



# THE REAL ESTATE REPORT

February 2007

A monthly column on the real estate market and related issues in the upper Hudson River Valley by Roderic H. Blackburn, principal of R. H. Blackburn & Associates, Inc.—Real Estate of Hudson and Kinderhook, NY. It also appears in *Berkshire HomeStyle* and *Capital District HomeStyle* magazines. If received in error notify [blackburn@berk.com](mailto:blackburn@berk.com). Questions welcome.



## Why Architecture Matters: How a house becomes a home

*We appear to feel more comfortable contemplating historical sources and stylistic tropes than we do delving into anthropomorphic, metaphoric or evocative meanings.*

True, just look at the real estate ads and MLS listings. They are full of hard facts, as they should be. Yet this is only the outer shell of a much deeper subliminal reality which strongly influences (as it should) the decision of what house to buy and the length of time an owner is likely to live there. Uncovering these layers of thought will help us understand how and why a house becomes a home.

Although we sense intuitively what a home means to us, few have organized these thoughts into coherent explanations. A delightful exception is a new book *The Architecture of Happiness* by Alain de Botton (Pantheon Books, 2006), which I believe will become a classic for its perception and prose. Enjoy these quotes as we open up the personal meaning of home.

### **Significance of architecture**

*Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places - and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.*

### **Sensitivity to Architecture**

*It seems reasonable to suppose that people will possess some of the qualities of the buildings they are drawn to...they will know something about patience and stability, tenderness and sweetness, intelligence and worldliness, skepticism and trust. We expect that such enthusiasts will be committed to infusing their whole lives with the values embodied in the objects of their appreciation.*

She likes it, he doesn't – a telling response to a house visit, indicating that the same house may speak differently to a couple who may otherwise share common values, though some different needs and expectations. A home is like the third leg of a marriage; to be a successful triumvirate all three legs should express compatible values while fulfilling complementary needs. Yes, homes have needs too - for tender care, protection and respectful improvement, especially in old age - just as we do. On this level a home, like a pet, is a "person," to whom we relate with affection, even love, and miss when absent, grieve when lost. The singular distinction of a home is its ability to go on serving the needs of families and contributing to their enjoyment for generations.

### **Architecture as communicative power**

*Buildings speak - and on topics which can readily be discerned. They speak of democracy and aristocracy, openness and arrogance, welcome and threat, a sympathy for the future or a hankering for the past.*

A recent trip to St. Petersburg revealed the power of architecture over a whole nation. In 1703 Tsar Peter the Great created this city out of "whole cloth" on swampy islands, and thereby imposed classical western European culture upon his ancient medieval kingdom. He knew that architecture could be a powerful tool for modernization, a permanent communicator of "higher" values. And he was right. Despite both eighty years of gray Stalinist construction and 900 days of Nazi siege, Lenin-

grad is again St. Petersburg, a magnificent city of restored palaces and public monuments. Its complement is Washington DC, another planned capital city in classical style, one sharing many of the same purposes, if polar opposite in its values - aristocracy versus democracy.



1. Palaces of Saint Petersburg, Russia. Tzar Peter, in creating this city, mandated Classical architecture of all his noble subjects who built homes in his new capital. Like Venice and Amsterdam, wide canals open vistas to better appreciate such grand public and private structures. The rage to emulate and expand upon the principles set forth in Palladio's *Four Books of Architecture* swept Europe and later America. Despite a century of Modernism, the Classical continues to resurface in new domestic architecture.

### **Human qualities in Architecture**

*We call works [of art including architecture]... beautiful when they succeed in evoking what seem to us the most attractive, significant attributes of human beings and animals.*

Listen to house hunters as they wander in and out of others' houses: "How handsome a house... charming rooms...lovely feel...great proportions...attractive kitchen...wonderful sense of warmth." So we learn that many thoughts about houses are similar in type and even language to those we apply to each other.

### **Feelings**

*It is natural for us to be as discriminating about the meanings of the objects we live among as we are about the faces of the people we spend time with...What we search for in a work of architecture is not in the end so far from what we search for in a friend. The objects we describe as beautiful are versions of the people we love.*

Those same visitors express feelings as well as values. "I love it...it's so comfortable...how appealing... it's so cold...sure doesn't speak to me." If you consider with whom or where we spend most of our time, it is our family, our home, our job. Little wonder that we look to each of these for companionship, trust, and reliability to nurture our needs and reaffirm our sense of self worth.

### **Associations**

*Insofar as buildings speak to us, they do so through quotation - that is, referring to, and triggering memories of, the context in which we have previously seen them, their counterparts or their models. They communicate by promoting associations.*

A tour through Europe fills the mind with images of great buildings, too quickly observed to sink in consciously, but none-

theless available in a kind of personal database to be pleasantly triggered by buildings at home, for example in our nation's capitol: The Pantheon at Rome by the Jefferson Memorial; "Cleopatra's Needles" (Egyptian obelisks) by the Washington Monument. Even houses can do this: Netherlands farm houses by the Van Alen House in Kinderhook, NY; Serlio's Villa La Rocca and Palladio's Villa Cornaro in Italy by Jefferson's Monticello in Charlottesville, VA.



2. The Pantheon - Temple of the Olympian gods - was erected by Emperor Hadrian by 128 AD in Rome. It is a remarkable structure. It is the best surviving building of the Roman period, Its dome was made of poured concrete millennia before this technique was used by us. It was the first hemispherically domed structure ever built, a model for all domed structures since. Its interior space is a breathtaking 142 feet high and wide, exceeding even that of St. Peter's or Chartres Cathedral, and unlike these, the Pantheon is a completely free-standing building. Ancient Rome is in ruins, but not the Pantheon. Jefferson used it as a model for his design of the Rotunda of the University of Virginia (right). The nation reciprocated with his memorial based on the Pantheon.

Jefferson's architectural designs influenced public buildings throughout the country, bringing a purer version of Roman and Greek architecture than had filtered into America through countless books and architects before (and after)

### The meaning of home

*We depend on our surroundings obliquely to embody the moods and ideas we respect and then to remind us of them. We look to our buildings to hold us, like a kind of psychological mold, to a helpful vision of ourselves...In turn, these places whose outlook matches and legitimates our own, we tend to honour with the term 'home.'* ...To speak of home in relation to a building is simply to recognize its harmony with our own prized internal song.

We have good days and bad days. A return to home for celebration or succourance elevates the spirits, calms the nerves. But of course it is not just any house which will do this; if that were so any house would do. Our measure of the meaning of "home" is how much our house expresses our values, our taste, and our sense of private and public self. A home confirms to ourselves as well as to others how we wish to see ourselves and be seen by the world. It legitimizes our image of self. (No wonder home owners are so willing to borrow to the extent necessary and mortgage lenders so willing to lend: losing one's home is a much greater loss than the loss of assets alone.)

### Home as identity

*...what we call a home is merely any place that succeeds in making more consistently available to us the important truths which the wider world ignores, or which our distracted and irresolute selves have trouble holding on to.*

Reminders of inner truths are all around us: in memories of experiences or things read, sermons and speeches, advice given

or received. Nearly all are transient, briefly heard, "misremembered," half forgotten. This is why symbols are so important. They are frequently recurring, mnemonic, visual devices which help us recall and confirm often unexpressed, seemingly inexpressible, inner values and feelings. The simpler the symbol and the more frequently observed, the more profound the affect on the individual and society itself. Little wonder that Flag Day brings out a larger crowd than the Fourth of July. Its symbol is simple and direct, its impact requiring none of the historic text of Independence Day. For each individual, home is such a simple, direct and ever present symbol, hence its powerful influence on our psyche.

### Architecture as memory

*The fear of forgetting anything precious can trigger in us the wish to raise a structure, like a paperweight to hold down our memories...As we put up tombs, markers and mausoleums to memorialize lost loved ones, so do we construct and decorate buildings to help us recall the important but fugitive parts of ourselves.*

The hurricane devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast witnessed mass grief over the loss of homes (not just anger over the loss of house insurance awards) and a scramble to retrieve precious symbols - primarily family photos. There is no more telling testament to the emotional ballast of "home sweet home" than tragic, potentially traumatizing, loss: ask not for whom the fire whistle blows, it blows for thee, for as much as your neighbor is diminished, so are thee. Our sense of community is built on commonly held values, no more powerfully invoked than by uncommon events. Volunteer firemen (and women) and others dedicated to the security of our person and property are the finest expressions of a community's lifeblood of care and caring.



3. Villa La Rocca Pisani in Northern Italy was designed and built by 28 year old Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548-1616) in 1576. He was an accomplished follower of Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), faithfully completing some of the latter's works after his death. The Villa Rocca Pisani is perhaps his most famous work. Its commanding position on the top of a hill is evident to all, including Thomas Jefferson who visited it, adapting features of the villa for Monticello (right).

Scamozzi published a book *The Idea of Universal Architecture*, accurately predicting the affect of Renaissance villa design on Western architecture for centuries to come.

### Architecture as repository of ideals

*If buildings can act as a repository of our ideals, it is because they can be purged of all the infelicities that corrode ordinary lives. A great work of architecture will speak to us of a degree of serenity, strength, poise and grace to which we, both as creators and audiences, typically cannot do justice - and it will for this very reason beguile and move us. Architecture excites our respect to the extent that it surpasses us.*

How did "they" do that? Designing a great public building

seems so beyond our individual knowledge and experience that we venerate those who can. Even a house represents a challenge beyond most people's imaginings. But design a bad house, one inferior in balance, harmony, integration of parts, features and functions, and even rank amateurs are confident enough to condemn. As when we consider the human face and body, we are all practiced, if not educated, critics of building aesthetics. In everyday life most see more of buildings than anything else - other than people. As repositories of values and taste, it behooves our municipalities to encourage preservation of the best of our buildings, for the inspiration of all - and all to come.

### Shifting ideals

*Behind a practical facade, modern architecture has never ceased trying to reflect back to its audience a selective image of who they might be, in the hope of improving upon, and moulding, reality.*

The great aesthetic divide is to be found in the late nineteenth century when Classical architecture (and realistic art) began to shift toward abstraction and the pruning away of seemingly extraneous details in favor of minimalist functional construction. The Industrial Revolution in particular brought us the engineering and materials required to create large, "useful" structures, like bridges and the Eiffel Tower. These structures began, often very dramatically but sometimes less obviously, even subtly, to change our appreciation of form and mass from a canon of designed aesthetics to one driven by function. Architects were persuaded by this change, to build accordingly. Le Corbusier's sparse abstractions reflected his conviction that humans needed only what worked, not what entertained the senses. Soviet architecture saw merit in the same minimal functionalism - even when maximally expressed. However, the huge Russian government investment in restoring St. Petersburg's Classical past recognizes a quite different appreciation, in fact acknowledgment, of what humans really desire.



4. The Luykas Van Alen House, 1737 at Kinderhook, NY. Built as a well-to-do Dutch farmer's house, it follows closely Netherlands houses of the seventeenth century with the use of patterned brick

and parapet gables. Its antecedents in the old country date back a millennium to the Medieval period, akin to the Gothic, not Classical. A museum of the Columbia County Historical Society. Reference: *Dutch Colonial Houses in America*, by Roderic Blackburn, photos by Geoffrey Gross (Rizzoli 2002).

### Beauty in the eyes of a nation of beholders

*It is only logical that we should be drawn to styles that speak of excitement as well as calm, of grandeur as well as coziness, given that these are key polarities around which our own lives revolve. As Standhal knew, 'There are as many styles of beauty as there are visions of happiness.'*

If what pleases us - gives us a sense of self worth and happiness - also inspires us to build homes which express our quite variable ideas and ideals, then we should expect equal variability in style. While we tend to share a commonly held range of values, the "psycho-visual" expectations of each of us are so idiosyncratic that beauty in architecture is very much in the eye of its beholders. This suggests that we can build what we like whether others like it or not.

Architecture, both as a matter of specific style and more practically as our built environment, serves as the most powerfully ubiquitous visual reminder of our past, an especially proud testament to human creativity. For some variability will always be a dissonant experience; for others inconsistency itself, perhaps as the much needed and stimulating expression of non-conformity, will have magnetic appeal. Some will appreciate the grand or classical, others will find joy in the mundane or vernacular; such is the variety we find in and among ourselves -- and in our eclectic nation. We are indeed a nation of nations, expressed more clearly and openly in our built environment than anywhere else.

This column has focused on the meaning of architecture for self and society. Another column will take as its departure what elements of architecture contribute to what we sense is beautiful in public and private buildings. Are there in fact laws of architectural beauty?