



AIA Best Practices: Eight pillars of traditional design

Excerpted from *Creating a New Old House: Yesterday's Character for Today's Home*, by Russell Versaci, AIA. Reprinted with permission.

Summary

Russell Versaci, AIA, explains how to create a new old house using the following eight pillars of design: Invent within the rules, respect the character of the place, tell a story over time, build for the ages, detail for authenticity, craft with natural materials, create the patina of age, and incorporate modern conveniences.

In search of the new old house

Imagining a new house can be daunting. Many people are confounded by the idea of building—wondering what the house should look like, how to make it feel comfortable, and whether it will reflect a personal style. They tour new homes looking for ideas, yet most of the new homes are cookie-cutter copies and ordinary. In their search for the perfect image, they realize that a weave of textures with the patina of age acquires a seductive charm that draws them irresistibly toward old houses.

What they really want is a brand-new house wrapped in the raiment of an old house—a new old house. A new old house combines the emotional comforts of yesterday with the creature comforts of today. After years of designing new houses that have a traditional pedigree, I have learned the design concepts that are essential to shaping a vision for a new old house. I call these principles the Pillars of Traditional Design. They are the building blocks that guide the design of an authentic traditional home with true historic roots.

Pillar one: Invent within the rules

The language of every traditional style—whether Pueblo adobe, Spanish Colonial, Greek Revival, or Craftsman—is recorded in a common set of rules that have guided the designs of generations of builders. These rules are tools that shape the outline of the house, govern the appropriate materials to use, and determine the way the details go together.

Designing a new house using a traditional style is not simply the act of copying from the past. While the historic shapes, building materials, and decorative details of old houses can be studied to find out what makes them work, it is possible to be creative with classic style. Ideas for new designs spring from the rules of tradition. Inventing within the rules builds fresh ideas that push traditional forms in a new direction.

Pillar two: Respect the character of place

A new traditional house complements its setting by respecting the character of the place in which it is built. By working with the natural features of the land and by fitting into the distinctive pattern of the neighborhood, a new house can blend into its setting and appear to belong there.

Old-time builders chose house sites that were protected from the weather by topography, sheltered by trees, and close to natural attributes like a hill or pond. An ideal site is one where the house will settle into the lay of the land rather than be perched up on display. A natural saddle of ground where there is a mature stand of trees serves as a backdrop for the house, and it anchors the house in its surroundings as if it had always been there.

Pillar three: Tell a story over time

Part of the charm of an old house is that it tells a tale of changes over time. In a new house, it is possible to 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—portraying the house as an accumulation of additions.

There can be a storyboard, or a scene-by-scene description, of the history of the house. A new house acquires the soul of the past when it tells a story that covers its newly minted form in a mantle of make-believe.

Pillar four: Build for the ages

Most old houses were made of rugged materials that have withstood the test of time. Poor-quality materials make even a well-designed house look fragile and inauthentic. A carefully executed traditional house is solid and meant to last—from the masonry foundations to the hardware to the interior moldings.

A traditional house should be built with long-lasting materials and time-tested construction techniques. There are no substitutes for clapboard siding, stick-built roof rafters, solid-wood doors, and windows with true-divided panes. These sturdy materials are expensive initially, but they pay for themselves in building character and durability for the long run.

Pillar five: Detail for authenticity

The success of a new old house depends on incorporating details that look familiar and true to form. Details like the shape of the roof, type of windows, molding profiles, and finish materials will look best if they follow historic patterns. The characteristics of a traditional style can be faithfully reproduced from pattern books. Period houses and living-history museums also provide powerful clues about what to build, how historic patterns fit together, and how they are used in their proper places to fashion an authentic home.

Pillar six: Craft with natural materials

Natural building materials such as wood and stone have an organic beauty that synthetic substitutes cannot reproduce. Fieldstone walls, wood clapboards, and heart pine floors have surface textures that are rich and warm; but synthetic materials such as vinyl siding and plastic laminate look homogenized, cold, and lifeless. Painsstaking craftsmanship with natural materials should be worked into every detail, from the fit of a stone wall to the crisp joinery of a mitered door frame.

Pillar seven: Create the patina of age

The distinctive patina of age that burnishes an old house to a mellow vintage can be reproduced by letting nature take its course on a well-chosen selection of new natural materials. Wind and weather will buff a wall of painted clapboard to a satin sheen. And the colors of handmade brick or stone will mute into earth tones after years of rain and mildew work their magic.

By incorporating antique building parts into the construction, a new house looks old from the beginning because it is built with materials that have a time-worn natural patina of instant credibility. Salvaged building parts—such as doors, mantelpieces, and light fixtures—preserve a bit of history tempered by time. Recycled pine floors and antique door knobs reveal marks of wear from years of handling that are telltale signs of their past.

Pillar eight: Incorporate modern conveniences

Most of the essential creature comforts of modern living can be woven into the fabric of a traditional house without being intrusive or overwhelming. New functions that never existed in old houses—bathrooms with indoor plumbing, eat-in kitchens, family rooms, laundries, and home offices—can be integrated into the layout of a traditional floor plan by rearranging the pattern of rooms.

New technical innovations—such as the heating and air-conditioning systems, computer networks, security detectors, and televisions—can be concealed within the structure of the house. Most of these systems can be inserted into the framing without intruding on the finished work. Special features such as control panels can be hidden in wall cabinets, behind grilles, or within secret compartments. Seamlessly weaving these conveniences into the house during the planning stage preserves the ambience of the old by integrating the new with craft and ingenuity.

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Chapter 10 – Design Project Management

Section 05 – Design Phases