

# making the case for classicism

to heck with modernism. it's time to return to our traditional roots.

by alvin holm, aia

**t**here was an old woman who lived in a shoe but she was exceptional. Most of us like a house that looks like a house. When it comes to buying or building a home, our preferences lie within a fairly narrow range. No shoes, please, or ducks. We have seen schools come to resemble factories and office buildings morph into giant refrigerators. But our homes? Despite 50 years of monolithic Modern education, we still cling to the notion that they should be traditional.

Modernism, having swept the field in every other area of design, has never really won acceptance in the residential market. I am happy about that, and not surprised. Why would anyone want to live in the chilly, unyielding, cheerless abstraction of a Modernist house? My wonderment is focused on the spectacular success of Modernism everywhere else. Why do we tolerate the sterility of the modern workplace or the visual clatter of our malls or the hostile anonymity of our schools, courtrooms, and hospitals?

## a little history

In the wake of World War II, Modernism managed to obliterate the traditional design values that had prevailed for several thousand years before.

Throughout the first half of this century, Modernists engaged in honorable guerilla warfare against the tolerant establishment, making contributions here and there and generally enlivening the dialogue between the usual progressive/conservative poles. But until 1945, most new architecture remained traditional: the theaters, banks, hotels, railway stations, office buildings, and, of course, the homes. And then tradition died.

The GIs came home and went to college in unprecedented numbers, FHA created suburbia, and the interstate highway system destabilized the entire population. When the smoke cleared, Modernism had won the day. Tradition was nowhere to be seen—



Illustrations: Alvin Holm

except in the little bungalows proliferating like bunnies all across the country.

## archetypes

I once read of a classroom experiment where urban children who lived in row houses were asked to draw pictures of their own homes. All of them drew rectangles with triangular tops, chimneys with smoke, and a little path across the lawn to the front door. Most of these students had never seen such a house except in

storybooks. Yet each harbored this archetype.

Years later, I asked my senior students at Moore College of Art and Design to make a quick sketch of a house, any house. I gave them three minutes and told them to represent a house as simply and clearly as they could. My students are fairly sophisticated and highly skilled. Yet most drew the same archetypal house form as the children had done.

*continued on page 34*

All of us dwell in images as surely as we inhabit solid structures. And these visual metaphors are probably more important to us than our proud American pragmatism will permit us to confess.

In previous issues of this magazine, other writers have discussed the many qualities people seek in selecting a house: warmth, coziness, comfortable scale, symmetry, and so on. Everyone agrees that these qualities are found more readily in traditional homes than in Modernist ones. But the debate continues as to whether contemporary design can ever deliver them without resorting to traditional forms.

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—alvin holm, aia

for architects to incorporate these qualities into a “humane Modernism” (*Perspective*, October 1997, page 38). I agree that it is possible to do so. But in distilling those essences from well-loved houses of the past, the loveliness



itself is lost, because it resides in the whole, not in the ingredients. Beyond the sum of the parts is that image of home. It is not something created by hot young architects; it evolves from times past in ways we are powerless to change.

Another writer, architect John Burroughs,

I heartily agree with Burroughs, and I have devoted the past 20 years of my practice to doing just that: studying, teaching, restoring, and designing classical buildings. I find it a far more agreeable activity than laboring in the Modernist mines, as I did for many years previously.

angry, labored and ate and slept and caroused, just as we do today. And in our works there is a corresponding continuity that has spanned the centuries—until now.

My hope is that our reluctance to abandon traditional architecture in our homes will lead us back to a re-examination of the classical tradition in our civic life as well. Let us reconnect with those friendly and beautiful buildings of the past that we ruthlessly rejected after the Second World War. And let us learn from them to build a future more congenial to love and life on earth than the one we face today. ra

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Joanna Lightner

described the richness of classical design (*Letters*, January/February 1998, page 18). He asserted that “we must rediscover the traditions of building that were abandoned with the advent of the Modern movement.”

### back to the future

We may have achieved a brief and heady freedom when Modernism triumphed, but revolutionary posturing can no longer satisfy our longing for a life of meaning and delight. Three thousand years of layered iconography and refinement in the Western canon of design cannot be swept away without provoking a deep disequilibrium.

We remain the same species of beast that worshipped in temples and mosques a millennium ago, that reveled and sorrowed, got bored and