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CITYSPACE

Finding Good in What's Old



Back and forward: Relying on history for ideas on how to design residential properties isn't backward-looking. It's actually progressive. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

There's a place for traditional design in future development.

by James B. Garrison

A recent City Space column discussed the idea of quality in design ["Design for Dummies," Steve Conn, Aug. 19, 2004]. While there are many subjective criteria for what might constitute "good design" in an object or building, the most important is that the piece might cause a viewer to pause, if even for an instant. The engaging quality of design is what brings interest to our environment. In architecture, there are many buildings that never aspire to be anything more than a background. Certainly every building does not want to proclaim itself as the most important object on view, but buildings as throwaway objects or oversized signs for their owners or occupants are a disservice to the public. Land and resources are too valuable to squander, wherever they might be.

As I did the research and writing for my recent book on the architect John Russell Pope, *Mastering Tradition: The Residential Architecture of John Russell Pope*, I discovered that this designer was not a slave to tradition. Pope was a master who so thoroughly understood the qualities of historical precedents that he designed his buildings to be unique and commanding works where the style was merely a vehicle for a strong personal expression. It's not always obvious, but the traditional design conveys a power and presence too often missing in contemporary architecture.

One great modernist said "less is more"; another contemporary said "less is a bore." Architecture is about a dialogue. It's a relationship between a building and its site, neighbors, occupants and the public. Most buildings exist in the public domain, even when placed on large private tracts. Buildings make statements, both explicit and implicit. In the recent past, many designers — and some segment of the public — viewed modernism as the only proper style for public or commercial works, while remaining less decided about residential design. Traditional design persisted, if only as a foil to more contemporary styles.

What did this tendency say about design and human nature? Certainly, for residential architecture there has always been some sentimentality about the past. If the most basic function of a single-family house is to provide shelter, then the construction must convey that sense. A feeling of shelter comes from deeply ingrained notions of protection from the elements, a careful definition of entrance, both inside and out. These are devalued by becoming mere representations in thin, insubstantial materials, hastily thrown together.

As more and more building is simply construction rather than architecture, another movement starts to become more apparent due to its contrast to the norm. Traditional design, whether it be new classicism or simply buildings with details drawn from precedent, represents an important continuity in architecture. It's neither regressive nor backward looking; at its best, it's the most progressive because it builds upon the past rather than abandoning it. People respond to the familiar because it gives them a certain comfort. Even on a subliminal level, most people respond differently (and more positively) to well-designed, traditional buildings than to cheap knockoffs.

It is interesting that even in the midst of the height of the modern movement, the colonial revival survived, if only in branch banks and applique to tract houses. This survival brought sympathy for the few remaining genuine relics that, in turn, became more prized and were studied more closely. Suddenly, it became all right to start adding back detail to buildings. The postmodernists thought these details should be referential rather than literal. The postmodernist movement died, but a greater interest in the real thing remains.

Another reason for the survival of the colonial is that traditional design, even in its academic classical incarnation, is essentially a humanist expression. The pieces relate to an understandable scale and a sense of universal order.

It is up to our profession to embrace good design by not allowing traditional forms to be cheapened. Forms that have served the Western world for 2,500 years aren't suddenly obsolete. Rather, they exist in a new context. Precedents have meaning and deserve to be used in ways that do not subvert or cheapen the traditional meanings. Even the most modern building types may embody design elements founded in history, and become richer.




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view, but isn't that what makes our environment interesting?

ct who works primarily in historic preservation and adaptive reuse.

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