

A path to beauty - Architects foresee a day when more local homes fit city's glorious setting DOES NEW ANCHORAGE HOUSING HAVE TO BE SO UGLY?

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Sunday, June 11, 2006

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Back in 1978, there was a civic dust-up concerning the Captain Cook statue on L Street. It seems some were offended that Cook is standing with his back to the city. At the time, Ralph Alley, an iconoclastic local architect who has since left Alaska, said there was a logical reason the good captain had turned away: Anchorage, he said, is ugly. Cook simply didn't care to look at it.

While Alley took some heat for saying that, a fair percentage of those who have opinions about the look of our city -- particularly its neighborhoods -- have agreed with his sentiment. Indeed, according to a group of residential architects consulted for this article, the nearly 30 years that have elapsed since Alley spanked Anchorage for its aesthetic deficiencies haven't given Cook much reason to turn around.

"Ugly means different things to different people," says architect Catherine Call. "When I think of an ugly neighborhood, I think of T1-11- siding, vinyl windows of one size repeated everywhere, a 4-in-12 roof pitch with asphalt shingles, and a two-story box."

The odds are good that many reading this article at breakfast tables across the Anchorage Bowl just thought, "Hey, that describes my neighborhood." Opinions vary about what has caused the bland uniformity- that holds sway along too many of our city's streets, and there is disagreement about what might cure it or what we're really talking about when we say "ugly house."

While architects and policymakers debate such questions, there is a rising tide of homeowners taking matters into their own hands. They're getting involved in citizen groups working to rewrite land-use regulations and even kick-starting change in their neighborhoods by redoing their own homes, in turn feeding a boom in remodeling in the Anchorage Bowl.

WHAT'S UGLY TO YOU?

"I don't have the energy for the debate about what is beautiful or ugly," says Mike Mense, principal at Mike Mense Architects. "If the building drips on you or is dark or puts you in the shade, my guess is you will think it is ugly. But if we could buy a house that doesn't have ice on the front walk and where the sun shines in the family room -- now, that might be a beautiful house."

Mense seems to fall squarely in the camp that follows the famous dictum, propounded by Louis Sullivan, that "form follows function." It's a philosophy that makes sense in Anchorage, where protean- weather patterns and long winters give "function" a fairly exacting definition. However, it's harder than it ought to be here to find a house that meets this requirement, and harder still to convince homeowners -- stunned into a lack of imagination by the boring houses that have come to dominate the scene that it's possible to have more here than your basic box-on-a-slab.

"Most people think all houses, all buildings, all cities are more or less the same so don't worry about it," Mense says. "Buy something stupid, like everybody else, and then make do as best you can. It's not true."

Houses here, Mense holds, can be better, if only we think of them as "tools to support our lives" rather than basic shelter.

NOT JUST ANCHORAGE'S PROBLEM

However much Alaskans might protest that they "don't give a damn how they do it Outside," much of the sameness and inappropriateness--to-environment that afflict the housing stock here stem from cookie-cutter house plans imported from elsewhere. It's pure economic pragmatism: The subdivision developer who chooses houses from a pattern book doesn't have to pay an architect. The common practice accounts for the tide of similarity sweeping over suburban spaces throughout the U.S., yielding houses in Eagle River that look much like those in suburbs of Des Moines or Detroit.

"You're talking about tract housing here," says architect Chris Chiei, who formerly headed the Alaska Design Forum and now works in a solo private practice. "I know of a statistic concerning the percentage of homes that are built with no input from the people who buy them and live in them, and it's more than 90 percent. And that's in the country as a whole, not just in Alaska.

"That sort of mass-produced tract development contributes- to an ugly environment. I wouldn't even call (those developments) architecture."

Chiei's not alone in his opinion. Klaus Mayer, who was trained in Germany as an architect and is one of the principals in Mayer Sattler-Smith, says the developers' recourse to the house catalog has ensured that the majority of the housing in Anchorage doesn't respond adequately -- or at all -- to the special requirements of our subarctic environment. He finds the condo developments that have become so common in recent years to be especially egregious.

"(Condos) focus on the housing density only in respect to maximizing profits, (without any thought given to) what kind of place we are creating," Mayer says. "I recently went to a birthday party for a child that goes to school with (son) Maks, and (the hosts) live in one of those developments. It was impossible to find on-street parking. All the buildings look the same and, in this case, are painted identically.

"I guess you could say that the market can absorb these projects and therefore they are good; they serve a demand. But I think the general public (has been) far too willing to put money down for (them). We put the short-term cost off onto the developers, who put in the infrastructure, off-street parking and landscaping, but the long-term liabilities come back to hurt us."

OUT OF LAND?

Nor do most architects contacted for this article buy the "we're running out of space in

Anchorage" argument for cheek--by-jowl development. At best, it's a shibboleth that's been repeated often enough to attain the ring of truth; at worst, it's a kind of confidence game run by developers to excuse a lack of creativity.

"The 'we've run out of buildable land' claim is by all means a ridiculous argument," Mayer says. "Anchorage has a density of about 153 people per square mile compared to, let's say, Boston, (which has) about 2,100."

Mense says the hook, line and sinker way Anchorage has swallowed the space-crunch dodge has made it unique among American cities -- but not in a good way. He says the city has become uniquely impoverished in the article of urban and suburban space, both public and private.

"We have less landscaping, less pedestrian improvements and, most importantly, less clear boundaries between space for vehicles and space for people," Mense says. "We probably could win the prize for greatest percentage of flat asphalt pavement."

SO HOW DO WE FIX IT?

One solution to the issue of our problematic housing stock is being debated publicly now: a rewrite of Anchorage's Title 21 statutes governing land use, dimensions and measurements. Hearings are scheduled for August, and camps of opposition and support for proposed changes are forming along predictable lines, with Realtors, developers and the building trades forming up to oppose reform and groups such as the Anchorage Citizens Coalition working in support of it.

Not everyone believes this effort will come to much, though. Architect Sam Combs, for one -- he is principal at Combs and Combs -- is skeptical.

"The Title 21 rewrite (is being performed) by another Outside expert from Denver who believes he knows the solutions to all our problems," Combs says. "This is another case where local designers -- i.e., architects, landscape architects, urban planners, engineers, builders, developers and, yes, even bureaucrats -- have a much better idea of what will work in the community in which they live and work."

According to Combs and others, the proper locus for change is with the individual. It's a slow process, obviously, and involves leading homeowners to question their living environment in ways they may never have done before and engage in a process that is not always comfortable.

"My first task is to convince people that things can be better," Mense says. "How do we make use of the sun? How do we deal with snow? How do our buildings allow us to enjoy our magnificent surroundings when we are indoors? One doesn't make a beautiful city by trying to do so. The residents of a city will make sure it is beautiful if we technicians make sure it works for them."

In response to designs that answer the questions above, a growing number of Anchorage residents are taking the dark, dank, inward-looking shoeboxes we've gotten used to and blowing holes in them for windows, moving out their walls, raising their roofs and reorienting their living

spaces to enable them to respond -- albeit belatedly -- to the light patterns and views that distinguish our part of Southcentral.

According to Call, people are-- also learning that renovation costs are not the stopper too many fear they are. As she's grown as an architect, she's also found ways to make projects more affordable.

"Not all of us can afford as much beauty as we would like," she says. "I stayed away from residential architecture for a time because I thought it would mean endlessly telling people I couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. As the years have passed, though, I've learned a broader definition of beauty, and that has helped me with my practice."

Those interested in starting their own project -- or in buying or building a house that responds effectively to conditions here -- might also take a look at Mense's list of requirements at www.adn.com/life/arts.

In neighborhoods like Turn-again and Rogers Park, Call says, the houses' very undistinguished facades may be working to homeowners' advantage. These houses -- mostly built from the '50s through the '70s -- have "good bones for expansion and addition."

"As owners personalize these houses through additions, landscaping, fun paint jobs, decks, siding changes, the neighborhood gains vitality, diversity and ultimately a complex beauty," Call says. "The houses themselves are not architecture with a capital 'A,' but many achieve beauty or at least charm in their setting."

FLORENCE OF THE NORTH?

Suggested by what Call says is that the beauty of our neighborhoods may ultimately be something that evolves over time, with neighborhoods going through a gawky, charmless youth and acquiring grace and beauty later.

"Anchorage's residential architecture has suffered from its relative youth," says Bruce Williams, principal at Spenard architecture firm Black + White Studios. "Anchorage has not had a substantial urban and historical context to respond to architecturally. However, as Anchorage continues to mature, opportunities for realizing critical densities and adaptive reuse of previous developments begin to emerge."

The result is that eventually, even in neighborhoods packed with built-on-slab, two-bedroom ranch houses, trees grow up, flowers and shrubs get planted, and empty-nesters and two-income families beautify their houses, and -- whether we angle for it or not -- a characteristic beauty begins to overtake even so architecturally humble a locale as Anchorage. Combs even goes so far as to draw parallels between Florence, Italy, and our comparatively young city.

"Florence is thought to be one of the most beautiful cities in the world, but it did not develop over 90 years," he says. "It took hundreds. Even today, there are areas of Florence that could not be called beautiful. It is a megalopolis that is stretching down the banks of the Arno River to the

sea. Those newer areas will hopefully gain charm as they age, just as I know that Anchorage will."

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CHANGING SPACES: A surge in Anchorage home remodeling is being driven by an aging stock of houses, a dwindling supply of places to build new ones, an aging population and ready access to money needed for the work.

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Anchorage architect Mike Mense has a list of requirements for making a good home in Alaska.

www.adn.com/life/arts

Ed Crittenden, eminence grise of Anchorage architects, who has practiced in Alaska since 1949, thinks downtown has untapped potential as a residential neighborhood.

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Caption: Photo 1: Weblink BW_061106.jpg Photo 2: AdamsHome_061106.jpg Photo 4: InamudiHome_061106.jpg Photo 5: BurkePhelpHome_061106.jpg Photo 6: H14 Money 06-11-06 STA_061106.jpg Graphic 3: ForestHome_061106.eps

Photo by KEVIN G. SMITH Architect Catherine Call crafted her home near Kincaid Park as a response to its wooded setting. Above: Subdivision covenants dictated traditional exteriors and materials for this home in South Anchorage. Architect Bruce Williams included a large glass wall facing the forest to provide a view of seasonal changes from the home's major living areas. The forest buffer ensures privacy. Right: The Inampudi house on the Hillside, also by Williams, features spectacular views and includes strategically placed windows that focus attention on and frame specific landscape features. The Hillside home of Peter Burke and Valerie Phelps, designed by the Mayer Sattler-Smith architecture firm, has main-level windows that yield stunning views. But the home also preserves private spaces, like this stairwell to the more enclosed lower level. ERIK HILL Daily News archive 2005 KEN GRAHAM / Black + White Studio Architects Black + White Studio Architects

Edition: Final

Section: Life

Page: D7

Record Number: 1106058506/11/06

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