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Seven Deadly Sins of Home Building

The author (an Architect) takes a lighthearted look at today's building practices.

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I live in a county with the dubious distinction of being the fastest-growing county in America, which wouldn't be a bad thing if it weren't for what trails in the wake of population growth – houses, lot of houses.

As a result, Loudoun County, Virginia, is now a poster child for everything that is wrong with contemporary home building. In a decade, this once-bucolic rural countryside has become a suburban wasteland littered with tract shacks and starter castles in a pandemic of monotonous production housing – which makes me wonder: Why are some new houses so ugly? Why can't we design beautiful houses anymore?

The building business used to have clear rules: Builders BUILD, and architects DESIGN. People depend on builders to know how to put houses together so that they provide long-lasting shelter. We don't expect builders to understand the subtleties of scale, proportion and detail that make a home gracious. That's the architect's job – or at least it was until the 1950s.

Just as the postwar building boom was starting, the architectural profession abandoned builders and home buyers. With the proliferation of production housing, home design became a second-rate calling for architects who couldn't design glamorous buildings like museums and office towers. Today, everyone wants to be a "Starchitect," making big news and big commissions, and leaving home

design merely regarded as a marginalized sub-species of the architectural arts.

As a result, the rules of home building have been reinvented to suit the needs of builders. Left to their own devices, builders have created a new design vernacular, ranging from the dreary to the disastrous. Builders and their hired hands – draftsmen untrained in traditional architecture – draw what realtors tell them will sell well. Creative design is an inconvenience, so every builder goes to the same source for home plans. Never mind that most off-the-shelf home plans are awkward, inept, and overwrought; the houses will sell anyway. Robert Stern, the dean of American traditional architects, says that "Americans buy the house they dislike the least."

Home building has fallen from the state of grace it held a century ago, when the art of building homes was a source of American pride, and has become another clumsy disposable commodity. It is now a conspiracy of avarice between builders, realtors, and mortgage bankers driven by the bottom line.

Take a ride around your local subdivision, and you'll see all the fatal flaws of contemporary home building. I call them the Seven Deadly Sins:

Muscle Mansion The average home today is a behemoth pumped up on steroids. Triumphant entryways, heroic front halls, and cavernous great rooms are the order of the day –

which rarely get used. Reserved for entertaining, these giant spaces are wastrels, because few people entertain at home, and if they do, guests find such spaces intimidating. These features are the sexy stuff that realtors love to show off, but they make no difference in the lives of the homeowners, save when they want to impress their friends – all show and no substance.

Smorgasbord Style Why settle for one architectural style when you can have a sampling of every style ever invented? Choose the telling details from the Colonial, Classical, and Continental traditions and heap them on the façade: you'll end up with new houses freighted with stylistic baggage clipped from traditions with no unifying theme, thrown together in the vain hope that a signature "style" will emerge. Call it Colonial, Georgian, Victorian, or whatever – its chaos by design.

Jekyll and Hyde Whatever happened to homes that are designed on all four sides? Today the front of a house is like a stage set from an old Western movie. Don't expect the front to advertise what the other facades will look like, because the front is a fiction covered in some kind of stick-on style. The other three sides aren't meant to be seen. They're a train wreck of leftover walls covered in flimsy materials with haphazard window placements, odd bump-outs, and saddlebag decks hung out on stilts.

Roofitosis It used to be that you needed only one roof to cover each part of a house. Now where one roof will do, the builders add two – or two dozen. Old houses were gracious because they favored the elegance of simplicity. Today too much of everything is not enough. Gratuitous roofs are supposed to add character where the true character of simple beauty is lacking. The multiplication of roofs on otherwise straightforward, boxes reveals the desperation of builders trying to make ugly ducklings look sophisticated and stylish.

Snout House Whoever heard of a garage becoming the front door? Yet this is a fact of life in today's suburban home building. The garage stands proud front the rest of the house, the primary portal to the home. Often the front door is just a token, a cleverly concealed after-thought. In the new builders' vernacular, the real front door is the garage – the modern-day classical portico.

Faux Follies Natural materials are the timeless medium of fine craftsmanship in home building. As they age gracefully, they mature to a rich patina. What can one say about aging vinyl siding except that it looks weather-beaten and worn out? Thin veneers of lick-and-stick brick and sissy stone never convey the look of authenticity we cherish in old houses. While synthetic materials may help to make a traditional house an affordable option, fakes ladled onto the façade like caked-on makeup look comic and unbelievable. There is no substitute for the real thing.

Palladia Mania The Palladian window is the default decorative detail that home builders use for the trappings of class on the front of a house. It is a circle-topped central window with two flanking sidelights derived from the work of sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. No matter that today's versions bear little resemblance to the work of the master and are often bastardized in composition and proportion, even by architects. The bigger the better, because the Palladian window is the "must-have" feature for marketing curb appeal.

Unfortunately, the Seven Deadly Sins are merely the most obvious symptoms – and thus easiest to poke fun at – of deep problems in contemporary home building for which there are no simple answers. But there is no need to despair. Here are some basic fixes that can change things for the better. First, we architects need to reintegrate our professional expertise into the design of houses, to liberate builders to do what they do best – build. Knowing that only a tiny fraction of home buyers are able to afford custom

design, architects must find new ways to package and offer good design to the home-buying public by providing house plans that are ready to build. Second, builders must reach beyond the bottom line to buy better design services and thus create houses that people will actually love, not just settle for.

There is hope for a renaissance in home building, and the promise lies in the revival of tradition. We all recognize beauty in old houses. We love their simplicity, grace, and authenticity. To create well-loved homes again, everyone with a vested interest in home building should look to the old ways of building – and rediscover the spirit of a time when making great houses was our first passion.