

Everything old is new again

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My morning commute begins in rural Efland, from a house designed to be a simple, functional building, with no stylistic references at all -- not historical, not modernist, not transitional. It's beautiful. From this departure point, I have an hour to consider a riddle:

Why is architecture in our area so driven by nostalgia and sentimentality? Why are new structures rarely designed to be exactly right for 2005?

Moving down Interstate 85, I pass Hillsborough, whose village center is unmatched in the area for significant, and pretty, houses and public buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of the design energy in Hillsborough is applied to preserving the historic appearance. I've seen new houses there that are made to look as though they've had additions and porch-enclosures over the decades. As I contemplate the mysteries of the new which is made to look old, I drive.

Ahead on my right, Duke Chapel's Gothic tower rises out of the morning mist. It's much like what a commuter in 15th-century Canterbury would have seen. Further up on the left is a parking deck built recently to service Durham's American Tobacco complex. It has brick corbeling and 19th-century arched window openings. I'm briefly distracted: Did they build parking decks in 1898?

As I drive toward Raleigh, I remind myself I'm in 21st-century North Carolina -- easy to forget when I pass by the new Reedy Creek Greenway pedestrian bridge. Apparently, the style was inspired by the Sydney Harbour Bridge of 1932, which was styled after New York's Hell Gate Arch Bridge of 1916, and so on back through the ages. It's supported by concrete made to look like old stonework, so that as we zip along underneath in our high-tech cars to buy our slick and modern iPods, we're inspired to recall an earlier, more relaxed time.

If I were to exit onto Oberlin Road, I'd have to grapple with an old question: What led Fidelity Bank to create its absurd neoclassical temple in Cameron Village? So I continue down Wade Avenue, and the new Oberlin Court apartments appear on the right. Styled with random detailing from the past to evoke vaguely historic row houses, the building makes no attempt to thrill nor inspire -- I'm careful to be in the left lane so it doesn't suck the life right out of me. I imagine a leasing agent might tell me it's "transitional style."

Transitional toward what? Is there a goal, or do we just like transitioning?

Further along, I hope for a green light so I'm not trapped in the nostalgic vortex created by the new Dawson on Morgan, whose Web site lists among its amenities, "Distinctive neoclassic exterior architectural styling." In other words, the architects used the same thought process that Hollywood's early set designers used in creating period streetscapes. A little of this, a little of that ... don't worry, just make it look old.

At the end of my commute, in downtown Raleigh, there is a building boom. The swanky new Progress Energy building -- with its desire to be mistaken at ground-level for the Chrysler Building in Manhattan (shiny metallic protuberances were exciting in 1930) -- is a high-profile addition to downtown. The building devolves down the block, its parking deck, like the American Tobacco deck, disguised as a series of burned-out buildings from various pre-war eras.

I remember seeing blocks of burned-out apartment buildings in 1980s Harlem -- the window openings of which had been draped with photographic images of curtains and hanging baskets: the city's attempt to soften the depressing sight of all those empty window openings. In the Triangle, buildings are designed to look burned out from the start. If a commuter dropped in from outer space in his iridium-guzzling, interstellar SUV, he would look at this parking deck and think, "Well, I can't park there. That's an old burned-out apartment building."

The true design process -- the discovery of appropriate and exciting solutions to problems -- is a thrilling endeavor with enormous potential for all involved. Part of that thrill comes from pushing solutions beyond our "safety zone." I'm not an architect, but I think our problem might be a lack of trust that the design process can yield new results that are fascinating, inspiring, beautiful and marketable. It's safer just to reuse a design solution from the past -- 100, 200 years ago.

The architect Andres Duany, who is responsible for such nostalgia-enclaves as the Seaside planned community in Florida, has said, "a house is best when it has old beauty and craftsmanship." Old beauty? With that logic, all our buildings would still look like cave dwellings -- beautiful, well-crafted and about the oldest possible building style. Poor Mr. Duany would have been happier during the Arts and Crafts movement. Instead, he has to labor against an intervening century of advancement in architectural knowledge and thought.

North Carolina is not interested in the "Bilbao Effect," in which a small Spanish city was transformed into a global tourist destination by Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim Museum building. In our state, in 2005, architecture is meant to sit still and keep quiet, and the "urban fabric" must be maintained. And when the urban fabric becomes patched with historical recreations and reinterpretations to the point that all our streets are a stage set designed to evoke a fictional nonspecific historical average, we won't have to worry ever again about people coming here to see our new buildings, as they're doing by the thousands in Bilbao.

The planned new Chancellor's residence at N.C. State University is a huge opportunity but will likely not cause any kind of a stir. There's a well-respected school of architecture right on campus, global buzz about sustainability and "green" design, lots of excitement about the potential of prefab construction, fascinating new materials and technologies -- but the chancellor will probably move into a transitional six-bedroom with something "Palladian" around the entrance.

On a recent trip to Manhattan, I stood in the garden at the new Museum of Modern Art. Looking out over the garden wall, a world-class "urban fabric" glows in the sun. From my spot in the garden, I see thrilling architectural solutions from every age of the city. The very old sits beside the most unapologetically modern, and this happens on every block in the city. All of it works

together to create a place we can't resist visiting. Historical New York yields gracefully to right-now New York, and the old beauty seems amplified and honored as a result. Designing something new to look old is a form of moving backward, and New York moves forward. All great cities move forward.

On my return commute, I admire the renovation of the beautiful Occidental Insurance building on Wade Avenue -- so quiet and perfect for its time. There are other local examples of designs equally right for the moment they were made -- some being made right now -- great structures embracing contemporary technologies and deriving their beauty from their functionality. One of them is the parking deck at the Oberlin Court complex.

As I drive, I glance over at it: just the necessary steel supports and barest railings. It looks exactly like a parking deck in 2005. It's beautiful.

Caption:

Raleigh's newly opened pedestrian bridge over the Beltline uses a traditional bowstring design with faux stonework to evoke the 19th century. A design-minded commuter asks, Why?

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