

The New York Times

A TIME FOR CONTINUITY

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

September 22, 1985



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THE CONCEPT of newness, the idea of things being different from what has come before, has an odd role in our culture at this moment, and so in our architecture. It seems at once to attract and to repel us. We want our buildings, our houses, to be new and different, to stake a claim for our own time on the landscape of history. Yet at the same time we are striving earnestly to hold on to the architecture of the past and to evoke some of its qualities in the new things that we build. We want to be new, but we do not want to be that new, in other words, and that casts the whole meaning of the quest for new ideas in a somewhat unusual light.

Moreover, we surely do not want our houses to be new in the same way that we wanted them to be new in the 1950's and 1960's, when newness meant breaking away from almost all that had come before. Those were decades when freshness was all -when to be new, to be "modern," was also to be revolutionary. The very idea of modernism had a daring sense of freedom to it; the way in which modern houses symbolized newness of thought and freshness of outlook was, in its way, as important as anything about their physical appearance. Newness, a generation ago, was a badge to be worn proudly, a sign of liberation from a past that was thought to be less uplifting than suffocating.

Now, the past has come to mean something else altogether. History, in architecture as in so many aspects of our culture, is not the oppressive presence it was once believed to be; it is more comforting than threatening, a means of connecting with a larger stream of things. This is an age when we are deeply conscious of the traditions of architecture, and of residential architecture especially - an age when we want things to look at least somewhat as they have always looked, an age when we do not want to reinvent the architectural wheel, but merely to evolve it

into something a little different.

Continuity and convention - words that were suspect in the age of modernism's reign - are no longer words architects avoid. To be completely original is no longer a sign of success, and, conversely, architects correctly no longer take it as a sign of failure when their new designs give us the sense that we have seen them somewhere before.

Indeed, referring to a splendid shingled and gabled lakeside house in Westchester County designed by Robert Kliment and Frances Halsband that the architects called "easy to like," the writer Charles K. Gandee noted in *Architectural Record* earlier this year: "Not so long ago Kliment and Halsband would have been banished from the inner circle of 'serious' architects for committing such a crowd-pleasing crime."

But now, this house, which has double-hung windows, a dozen gables and an inglenook-like library with an Adamesque fireplace, was selected to lead off *Architectural Record's* annual review of significant houses - a review in which more than half of the houses had shingles or clapboards, peaked or gabled roofs and other traditional elements, including, in one case, a dome topped by a lantern.

What, in such an age, can a search for new ideas mean? Does it mean that the newest work is in fact the oldest, the house that uses the most his-PAGE 52 torical elements and whose architect seems to have delved the deepest into his sourcebooks? Does it mean that this is a time in which to be modern is to be old-fashioned and to be old-fashioned is to be modern, and that to be at the vanguard is merely to be producing what is the most familiar?

It is easy to misunderstand this time and say yes. Imitating the past is nothing if not trendy right now, and there is plenty of work that is fashionable only because it looks like the architecture of the turn of the century. The upwardly mobile clients who demanded flat-roofed beach houses with vertical cedar siding and lots of glass a few years ago are now all crying out for shingles and gables, for houses that look like the ones their grandparents lived in. If architecture were the stock market, this would be a time to put your money into shingle futures and take it out of vertical siding and huge walls of glass.

It does give one the sense that ours is a moment of utter retreat, a time in which originality has become a less and less valuable commodity. But the reality is not so discouraging, for beneath the glib surface of simple-minded copying, there is as

much originality as ever in our residential architecture, and the best houses show it. Our architecture right now is not concerned with breaking the rules of the past, as it was when modernism held sway more completely, but neither is it merely a matter of copying and imitation. To the best architects practicing right now, the past is a source not of literal copying but of inspiration. It is not an ending point but a beginning point, a place from which their own creativity can spring.

Take, for example, Stanley Tigerman and Margaret Page 54-55 McCurry's weekend house in Michigan, a barn-shaped structure designed by this husband-and-wife team for their own use. The house is a simple, but hardly straightforward, building of wood and metal, its overall form recalling both farm structures and small country cottages. The ends are covered in a trellis-like grid of wood, and at one side sits a round gazebo, like a squat silo sheathed in screens. The house is a lively composition, a graceful blend of freshness and serenity; what is most pleasing about it is how naturally it appears to link the traditions of farm architecture with those of the small American cottage. And the industrial air of its parts not only alludes to high-tech, it reminds us of the closeness of all barn building to industrial design.

Carlos Brillembourg was equally inventive in a recent house that he designed with Jonathan Lanman in Sagaponack, N.Y., in which a few shed-like, shingled wings are assembled into a striking composition at once visually alive and yet serenely at home amid the potato fields of eastern Long Island. The anxiety of so much of the sharply angled, abstract modern architecture that can be seen near this house is absent, yet Brillembourg and Lanman did not retreat into simple copying.

Neither did Paul Haigh, of Haigh Space, a New York firm that designed a remarkable renovation in Remsenburg, N.Y., of a 1960's ranch house, the epitome of suburban banality. Instead of fighting the original architecture, Haigh decided to celebrate it, with an additional structure wrapping around it that echoes the original design but adds a slightly more elaborate level of classical detailing. The addition contains an outdoor deck that is pleasantly ambiguous - behind a screen wall, it is at once within the building and outside of it - and the total effect is one of witty inventiveness. The original structure is a house that a few years ago would have been altogether disdained by "serious" architects; Haigh, however, man-ages to comment on it and elevate it without ever mocking it.

Both Paul Segal, in the Weidner House in Water Mill, N.Y., and Bruce D. Nagel, in the Radler House in Bridgehampton, N.Y., have sought to find a meeting point

between the shingled traditions of the American house and modernism. In the case of Segal's work, it is through a nicely proportioned, cottage-like form, and in Nagel's house it is by a large, barn-like form, shingled yet with a modernist cant to the details.

There is more and more work like these houses right now, and it is turning up all around the country. In Houston, Taft Architects has designed a number of houses that allude to classical detailing but reinterpret it on a larger scale or through different materials. So, too, with the work of Kliment & Halsband, architects of that superb gabled lakeside villa in Westchester County; or Voorsanger & Mills, whose partner Edward Mills designed a remarkable shingled house on Long Island that neatly merges basic geometric form with the American villa tradition. Behind almost all of this is Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown, the Philadelphia-based firm whose senior partner, Robert Venturi, is justifiably considered the philosophical father of so much that has happened in architecture in the last decade. What is striking now is the prevalence of architecture that is, at least loosely, inspired by Venturi's theories. There are not only what might be called second-generation Venturi-ites, like Robert A. M. Stern, the New York architect who was Venturi's first and most devoted follower, though his own work has turned to somewhat more literal historicizing in recent years. There is also now a third generation of architects younger than Stern whose practices have grown up entirely in the age in which history is once again respectable.

What divides the good work from the bad here? How can we tell the difference between true creativity and mere copying, or between those houses that reinterpret the past skillfully and those that do so simplistically and awkwardly? It is far more than a question of architectural style; indeed, style itself gives us little guidance at all. It is much more a matter of basics, of those fundamental aspects of all architecture - things like scale and proportion, the ability to make good compositions, the ability to make good floor plans, the appropriate and knowing use of materials and, surely hardest of all, the making of meaningful interior space.

These things are what make the houses mentioned above successful, and the absence of them is what makes so many others that aspire to the same things fail. These basics are the building blocks of all architecture, whatever the style, whatever the time. They mean more than style; they always have, and they always will. There are architects who can manipulate these basic things creatively, and there are

architects who cannot, whatever style they work in. It all reminds us that architecture is an art of specifics, not of generalities, an art of answering particular questions and solving particular problems, and not in any way a matter of making formulas.

The intense reaction against modernism that we are now experiencing has occurred largely because modernism itself, in its early days so brilliantly creative, had come, by the 1960's and 1970's, to be all too much of a formula itself. The best minds, frustrated by the standardized, rote qualities of so much modern architecture, were led by Venturi and others to look elsewhere. We are now at a moment when that process of looking elsewhere has become, in itself, the standard approach, when it is entirely expected that an architect will look back at the architecture of the past for his or her inspiration. The real question we face in the coming years, as reshaping the past becomes still more common, is whether it, too, will become a formula - or whether it will retain the inventiveness that its best proponents now possess.

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A version of this article appears in print on September 22, 1985, on Page 6006050 of the National edition with the headline: A TIME FOR CONTINUITY.
