

## Preservation — by design

Think you need to destroy your old house to save it? Put down that sledgehammer. Maybe you need a preservation architect.

### HouseCalls Michael Good

Open your eyes. Look around. Everything you see — the newspaper in your hand, the chair you're sitting in, the room you occupy — has been designed.

Even the “natural” world outside — landscape, walkways, streets, buildings, the plants — have been designed by someone — or a committee, all educated, experienced, trained, mentored, licensed and insured. Years of study and a lifetime of experience go into making the most mundane of objects. When designers are successful, you don't even notice they've been there. Good design seems inevitable, invisible. No wonder we don't give it much thought.

Still it seems surprising that so many old house owners, when it comes to redesigning the costliest art object they own — their home — decide to wing it. They get their inspiration from Pinterest, from online real estate ads for houses in the neighborhood they couldn't afford, and they leave the execution to a guy with a high school diploma and a license to negotiate contracts with subcontractors — but no formal training in architecture or design.

For new buyers of old houses, the ink is hardly dry on the escrow papers before a dumpster is parked in the driveway, filled with lathe, plaster and \$100,000 worth of old-growth Douglas fir molding.

Blame it on the internet, where all opinions are legitimate, no matter how unqualified the source. Blame it on reality TV, and the home shows dedicated to the premise that the road to happiness stops off at the dump, where you can unburden yourself of the previous owners' ill-conceived design ideas.

OK, I'm probably being too hard on today's old house owner — if he or she wants to get some professional advice about how to sensitively remodel his or her historic house, it's hard to figure out who to turn to for advice. The internet is full

of charlatans and self-promoters selling snake oil (which can be used to revive your woodwork — see the YouTube video). The average contractor doesn't know how to restore a 100-year-old house. He only knows how to gut it and build a 21st-century house inside it.

And the average architect might have good ideas about the use of space, and proportion, and how to insulate your house for a Chicago winter, but he knows nothing about Spanish Revival plaster textures or arts and crafts millwork.

That's where the restoration architect comes in.

“The restoration who?” you might ask. “The restoration architect has a broad perspective and a background in handling both the scope of work and the unexpected situations you're going to encounter when work-

space. Any homeowner has some affiliation with a dwelling and the emotions attached to it. But an architect specializing in restoration understands the emotions of clients as well as certain core principals in our field, and certain situations to avoid.

“We have 35 years of studying architecture. We understand the materials and spatial concepts from decades ago. And we try to understand the original intent [of the original designer].

“Not that we're perfect. The client and other professionals have certain information that they add. We're the commander of the ship, making sure it stays true to its course.”

Eisenhart and his partner Eva Thorn have decades of experience and years of training (he in architecture and preservation from the University of Michigan; she in architecture from the University of Kaiserslautern, in Germany). This has given them some unique insights into the lives of their predecessors, the master builders whose work they endeavor to preserve.



The kitchen of the Harmon residence in Kensington, profiled in these pages as “The Perfect House” (Photo by David Harrison)

ing on an old house,” said John Eisenhart, principal of Union Architecture, a local firm that specializes in restoring early 20th-century vernacular architecture.

For the renovator, there are two separate issues to consider. “One issue is with the city, with permitting, building codes and the general construction practices one needs to get through. The more important issue comes down to the basic day-in and day-out. We deal with space and spatial issues and the emotions attached to

“In the teens and twenties, most of the houses weren't even built by architects,” Eisenhart said. “They were the product of builders who used pattern books. And the plans in the books might not have even have been designed by an architect. Actually, a home designed by an architect was pretty rare. Maybe 5 percent.”

Eisenhart makes a distinction between the sort of journeyman builder who stuck to the plans he purchased from pattern books and the master builders such as Nathan

Rigdon, Martin Melhorn, Cliff May and Richard Requa. Requa started out as a site foreman for Irving Gill but eventually became a licensed architect as well.

The majority of the houses built at the beginning of the 20th century were based on vernacular designs. (Vernacular architecture is “indigenous to a specific time and place,” Eisenhart explained.) The journeyman builder stuck with the designs he found in books like “Wilson's California Bungalow.”

“The master builder had a greater interest in architectural styles,” Eisenhart said. “Not just in what was built around them. They referred to the journals that were available at that time. They worked within the vernacular.”

“Richard Requa worked within the vernacular. But he also played within the vernacular theme, like a jazz musician. Not like a classical musician, who can't improvise. In general the classical musician is playing the music the way it's written. Some of the builders, like Rigdon or Melhorn, had some improvisation going on. How deep was that vibe? It's hard to say. Cliff May . . . he was always evolving. (May was a big-band leader before he took up architecture and introduced the California ranch house.)

“When you look at Irving Gill,” Thorn said, “you can see the change; he was evolving. Over time his trim work, instead of having the trim pronounced from the wall, he recessed it from the wall.”

Then you have the classic gentleman architect, like William Templeton Johnson, who married into money and designed for the class of people to whom he belonged.

“That guy could do various styles. He could do classical. He got into art moderne. He got into deco. He could flow with any style,” she said. “Usually builders had a couple styles they could go with. Whereas an architect has that, but he also has a general background and awareness of the history of architecture and he draws from that. Not just local building, he's looking at it from the standpoint of his educational background. It can be a very unique house, even though it shares something with the vernacular.”

True to their training, Eisenhart and Thorn's most

recent projects have run the gamut from Mid-Century Modern to early 20th century vernacular; Spanish Colonial to Cliff May-inspired Rancho. They've done residential and commercial, designed dream homes in La Jolla and monitored historic structures in the path of a high-rise development Downtown. That particular project, a

1906 Church for a Mexican congregation Downtown, stood in the way of progress — from the developer's perspective. As Eva put it, with their influence, the project went from: “Let's get rid of this old shack,” to, “How is this interesting? How can we use it?” It's now on its way to becoming a jewel, rather than an eyesore.

Architects are famous for their egos. You need to believe in yourself to build something that could last for a hundred years. But restoration architects have to possess humility as well; after all, they're trying not to screw up something that's already lasted a century.

“With every job you get to the point where, you know everything and then, suddenly, you don't know anything,” Eisenhart said. “You had a certain prejudice about things. And then you encounter new stuff and discover it's different. You never want to think you know everything. That's one of the things that's interesting. When you get with clients, a bit of what they know gets added to what you know and the concept of the house grows.”

Perhaps because she grew up in Europe, where houses evolve over the centuries, Eva thinks even modern tract houses can be improved — if homeowner associations would let them. Instead, many a 1980s tract home is frozen in time by CC&Rs. “That's why I feel HOAs have too much control over tract houses. They don't let people expand on their houses based on their own needs.”

Not that the average old house owner can't use a little guidance — perhaps even from a restoration architect.

“People always want something unique and they don't understand they already have something unique,” Eisenhart said. “I think we can help them see that. We can help them learn to love it and appreciate things they didn't see before.”

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