four bathrooms, it's bigger than its forebear.

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square feet. Ross and Lauren Ashley recently bought one of the bigger models. They picked the neighborhood where they wanted to live and waited for a lot to open up. Simpson owned a lot, but there was already a house on it. The Ashleys bought it, knocked down the house and hired Simpson to build them a Highland. "We like the exterior because from the front it doesn't look like a huge 5,200-square-foot house," Ross Ashley said. "We get a lot of people who come in and say, 'So what did you remodel?'" The Ashleys' old-looking new house, which is about 5,400 square feet, including the "sleeping porch," was aesthetically pleasing enough and had enough passing grades in the coziness factor, to warrant a spread in Cottage Living.

The five-bedroom, four-bath house was built in about eight months for \$1.6 million, including the land. To break out of the small spaces typically found in houses of the 1920s, Simpson configured the floor plan so it would make sense for the present day. "The rooms are proportional to modern homes, so it's not a problem in the 5,400-square-foot model — even in the smaller ones it's not a problem," he said. But the idea of using new materials and methods to purposely build something that looks old can still be a head

"The client said she wanted a house that looked very traditional and like it had always been there. She brought images to me from the Colonial era and Craftsman," said architect Marta Hansen-Allbright of Allbright Hansen Architects of Annapolis. "I was finally working on a new house, but the images she brought were from restoration homes. I thought it was ironic."

Hansen's own style leans toward the modern, but her clients, Cindy and Bob Riera, preferred an old-school approach for what was to go on the water-view lot in Edgewater.

"I like older things," Cindy Riera said. "I lived in an old farmhouse in Annapolis where you had to go into the root cellar to change the heat." Cindy teaches fifth grade; her husband is a defense contractor. They spent years moving from house to house as second-generation Navy families. When they decided to build their own place, they worried over the design. Until they got it the way they wanted it, "It took about a

be somewhat protected.

In the Rieras's modern interpretation of the Five Part, the master suite is in one wing, the guest quarters in another and the kitchen is in the back of the main building. Hansen-Allbright used red brick and white wood trim for the blocky main building, two stalwart materials of vernacular Georgian architecture.

The wings are clad in wood, which helps with the illusion of age. "We tried to strip it down in the middle so the wings look like they were added on," Hansen-Allbright said. "It keeps the parts discrete."

Another trick she used to make the house look older was placing a cellar door at the front of the house, where it would have been 200 years ago. The result is a stream of guests who are routinely fooled about the true age of the house.

Carter Morrow of Bay Homes in Loudoun County, who built the Hendrickses' home, sees a market for these new-old houses. "It's different and distinctive and fits in well in neighborhoods of smaller homes," he said. "It's not a McMansion and it's not a starter castle."

Morrow has since built another house using a slightly modified version of the Hendricks design and plans more. He calls them the Oak model, and sees potential for a traditional, non-fussy approach to house design.

"It's simple and classic architecture, an efficient floor plan, not particularly tough to build, and they have killer

kitchens with 40 square feet of counter space right in the heart of the house," Morrow said.

Taking suggestions from Hendricks, Morrow started with the original design, widened some of the windows and provided a bit more space to a computer niche in the kitchen. He also took the back-to-the-past feeling to another level by adding scavenged stained-glass panels and barn beams to the interior.

"One of the things we do is to take some of the Armor All sheen off and add some patina," Morrow said. The secondhouse was built speculatively, but appealed to buyers.

"I had it sold as soon as I could sell it," he said. "I could have sold it three or four times already."