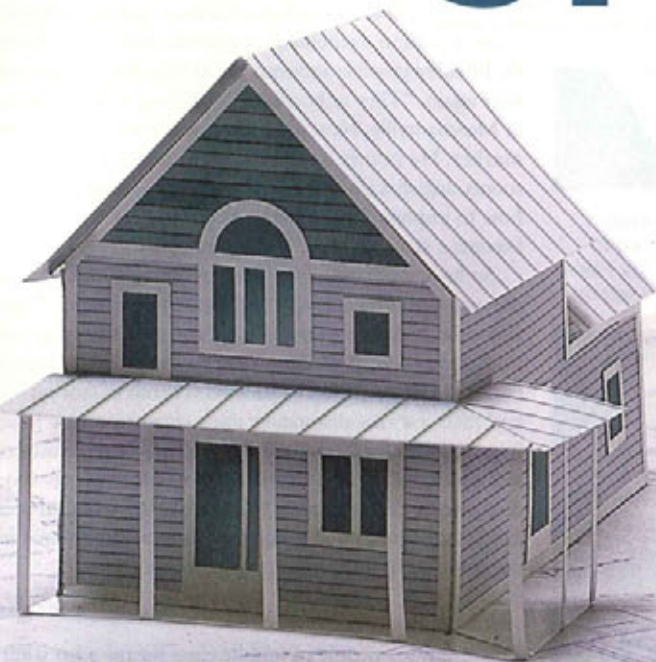


# A BETTER BREED OF STOCK PLANS



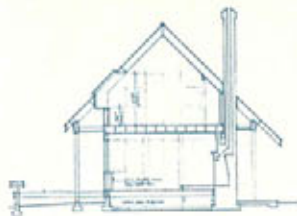
A new generation of house plans offers custom-home details for off-the-rack prices

BY DANIEL AKST PAPER ENGINEERING BY BRUCE FOSTER





**ABOVE:** Architect Russell Versaci made his reputation with traditional-inspired, custom-designed farmhouses. This one was built from a plan (the Sawyer) purchased on his Website. **BELOW:** The Three Gable House is one of a handful of modestly sized but richly detailed plans that Ross Chapin offers online.



**"THERE'S A NICHE BETWEEN THE BACK-OF-THE-MAGAZINE COOKIE-CUTTER PLANS AND CUSTOM PLANS FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT QUALITY BUT DON'T HAVE HUGE AMOUNTS OF MONEY."**

—ARCHITECT RUSSELL VERSACI

#### WHERE TO FIND THEM

For a look at the work of some of the architects and designers mentioned in this article, check out these Websites.

##### Gregory La Vardera

[www.lamidesign.com/plans](http://www.lamidesign.com/plans)

##### The Bungalow Company

[www.bungalowcompany.com](http://www.bungalowcompany.com)

##### Ross Chapin

[www.rosschapin.com](http://www.rosschapin.com)

##### Healthy Home Designs

[www.healthyhomedesigns.com](http://www.healthyhomedesigns.com)

plans they saw, some costing as little as a few hundred dollars, fit the bill.

That's when they turned to the Bungalow Company. Its designs cost a bit more, and there were only a handful to choose from, but one was exactly what they were looking for: a 2,500-square-foot Arts and Crafts model that combines a period aesthetic with a modern, three-bedroom layout. What impressed the Heirendts was the deep porch, tradi-

tional details, and extensive woodwork—hallmarks of Craftsman houses rarely seen in the dozens of plans they had looked at. Better still, the Bungalow Company, like most stock plan producers, would customize it to the couple's wishes. At their request, designer Christian Gladu altered the floor plan to make space for an additional bedroom and bathroom upstairs, enlarged the kitchen, moved and expanded the pantry, and added a half-bath under the stairs. The changes took about a month to draw up and cost an extra \$2,100 on top of the \$1,600 for the basic plan—not cheap, but far less than an architect would have charged to design the Heirendts' dream house from the ground up.

The result is so convincing, Kathy Heirendt says, that the place blends seamlessly into its neighborhood of older homes. "People ask if we remodeled," she says. "It's all new, but you wouldn't know it."

#### HELP FROM THE INTERNET

The drive to develop and market a better class of stock plans may be a recent phenomenon, but the idea of ready-made designs has strong historical roots. "Pattern books" were a staple of 19th-century building, and in the early 20th century Gustav Stickley sold plans for Craftsman-style homes to generate demand for his furniture. The American Plywood Association had a similar idea in the 1950s and '60s when it published plan books for vacation homes to be built using its products. More recently *Life* magazine commissioned "Dream House" designs from architectural heavyweights including Robert A.M. Stern and Michael Graves.

The Internet has made it easier than ever for individual architects and entrepreneurs to carve out a niche in the \$72-million-a-year plan marketplace. Architect Ross Chapin, based on Washington state's Whidbey Island, is best known for his custom residential and clustered-home





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### GETTING IT BUILT

No matter where a stock plan comes from, you'll need the help of a local design or building professional to adapt the plans for your particular area and site. "A set of plans for use in Florida cannot be the same set of plans for use in Minnesota," cautions Michael Pfeiffer, vice president for codes and standards development at the International Code Council, which updates the building code used as a starting point by many localities. California, for instance, has stringent seismic requirements. And many states require that house plans be signed or stamped by an in-state architect or engineer, says Paul Mendelsohn, senior director of state and local government affairs for the American Institute of Architects.

A good builder will be familiar with local requirements and probably knows a reputable architect or engineer who can help with siting the house, dealing with drainage and roads, or at the very least reviewing the plans. Your builder can also tell you how many copies of the blueprints you'll need. (Many plan sellers offer a master copy, sometimes on CD-ROM, from which additional copies can be made.) And your builder can help you fill in the inevitable blanks. Some plans, for instance, do not include complete lighting and electrical plans.

designs. He never advertises, but visitors to his Website will find several plans for sale. He put them there, he says, so that people who weren't wealthy could have access to better design. "What's on the market are variations on a few dozen outdated plans. We live smarter now and need plans to fit the way we live."

The Internet also makes it possible for like-minded designers and consumers to find one another. Healthy Home Designs, for example, offers plans for environmentally conscious houses, made to be energy efficient and built without toxic materials, by such well-known architects as Dale Mulfinger, Michaela Mahady, and Sarah Susanka.

If the Internet makes it so easy for architects and designers to sell stock plans, why aren't more of them doing it? Russell Versaci's experience provides a cautionary tale. While he brought happiness to people like Marcus and Susan Jones, who built his 3,250-square-foot Currier farmhouse in rural Maryland, the architect fears inducing apoplexy in some of his well-heeled clients, who could have forked over tens of thousands of dollars in design fees for a multimillion-dollar custom home only to see something that looks similar available online for a fraction of the cost.

Versaci now says his portfolio of stock homes is "in dry dock" until he can set up the whole thing apart from his custom practice, in an enterprise that can support the plans by efficiently customizing them and consulting with buyers. "We need to establish a separate entity," he says. But he hasn't lost faith in the idea that stock plans can make good design affordable: "I really believe it's important for architects like us to create a product that people can build." ■

#### For more information on architectural styles

Go to [www.thisoldhouse.com](http://www.thisoldhouse.com) or America Online Keyword: This Old House and click on Design & Planning in the Homeowner Know-how section.



The Bungalow Company sells about two dozen Arts and Crafts plans, including the Birch, left. What sets them apart is their size—modest by today's standards—and emphasis on traditional Craftsman details, like the exposed timber porch columns of the Tumalo model, above.