

What is Contemporary Traditional Architecture and Why Should We Consider It? Or even Teach It?

Contemporary Traditional Architecture

When traditional architecture is mentioned, the first thing likely to come to mind for many people is the old farmhouses they see on drives through the country. That is certainly one definition that makes sense; however, contemporary expressions of traditional architecture go far beyond that. I have chosen to call such expressions “contemporary traditional architecture.”

The adjective “contemporary” clearly indicates that this type of architecture is current; it is the “traditional” adjective that needs further definition. *Traditional in this context means the designer is drawing on forms, materials, and stylistic influences that have gone before, whether from the local region, or elsewhere.* Another description is that of architect Stephen Mouzan, author of *The Original Green*, who describes what he calls “living tradition” in the context of sustainability as “the collective intelligence behind . . . sustainable buildings and sustainable places.” Historic buildings and places, or new buildings and places designed using lessons learned in the past, represent this living tradition.

When used today, this kind of design does not myopically look back at the past as some golden age (although examples of such can be found). Rather, it looks to the future, remembering the lessons of the past, and building on them. A design by Mouzan was widely touted when it was illustrated in a *Wall Street Journal* article titled “The Green House of the Future” (April 17, 2009). Another example is the 2002 design by Robert A.M. Stern Architects for the International Storytelling Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee (Figure 2). This building responds very sensitively to its context, without copying any building that came before.



Figure 1: SmartDwelling I, Stephen Mouzan, 2009



Figure 2: International Storytelling Center, Robert A.M. Stern Architects, 2002

Where does contemporary traditional architecture fit in the broader scheme of contemporary architectural design?

For the past several generations, architectural education has, for the most part, emphasized the new, the radical. The point is often made that if a building is not “of our time” it is retrograde and irrelevant, giving in to popular taste, and thus suspect. There is no sense of continuing a noble tradition, updating it through creativity within a framework of tried and true design methodologies. In the words of Roger Lewis, a

Washington Post architecture commentator, “Today almost all practicing architects in the United States are, in the broadest sense, modernists. . . Their talents and aesthetic tastes vary widely, but few [architects] design buildings replicating architecture of the past or buildings festooned with historic motifs and ornamentation borrowed from previous centuries.” (*Washington Post*, May 18, 2012) The emphasis is rather on personal expression and seeking something so new and creative that no one else has ever thought of it before.

Creativity is, of course, a good and necessary thing. But if a client is looking for a traditional design today, what do they ask for? Where do they turn? How do they find an architect who is conversant in designing forms and details they will be happy with? comfortable with? proud of? Will the architect say, “What do you mean by traditional architecture?” Should they look for architects who call themselves classicists, because that title seems to indicate an architect may have an understanding of tradition? But what, after all, is tradition? Is there such a thing as “new traditionalism”? or has it never died?

The argument can be made that tradition has in fact died, that there is no longer an unbroken line of designers following in the footsteps of their fathers. And in a broad sense that is true, which leads to the coining of the term contemporary traditional architecture. But there is a very small cadre of practitioners who have followed in the traditions of their predecessors, and continued to design using the lessons of the past. Don Swofford in Virginia and F.L. Bissinger in Pennsylvania come to mind. But a more sizable group brought up on modernist principles, has rebelled against those limits, and seeking a source of harmonious design, found it in tradition. Robert Stern is perhaps the best known of this group, although he also embraces modernism for certain projects where the firm deems it appropriate and, as dean of the architecture school at Yale, encourages the presentation of a wide variety of views.



Figure 3: Washington University Social Sciences and Law Building, Kallman McKinnell &Wood, 2008



Figure 4: MIT Stata Center, Frank Gehry, 2004

Some may find the questions listed above provocative; others may find them irrelevant. It depends on the architect’s point of view. In all likelihood, however, questions of style will remain relevant to clients. Some clients look to their architect to lead them in matters of design and taste. Others already know what they are comfortable with. Institutional clients may have a stylistic given, for instance a desire to link to a style that already defines a campus, projecting stability and longevity (Figure 3), or a look that says “I am Up-to-Date/Cutting Edge” and thus my school/organization is, too (Figure 4). These options can be seen as a battle between the traditional and the avant-garde, although in architecture today the avant-garde is practically mainstream and the traditional is side-lined and often ridiculed as a “pastiche.” Roger Lewis, in fact, starts the article quoted above by stating “The nation’s capital is the only American metropolis where debates still break out periodically between architectural traditionalists and architectural modernists,” and then goes on to belittle the traditionalists. Buildings like MIT’s Stata Center usually get the attention and the press, while buildings like the new law school at Washington University usually fly under the radar.

A further pairing of educational examples is likewise striking (Figures 5 and 6): Quinlan Terry's Downing College Library, Cambridge, UK (1992), and Will Alsop's Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto (2004).



Fig. 5: Downing College Library, Quinlan Terry, 1992



Fig. 6: Ontario College of Art and Design, Will Alsop, 2004

What does the past have to teach us?

The past is a rich mine of inspiration. There is much we can learn from the architecture and building traditions that have gone before us. Architects can draw from ideas of beauty, harmony and proportion that have stood the test of time and create designs that will be accepted, even loved, by clients, and the general public. Such acceptance will contribute to the longevity of such buildings in the future. Just as the greenest building today is the one that already exists so in the future the greenest buildings will be those that are adaptable enough to accommodate future space needs but also “lovable” enough to be objects for future preservation.

Sustainable construction techniques and design ideas that have served past buildings well and lasted for centuries have not been out-dated by the latest technology. The 1970s (or 1990s, or even 2010s) office with fixed windows becomes a stifling box during a power outage. Natural ventilation, use of local materials, appropriate solar orientation, flexible planning, all these are hallmarks of traditional architecture of the past, and all are certainly appropriate for contemporary design.

The “lovability” variable, however, is not necessarily seen as important, or even understood. Yet, when a building is lovable, it is less likely to be torn down and thus becomes greener; it becomes a more sustainable design. A building that today has all the latest high-tech energy-saving equipment will, in the future when its equipment becomes obsolete, the appearance of the building is no longer popular (if it ever was), and people would rather have it torn down, no longer be sustainable design. Instead, it becomes an example of conspicuous waste should it be demolished.

Why Should We Consider Teaching Contemporary Traditional Architecture?

Gary Brewer, a partner at Robert Stern's office, recently wrote in a post to the Traditional Architecture listserve that “Practicing architecture always has a way of balancing grand intellectual theories with an on-the-street pragmatic reality of what it takes to actually build.” And what are some of the aspects of that pragmatic reality? Some things are what we might expect, such as “value engineering,” financial realities, building code issues, or building material considerations.

But another factor architects often face, is client desires and expectations. A client may desire a design they are comfortable with, which may mean the style of building they grew up with, or what they think is appropriate to their context. And often that means something traditional. Unfortunately many, if not most, architects who come out of architecture school today are not sure how to approach such a design. Thus, we get many “sort-of-traditional” buildings that really are extremely awkward, if not down-right ugly, buildings that have not learned from the past. Many, many examples could be cited. A local example is the new fire station in Clarence Center (Figure 7). Its context is a historic village, and the client’s desire was to have a design that related to the village; however, how to accomplish that goal seems to have been a mystery to the designer. Thus, we have parts that do not relate well to one another, squat proportions one place and elongated features elsewhere, ambiguous detailing (what exactly do those bands at the top of the piers represent?), and a general lack of unity. The designer may well have benefited from having a course in traditional design in school.



Figure 7: Clarence Center Fire Station, designer unknown.



Figure 8: Illustration from Best Western Design Manual

The hotel building type has a long and distinguished history, but those lessons seem to have been lost over the past 50 years or so. Design guidelines for many hotel chains today show egregious examples of not learning from the past when they attempt to describe how to design a traditionally styled hotel (Figure 8, an illustration from the Best Western chain’s design manual). Several examples from the Homewood Suites chain illustrate the same problem, which seems to be ubiquitous in the industry (Figures 9 and 10). But is it entirely the industry’s fault? Or do the architecture schools bear some of the blame?



Figure 9: Homewood Suites, Slidell, LA



Figure 10: Homewood Suites, Tallahassee, FL

Pitched roofs, chimneys, sash windows, dormers, pilasters, cornices, etc., figure into the design vocabulary in these buildings, but these elements are used awkwardly, without an understanding of the traditions from which they come. The resulting buildings would not make anyone's list of favorites.

Retail buildings, such as shopping centers and malls, are another building type where clients often require a traditional style but the results are similar to those in the hotel industry. This problem is not just limited to the United States and Canada, as the Versace store in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (Figure 11) shows (although this may have been designed by an American architect). Here clumsy proportions, extraneous details, and an awkward and overpowering entablature negate the attempt to relate to the historic architecture in Jeddah. Even a well-respected architect such as Charles Moore, when designing a delightful set of Post Modern columns for an addition to the Williams College Museum of Art, topped them with a bland, ill-proportioned stucco box that cheapens the whole design (Figure 12). Religious buildings are another arena in which poor traditional design is often found.



Figure 11: Versace Store, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

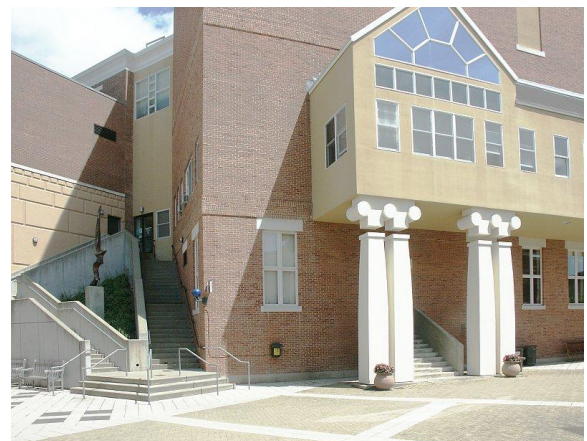


Figure 12: Williams College Museum of Art Addition, Charles Moore, 1986

Much residential design in the United States is not done by architects, but by unlicensed architectural designers and builders, who often buy their plans from plan services or out of catalogs. The examples of poor traditional designs found in such sources are appalling. This problem is not limited to North America, either, as “McMansions” exhibiting the same awkwardness, poor proportions, and cartoonish detailing (Figure 13) can even be found in Russia.



Figure 13: Russian McMansion



Figure 14: American McMansion

Residential design is a rich field for the exercise of traditional design as so many residential clients prefer it. The unfortunate part of that dynamic is there are so few architects working today who are really knowledgeable in how to design a satisfying, literate, well-detailed traditional home. The woeful tale of “McMansions” spreading across the suburbs of America (Figure 14) has become part of popular lore, but the logical cure for it, traditional design carried out by knowledgeable practitioners, seems beyond reach because the majority of architects and designers apparently do not have the knowledge or education to carry out such design. There are firms today, however, who can do an admirable job in such situations. Albert, Righter & Tittman of Boston is one such (Figure 15). Archer and Buchanan of West Chester, Pennsylvania (Figure 16).and Russell Versaci in Virginia (Figure 17) are two more.



Figure 15: House on Cape Cod, Albert, Righter & Tittman, 2006



Figure 16: House in Devon, Archer and Buchanan



Figure 17: House in McLean, Russell Versaci Architecture

The case for teaching traditional design can thus be made on several fronts including, most importantly, sustainability and the numerous client requests for traditional design. Just because the public seems to favor traditional design in numerous surveys may not be sufficient cause to pursue and promote this approach, but certainly its other benefits, including its sustainability, beauty and lovability, are.

Anthony O. James
Buffalo, NY
November 2012