



Bringing the Past into the Present

FOR ARCHITECT WOUTER BOER OF JONES & BOER ARCHITECTS, THE KEY TO TODAY'S BEAUTIFULLY DESIGNED HOMES INVOLVES LOOKING TO THE STRUCTURES OF YESTERDAY.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT C. LAUTMAN; PORTRAIT BY JOYCE BOGHOSIAN

Traditional architecture is always a great source of inspiration, and we are fortunate to have such a rich diversity of architectural precedents from ages past scattered throughout our cities and countryside. I am particularly drawn to simple farmhouse buildings. Just a short drive from Washington, D.C., where I reside, the roads of rural Virginia and Maryland reveal many historic vernacular structures. These buildings have an honesty about them that I find irresistible.

What is it about these farmhouses that makes them so appealing? Is it simply romanticizing the past, or is it something more? I find myself drawn to simplicity—perhaps because of the chaotic world we live in—and these older farm structures have a

straightforward integrity about them that I find compelling and increasingly relevant.

Over the last few decades, D.C. and its surrounding suburbs have seen explosive growth. Older neighborhoods have changed greatly, and an increased awareness of the “McMansionization” of suburbs has led many government bodies to rethink how design guidelines can be written to prevent poorly thought-out architecture.

Why not look to the vernacular farmhouse structures for our inspiration? These buildings are defined by elegant proportions and thoughtful construction details. I love their well-defined rooms, as well as their windows and doors that are placed sensibly to give simple symmetry and balance to both the inside and outside.

It's the details of a building that delight the eye, adding beauty



PHOTOGRAPH BY MAXWELL MACKENZIE; PETER VANDERWALKER

and a sense of craftsmanship. Many of these vernacular structures achieve this, seemingly effortlessly. Construction practices passed down through generations of craftsmen resulted in perfectly scaled building elements: Dormers complement the scale of windows and do not crowd rooflines; exterior window casings and sills coordinate with siding to give shadow and depth to facades; and interior crowns and trim are used sparingly to quietly highlight rather than stand out. It is humbling to think that so much of this beauty was created by craftsmen who could not have known just how much future generations would admire—and wish to emulate—their incredible skill.

Too often today, the simple components that make up newer structures are clumsily recreated: Multiple gables are crowded

onto elevations, eave details are overscaled, and double-hung windows feel veneered onto building masses. Plans are divorced from elevations, and the result of all this is unconvincing and disappointing.

A great starting point for counteracting these tendencies is to study the silhouette of a vernacular building. Keeping a simple plan and roofline sets you up for elegant elevations; magic can happen with just a single gable whose height and width are perfectly proportioned and pronounced. What is most exciting is to imagine how our vernacular traditions can be reinterpreted and repurposed to best fit our modern-day requirements while retaining the original character of the time period. For inspiration, just go for a drive in the countryside.