

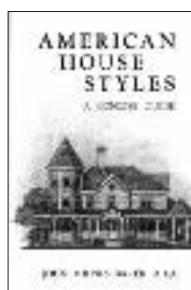
# Searching for Style

by Gordon Tully



John Milnes Baker is an architect from Westchester County, N.Y. His new book, *American House Styles: A Concise Guide* (W.W. Norton and Co., NY, 1994, hardcover), presents an illustrated reference to American house styles, each described with a page or two of well-written history. As such, the book is a useful guide for the real world — the world filled with buyers, brokers, and designers who enjoy identifying houses as if they were birds.

The book is an excellent complement to my “stylistic bible”: *A Field Guide to American Houses*, by Virginia and Lee McAlester (Alfred A. Knopf, NY, 1988, paperback). While the McAlesters’ book illustrates each style with many small photos of real examples, Baker uses an ingenious device to demonstrate the historical changes in residential style. He designed a basic four-bedroom, center-entrance house, then transformed it by applying each style in turn. In this way, he seems to



immediately get to the essence of each style, since only the essential details change while the underlying house remains the same throughout.

*American House Styles* is not a

plan book, but it is a very good field guide, not the least because of Baker’s terrific drawings and historical notes. The author’s approach raises a very interesting question: What exactly is style, anyway?

## The Emperor’s New House

Baker’s book demonstrates that what is currently called “style” is often only a veneer. Like a suit of clothes, modern residential styles reside only in the surface materials, roof form, and trim details. If you pick up these elements, as Baker does in his examples, you might catch the essence of the style. But not

always. Sometimes you have to change the plan, and this is where Baker struggles with the issue of style versus content, of clothes versus the man inside.

The example of the southern Georgian house in the book (Figure 1) illustrates my point. Baker’s design is like a contemporary builder’s house, with all the right superficial stuff — brick veneer, hip roof, big end chimneys, even fancy trim — suggesting the original Georgian prototype. But there is something wrong; it just doesn’t feel like an authentic Georgian house. It doesn’t feel right because the plan is wrong. You can’t catch the essence of a brick-walled Georgian house in a modern, stick-built, Georgian wanna-be.

Compare Baker’s Georgian with a real 1730 southern Georgian brick house — Westover, in Charles City, Va. (Figure 2, page 19). In the original plan, the thick outside bearing walls make a decisive difference. Splayed window niches create important places for window seats and provide sidewalls to store indoor shutters. Thick brick walls provide significant thermal and acoustical control for a feel that stud walls can’t offer.

More important, extensive symmetry is crucial in the original, and is possible for one key reason: The specialized service spaces in the modern plan — kitchen, baths, closets, utility rooms — are simply missing in the original. The true Georgian plan had well-proportioned, symmetrical rooms opening off a central hall. Fireplaces, doors, and windows were arranged symmetrically both outside and inside. Symmetry and refinement are the essence of the style, and such refinements are impossible in Baker’s complicated modern plan.

The lesson is: You can’t take a modern house, apply “Georgian-ness” to it, and thereby make it Georgian. The essence of the style is built right into the plan. The style isn’t just the stuff you add onto a box; it’s an approach to design that runs through every aspect

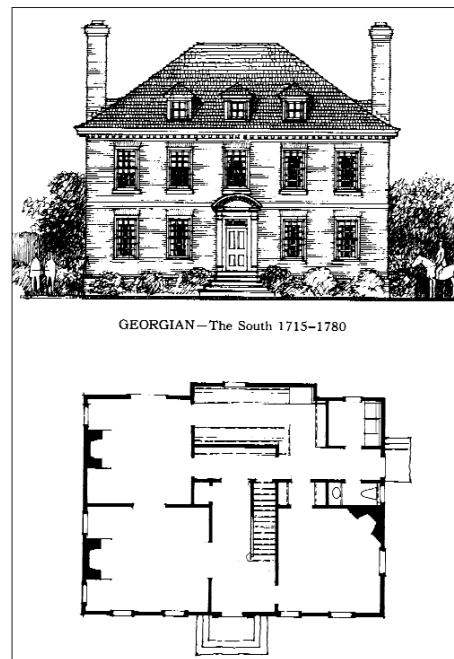
of the house. Traditionally, style was a way of building and not a suit of clothes to put on after the plan and building form were generated. Every aspect of a house was woven together in a stylistic net. In Colonial times, the rules of style so completely determined the manner of building that even the most famous and beautiful homes were designed by the builder in consultation with the owner. Indeed, there was no one practicing as an architect in the colonies in the early 18th century. But judging by the results, the owners were pretty damn good architects.

To judge by contemporary houses, today’s homeowners are lousy architects. Why the difference? It comes back to the subject of this column: When we think of style, we too often think of historical imagery, and not content — the clothes, not the man.

## Ranch-Burger Deluxe

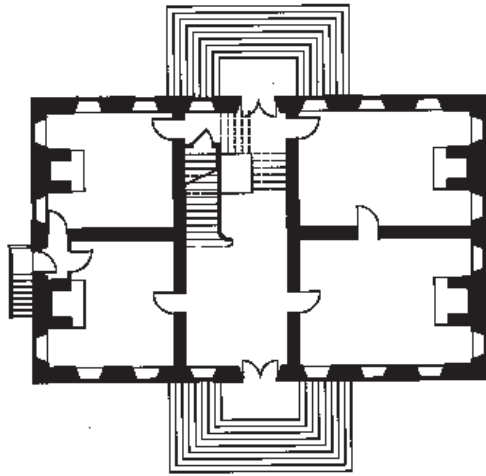
One lesson we get from Baker is that historic styles can be reproduced if you pay attention to the details and don’t go overboard modernizing the plan. Such accurate historical reproductions have their place, as of course do restorations of old houses.

Where designers need to be careful is with the current trends in “period”



**Figure 1.** A southern Georgian house (1715–1780), from *American House Styles*, by John Milnes Baker. The exterior is accurate for the period; the interior plan has been modernized to include a kitchen and utility rooms.

## Westover



**Figure 2.** *The interior of a true southern Georgian — Westover, in Charles City, Va. — has a different feel than the contemporary plan in Figure 1. The period building has thick brick walls with splayed window seats and a floor plan that is symmetrical throughout. Specialized service spaces in the modern plan — kitchen, baths, closets, utility rooms — are missing in the original.*

house design. In many cases, cost, environmental pressures, and degenerating standards of taste have led designers and builders to boil down stylistic elements until only tiny details serve to label the style. Cover a ranch-burger with tan stucco, tile the roof, and it is Southwestern. Put vinyl clapboards with plastic corner boards on the same ranch, add plastic shutters and a paneled front door, and Poof! it's Colonial.

Or take a look at any plan book of "Queen Anne" Victorian houses. Because the houses are designed from the outside in, the plans are very bad, often featuring windowless kitchens, useless porches without screens, useless towers, and big double-height entry halls. Good design has been sacrificed for imagery. But people still buy these things because they are buying into an image, or a perceived lifestyle. Maybe it's a vision of kids in their Laura Ashley nightgowns curled up on a window seat reading. Or maybe it's a Colonial fantasy, with the family in the great room, eating roast turkey in front of a crackling fire while the wolves howl outside.

### Sell Good Design

Baker's book can be an inspiration in the search for style. A careful read through *American House Styles* can help you weed out the stylistic fads and locate a tradition of houses designed from the inside out. Houses that came out of the English Arts and Crafts movement in

the 1870s — the Shingle, Prairie School, Bungalow, Craftsman, and San Francisco Bay Region styles — belong to this tradition. Other regional vernacular styles, such as the Cape Cod house and the Southwestern adobe, also resist the inroads of homogenized housing.

I hope I am preaching to the choir, and that I don't have to convince you that houses just need to be good — they don't need to drop into some convenient real-estate category. But how can you make a living with an attitude like that? It doesn't matter how "right" you are if no one will buy your houses.

One answer is to try to educate buyers to look under the hood, and not to cling to irrelevant historical references. It's not an easy task — people have been carefully trained by generations of advertisers to ignore the substance and buy the ambiance. But you can turn the power of advertising to your own ends. Tell your buyers about the advantages of good plans, low maintenance, and energy-efficient construction. Describe good site planning, and explain how good exterior detailing, like eaves that keep out the rain and protect the walls, can actually help a house survive the winter. In short — sell good design. ■

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