

Pennywise

SKETCHES BY ANDREW LEWIS

Russell Versaci offers a cure for the common McMansion.

If the American dream is no longer a muscle mansion with an urban assault vehicle parked out front, what's next? A sea change is coming, and it's time for the home-building industry to rethink its game plan.

With the collapse of the mortgage market and the rising specter of oil depletion, the warning signs are clear. Americans are parting company with their McMansions, SUVs, and all the other goodies that cheap credit and cheap gas made possible. Good-bye to the era of easy money and fancy new homes with fancy price tags. Home builders, having bet it all on suburban sprawl, are reeling.

Leading the charge in the changing market are the 80 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Now about to enter their golden years, the baby boomers are ready to move on, and their new priorities don't include big, showy houses in gated subdivisions. Smaller, leaner, and greener are the new bellwethers.

Aging boomers want to spend their money on quality, not quantity. They want smaller homes that are easier to care for and more environmentally friendly. They favor traditional styles that are built to last with high quality materials. And they want to live in places that offer natural beauty, recreation, and real culture. High on the list are smaller cities such as Santa Barbara, Austin, Charlottesville, and Charleston. Not surprisingly, each has a distinctive architectural character that draws newcomers.

Home builders toting bulging portfolios of generic bloated McMansions have little to offer new arrivals who want smaller, more authentic homes. The five-bedroom, five-bath, 5,000-square-foot behemoth is a relic of another era. If builders want to stay in business, they



will have to find new strategies to attract a market that is downsizing.

It's not just the home designs that need slimming. The home-building system itself needs to pare down. Construction costs are out of control because builders are still using a delivery system that hasn't changed much since the Middle Ages. We still gather up sticks and stones, bring them to the job site, trudge through mud and snow, go up and down ladders, cut and hammer in the blazing sun or driving rain, and generally build like medieval housewrights. Stick building houses is expensive and outmoded. With the home-building industry in shambles, there must be a better way.

Here are my suggestions: First, architects need to give home builders designs for smaller traditional homes that will attract maturing home buyers. The houses should be authentic, appropriate to place, and built for the ages.

Russell Versaci's design called the Barrister is from his Simple Farmhouse Portfolio.

Every region of America has a legacy of architectural traditions to serve as inspiration. Our best traditional architects should be drawing on them to design homes that are rich in character and that will be treasured for generations.

Second, home builders need to look for ways to meet new demands in a changing market. Builders know that rising material costs, lack of skilled labor, unpredictable schedules, shoddy workmanship, and dwindling profits are making their trade unworkable—and their products unaffordable. They should look at systems of home delivery that offer a better alternative to stick building.

I'm putting my money on factory prefabrication. One hundred years ago Sears, Roebuck & Company conceived the idea of a house in a box. From 1908 to 1940, Sears manufactured nearly



The Chandler, a Southern planter's house in the vernacular of the Low Country, is another design by Versaci.

100,000 homes, built in distant factories as kits of parts that could be shipped anywhere. Sears kit houses were traditional, well designed, quick to build, and affordable, and Americans gobbled them up. Nowadays Sears kit homes are considered American classics. Today whole neighborhoods of them survive across the country, still prized by their owners and coveted by home buyers.

Following World War II, the kit home was killed off by the rise of mass-produced housing in planned communities like Levittown. At the same time architects gave up on the design of small houses in favor of heavier commissions for the well-heeled, leaving middle-class America with depressingly bad choices. Although today the kit home model has disappeared almost completely, it wouldn't be hard to revive it.

The fact is that America has a huge industry equipped for prefabrication. After touring half a dozen plants, I am convinced that their standards meet or exceed those of stick building. Factory building is efficient, consistently well crafted, and not affected by shortages of local skilled labor. The manufacturing process makes a tighter house that is bound to last longer and require less

upkeep. And that's not all.

There are cost and time advantages, too. According to industry sources, a prefabricated home costs 15 percent less than stick built, and it takes one-third less time to complete. Since all parts are made indoors, weather delays are eliminated. Materials are delivered to the job site from a single source on a reliable timetable, streamlining the delivery schedule. And construction waste going to the landfill is reduced by 25 percent, for a greener footprint.

With the clear benefits of prefabrication and with already-existing facilities, what's holding us back?

Unfortunately, the industry has an image problem. Hobbled by the old stigma of the trailer home, the prefabrication industry is using only 60 percent of its capacity. Part of this is a lack of vision at the top. Prefabricators can't see a way out of their stock-in-trade—building lowend housing—and are missing the future that's right before their eyes.

It would serve them well to get new glasses. Given the dismal climate of the housing industry today, opportunity is knocking. To meet it, prefabricators need to reconsider their strengths, revamp their designs, and reposition

their products.

Architects should do the same because times are changing for us as well. The high-end custom home commissions that were plentiful in the era of easy money are now thinning out. Sure, there will always be “patrons”—the 0.5 percent who can afford to build regardless of cost. But a shrinking pool of patrons will not keep all of us in business.

What about the next tier down, the 20 percent of American households who are customers rather than “patrons”? They are solid middle-class families planning their future homes, and they appreciate the benefits of an architect's design but cannot afford to custom design their home. This group works out to a couple hundred thousand customers who need our help each year, and we should offer them predrawn designs. I am convinced that they are the market of the future.

All of us in the home-building industry need to invent new ways of doing things or, better yet, reinvent good old ones. Having grown my architecture practice in the rarified era of custom-designed and custom-built homes, I have seen change coming for years and have been gearing up for the new market.

In my practice, we have been creating a collection of designs for houses based on America's regional styles—Hudson River Valley, Pennsylvania Dutch, Southern Piedmont, Chesapeake Tidewater, and Carolina Low Country—with more to come. The houses are part of our Simple Farmhouse Portfolio, and they are authentic, affordable, and green. I believe that houses like these are going to define the next chapter for the new old house. This new direction doesn't involve reinventing the wheel, just updating tradition for the new century. Rather than a revolution, it's a rebirth. In the end, I think that's what the new old house is all about. **NOH**

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