

CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

By Christine G. H. Franck, ICA&CA Board of Directors

Imagine architecture that facilitates civic life and celebrates a place's history. The architecture of Charleston, Santa Barbara, Austin, Lake Forest, Coral Gables, Forest Hills, or any neighborhood built before the end of the Second World War might come to mind. What will not is anything built by today's housing industry—excessively large, unnecessarily complex houses displaying unrecognizable traditional styles, each seeking to outdo its neighbor with the most Palladian windows, the tallest foyer, and the most complex roof regardless of their effect on the public realm or the quality or cost of the house. Why is it that we seem incapable of making buildings like those we admire? Are we really so less capable?

If we assume the profit motives of today's industry are not dissimilar to the past, then what accounts for the difference in design quality? Perhaps the greatest difference is simply what is not known. Prior to changes in architectural education after the advent of modernism, architects learned architecture through the classical tradition. What was once common knowledge at all levels—our best building traditions—is no longer. This is the single greatest difference between today and the past.

Recognizing this, the Florida Society of the American Institute of Building Design (AIBD) recently asked the ICA&CA to design a program for them about classical architecture. The AIBD is an association for residential designers who, while generally not eligible for licensure, are responsible for over 90 percent of houses designed in America.¹ Their organization, formed in 1950, has members in 47 states and provides educational resources, a code of ethics, and encourages certification through an independent body. Given the percentage of houses designed by the associated designers in a market with 1.36 million housing starts in 2002,² the ICA&CA Program in Classical Architecture for Design and Building Professionals has the potential to significantly impact residential design from the plan book house to the custom house.

At the request of Florida Society member, Bud Lawrence, ICA&CA faculty members Steve Bass, Stephen Chrisman, Gary Brewer, Steve Semes, Richard Cameron, Alvin Holm, Andy Taylor, Martin Brandwein, and

I designed a program that relies on the ICA&CA's fundamental premise that knowledge of the classical can improve the quality of design regardless of the design idiom.

The result is a certificate program that establishes the importance of design to our environment; includes general education about moldings, the orders, proportion, and the historical tradition of classical architecture; as well as provides references and sources for study. In tandem with

this canonic training, focused instruction includes designing a well-proportioned façade, rational plans, coherent rooms, entries, windows, and interiors. Students are also instructed in characteristics of their local vernacular.

To put these lessons to the test, the Florida AIBD students were assigned a design problem for a home in Winter Park, Florida. They followed a process of identifying precedents, analyzing them and then designing, all with faculty review. Throughout the seven weekend-long sessions students sited their house; laid out the plan, section, and elevation; detailed the entry and windows; and planned and detailed an interior room.

Overall, 104 designers participated in the Florida AIBD

program with 40 receiving the certificate. A second program begins in November of 2003 for the AIBD societies of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. Hopefully more programs will follow. As the incoming president of the AIBD, Lyle Breeze told me recently that, despite four years of a fine arts education, this program has had the single greatest impact on him as a designer. Perhaps one day common knowledge of traditional building will be prevalent once again, and new houses will be built like those of the past: houses that are worthy of us and the best places that we can imagine.



Student work above: Front elevation of house in Winter Park, Florida, part of final project work rendered by David Grace, a designer from Marietta, Georgia, and a certificate holder from the inaugural AIBD program held in Florida in 2002. Back cover: Ionic column detail, front entry.

¹ Though hard data does not exist for the number of houses designed by architects versus non-architects, a variety of sources quote the commonly accepted figure of only about 10 percent of today's homeowners using an architect or buying a house designed by an architect.

² NAHB Housing Starts Statistics for 2002.