

Architectural diversity

A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT SOUTH CAROLINA'S REGIONAL HOME STYLES

STORY BY SHEILA PAZ

South Carolina's diverse landscapes, stretching from the serene seaside to the rugged mountains, have given rise to a variety of distinctive home styles. Each style is crafted to accommodate the region's natural elements and rich cultural influences. We spoke with architects and builders from each region to gain deeper insight into what makes these home styles so distinctive. From the practical yet beautiful raised homes of the Lowcountry, designed to withstand tropical storms and marsh breezes, to the stately and formal homes of the Midlands and the versatile, modern interpretations of traditional styles in the Upstate, each region offers a glimpse into the architectural diversity that defines South Carolina.

THE LOWCOUNTRY: Architectural style shaped by history and nature

The Lowcountry's signature style is unmistakable: wrap-around porches with haint blue ceilings, large windows with shutters, symmetrical designs and homes raised above ground. These features were initially designed to meet the needs of early settlers and have persisted into the modern era.

"The sea and waterways largely contribute to the Lowcountry's aesthetic, including its architecture," says Mike Ruegamer, principal at Group 3 Design. "With the semi-tropical climate, extensive marshes and the threat of tropical storms, homes are designed to be raised above the flood plain and take advantage of breezes. Extensive use of wide porches and tall ceilings catch cooling marsh breezes for residents to enjoy the mild climate."

These features predominantly display European and Caribbean influences, brought to the Lowcountry after settlers visited the Caribbean.

"The colonists learned how to design with lighter colors, big side porches like in Charleston and formal street facades," says Sarah Kepple, project manager at Pearce Scott Architects. "It was a merging of British architectural style and Caribbean outdoor social lifestyle."

Lowcountry homes have a simple yet elegant style that remains unchanged.

"You would have this humble character to a lot of the Lowcountry architecture," says William Court, founding principal at Court Atkins. "It was born out of local vernacular styles and needs rather than a high-level sense of ornament detail. That was part of the charm of it; the simplicity has continued through today."

One distinctive feature is the haint blue ceiling on porches. This tradition dates back to the 19th century when, in Gullah culture, it was believed that ghosts or haints could not cross water. Therefore, they would create a paint-like mixture of milk, indigo dye, lime and other materials to paint porch ceilings to simulate water. Additionally, the citrus from the mixture acted as a natural insect repellent.

"It is an indicator of a Lowcountry house here," says Stephanie Lee, marketing director of Shoreline Construction. "You drive around and see that part of history is still true today. People still paint their Lowcountry porches that haint blue."

The Lowcountry continues to honor its architectural heritage while incorporating modern touches, preserving its charm and historical significance.



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THE UPSTATE: European influences and Southern traditions

Upstate South Carolina showcases a blend of European influences, Southern traditions and modern designs, resulting in diverse architectural styles. The region's evolving styles and environmental elements make the Upstate a hub for various distinctly styled homes, such as mountain modern, Tudor style, farmhouse and Nantucket style. Each style has modernized over time while retaining elements of past designs.

"They have materiality, and the styles are timeless," says Stefan Young, principal architect for Doma Architecture, exclusive to Dillard-Jones. "They are appealing to a larger group of people and use different ways to incorporate design features that the client needs. You can get creative with the styles and articulate how you want the exterior and floorplan."



Typical features of Upstate homes include wide overhanging eaves, stone veneer, brick exteriors, timbering, significant glass use and neutral color palettes, such as white homes with black windows. Moving further upstate from the Greenville/Clemson area toward Travelers Rest and Cleveland, the homes feature more timbering, visible structural elements paired with big windows, and stone accents. Basements are a significant feature of homes in the Upstate.

"They are a side effect of the area being more of a hilly region," says Konrad Nyblom, owner of BLOM Design Studio in Greenville. "When designing homes around a lake, like Lake Keowee, typically lots are sloped towards the lake. To maximize the use of that square footage and bring the living level down closer to the backyard, basements are often utilized."

The Upstate has become a timeline of various home styles, showcasing their development over the years while staying true to the region's architectural roots, blending historical charm with contemporary design.



THE MIDLANDS: Traditional Southern elegance meets practical design

Homes in the Midlands reflect a blend of influences that set them apart from the Upstate and Lowcountry. Styles include Georgian, Colonial, Craftsman bungalows and ranch-style homes. Traditional Midlands homes are characterized by detailed columns in the front, a mix of brick and wood exteriors and often feature a rear porch. Front porches are less common due to the style's focus on structural and formal facades. The homes typically have low-gable roofs with wide eaves to provide shade and cooling during hot summers.

Midlands architecture differs from the Upstate and Lowcountry due to its historical role as an agricultural and trading hub. These homes blend traditional Southern touches with practicality, reflecting the region's formal elegance and historical continuity. As the capital of South Carolina, the Midlands' cultural and political importance is underscored through its architectural styles.



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Shared similarities

Despite the regional differences, several features are common across South Carolina's home styles to combat the heat that prevails for much of the year. These include:

- **Metal roofs** for their durability and reflective properties.
- **Double-hung large windows** to allow natural light and provide ventilation, bringing cool air through the bottom window and letting hot air out through the top.
- **Wood siding** for its natural insulating properties and availability in all regions.
- **Larger doors**, often including sliding doors, to facilitate airflow.
- **Transitional spaces** between outdoors and indoors, such as front and back porches.
- **High ceilings** to allow hot air to rise, keeping living spaces cooler.
- **Wide eaves and overhangs** to provide shade and protect from rain. LL