

Straight Talk on Architecture Mr. Hiawatha Estes, '40eng

Hiawatha Estes, picture-windowed below, provides a weekly house plan feature for 26 newspapers and three national farm publications with an overall circulation of 2,500,000. His popular designs earn him a lot of money—and a lot of criticism . . .

WHEN OUR universities begin turning out architects who can recite the precepts of Frank Lloyd Wright but can't design a livable house, the time for some straight talk about home planning is long overdue.

Somewhere along the line our schools of architecture seem to have forgotten the basic principle of home design: To provide a comfortable and efficient headquarters for human activity. Losing sight of this goal, they have become preoccupied with drama, impact and the use of eye-catching but impracticable building materials. One result of this unrealistic attitude is that into my office every year walk young men who are itching for a crack at a Talisman West, but who can't design and prepare the plans for a house that will meet the requirements of the average family or even comply with the regulations of the local building department.

Not long ago I interviewed a job applicant, a senior architectural student from a nationally known university. "So you're Hiawatha Estes," he said, "the one who syndicates those traditional ranch-type house plans in the newspapers. We've discussed you in class. Our professor uses you as an example of the horrible depths to which an architect or designer can sink if he doesn't keep on his toes."

This rebuke springs from a fact to which, if it is a crime, I unashamedly plead guilty. And that is I design the type of home no one talks about but in which nearly every-one lives.

Before continuing there are two facts I want to make clear. First, I earned my spurs and my degree as an engineer, not as an architect. And secondly, although I champion common sense in housing as opposed to theory, I am not a member of the

"Old Guard" who believes everything new to be automatically bad.

If I had the opportunity to impress a young architectural student with one basic truth it would be this: A home is usually the largest single investment a family makes in a lifetime. And when it comes to taking on the burden of a \$15,000 or \$20,000 mortgage, the family wants a house that's practical, livable and capable of being resold at



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a reasonable price. They cannot afford to be capricious with regards to such a large indebtedness.

I think beyond this that housing, basically, is a very simple kind of challenge. It really doesn't take a great architect or designer to plan the practical home that most families demand. Basically the design calls for four walls, a roof, glass to let in light,

ventilation and due consideration for the prevailing climate. Other important factors are separating the family's activities for privacy's sake and the planning of cooking and sleeping quarters.

The hardest thing for the student to realize when he is weaned on lofty lectures and inspiring experimentation is that planning a suitable "bread and butter" home is a relatively artless matter. It doesn't require the creative ingenuity that is necessary to produce a beautiful painting, a novel, or even a first class piece of landscaping. But it does require the fundamentals of draftsmanship, knowledge of building codes and the ability to select building materials within a budget—fundamentals our universities apparently have chosen to soft pedal in deference to more worldly wisdom.

Why? To the practical man, classroom theory has never had a reputation for being down to earth. But it seems to me that today there is a more far-reaching influence of unreality working on our young architects. This influence is the slick shelter magazine devoted to "better living." These magazines are widely read, widely admired, and I'm afraid, widely misinterpreted. And, perhaps most impressive to the ambitious student, they have heaped publicity and success on some of our more daring architects and designers.

It is the nature of youth to want to be different; and, as he has a much better chance to build a reputation by doing something garish or outlandish in order to gain attention and secure publicity for his designs, he finds it easy to turn his back completely on traditional architecture. This type of architecture has survived and proven to be serviceable for many years; you can't just simply say, "It's no good anymore, so let's throw it out and devise something new."

But how important are these magazines to the thousands of families prepared to build their own home in the next year? And how much serious attention should the student pay to the publicized dramatic designs?

I think the answer lies in the fact that material for these magazines is chosen by editors who are not architects but men who have been trained in photo-journalism. That an arresting picture is worth ten thousand words has been a by-word among the mass-circulation home publications almost since the camera was invented. And with every issue it becomes more difficult to attract the reader's attention because the reader is not interested in looking at the same thing again and again. The result is that editors are constantly on the look-out for something *different*, a house plan that may not meet the needs of family life or respect good common sense in design, but one that photographs with impact. Then to support their selection of dynamic photographs, the editors will conjure up a host of reasons why everyone should have the illustrated *advantages*.

As mentioned before, to design a house is not so difficult, but it is a great challenge to most editors of Shelter Magazines to make it sound very complex, intricate, and complicated, so they will be considered experts when they show their readers how to solve all these problems.

I think that a large number of prospective builders are led astray in what is necessary for their home by this search for the new, novel and unusual.

The great majority of pictorial delights will neither stand up under the pressures of family living nor fit into the average family budget. The "open plan" house, for instance, which photographs so well because the photographer can show the mother in the kitchen and over her shoulder fifty feet away the kiddies playing in the lanai, won't stand up to the old fashioned "closed plan" when forced to face the realities of everyday life. In the open plan where the partitions are minimized and rooms are allowed to "flow together," father can't do the work he brought home from the office while the children watch television and mother meets with her P-TA committee. Naturally, all of this isn't explained in the copy describing the advantages of open planning.

A favorite with photographers is to aim their cameras across an immense, clean-lined and sparsely furnished living room and catch the paneled interior of a modern kitchen in the background. All of these beautiful photographs have created an illusion in the minds of the Shelter Magazine reading public that this is what people are

buying and this is what people want—when it is not true.

When the practical woman sits down with you to plan her own home, she will want to know how to best hide an often messy kitchen and she will ask what good is it to waste space on an over-sized living room that she will use only when entertaining 27 guests.

The high, open beam ceilings that bring such appealing perspective to a picture are unbelievably difficult to clean, while the additional space is expensive to heat and cool. Usually the first thing I notice upon entering a contemporary home with photogenic open-end glass gables is that the glass is dirty. Well, who wants to climb up a ladder and clean the glass every time it rains?

The other day I visited an ultra-modern house that might well qualify for a pictorial essay. But I found actual living conditions you can bet would never be mentioned in the article. The family had tacked bed sheets over the high windows so the bedrooms would be dark enough for some sleep in the morning. The drapes (a considerable expense) necessary to cover the huge areas of glass in the living room were faded and deteriorating from exposure to the sun. Glassed-in areas were finger marked by the children who had tracked in dirt on the polished stone floors. And the housewife confided that the floors hurt her feet. It was readily apparent to me that the advantages of this Contemporary home were far outweighed by the disadvantages.

THIS kind of architecture I call "sterile-modern." It makes no concession to the human being. I defend my traditional or ranch-type houses mainly because they are adapted to the living habits of their owners and will not force their owners to adapt to them.

The pressures of family life and the human desire for privacy at certain times dictate that in addition to four walls and a roof, a house have clearly defined areas for work, play, dining, cooking, sleeping and relaxing. These are the essentials that down-to-earth designers have found through trial and error to be the components of harmonious living. And when the "better living" magazines depart from this time-honored formula they are mainly seeking sensationalism to sell more copies of their publications and have not necessarily descended from on high with a great piece of enlightenment.

We have been conditioned by the Shelter Magazines into making *ultra-modern* synonymous with *ultra-fashion*. The public has

been slowly brain-washed by the Shelter Magazines and conditioned to think that the fashionable, smart, snob appeal crowd lives in the type of house which they feature. Even after living in such a home, some people kid themselves that this is what they like, when actually it isn't—it doesn't really satisfy them. I can see it meeting the needs of a childless couple of the New York apartment type who do a lot of entertaining and don't have the usual pressures of a growing family—that's the exact "family" it's designed for, but it isn't right for families that have the rough and tumble experience of raising young kids, and faced with the business of carrying on five or six separate activities at the same time.

This is not to say that the Contemporary school of architecture hasn't affected the Traditional home, and even in some cases improved upon it. The Modern Ranch house, for instance, incorporates several Contemporary ideas and remains suitable for family living. The Modern Ranch integrates a moderate degree of open planning into a design that basically respects the need for privacy. Floor to ceiling glass is used where practical, where it is easy to reach for cleaning and where it is protected from the sun by a wide overhang. Traditional design can also be advantageously altered to provide a broad view of gardens and picturesque landscapes. The clean living room lines introduced by the Modernists as well as the neat, efficient look given to kitchens have contributed their freshness to Traditional design without detracting from the prime consideration of comfort.

History tells us that in architecture, as in all of the creative arts, the extremists shock the traditionalists and somewhere in between the two we find the path to progress—and the public is served the best. But never in history has the public been assaulted with such a one-sided view of architecture as now pours forth from our "better living" magazines which represent the newsworthy and attention getting homes as the desirable.

There seems to be no one speaking out in defense of the old values. No one reminding students that knowledge of draftsmanship and building requirements is still the basic stuff of which architects and designers are made. No one willing to stand up and say, "Hang it all, a home is a man's castle and not a place to entertain the press."

Like the sack dress, "Sterile-Modern" architecture may retreat to that obscure place where fads which fight our natural instincts go. If so, it will be a welcome victory to those of us more concerned with fundamentals than frills.