

what i saw at the evolution

how—and why—residential architecture
has changed in the past 10 years.

by duo dickinson, aia

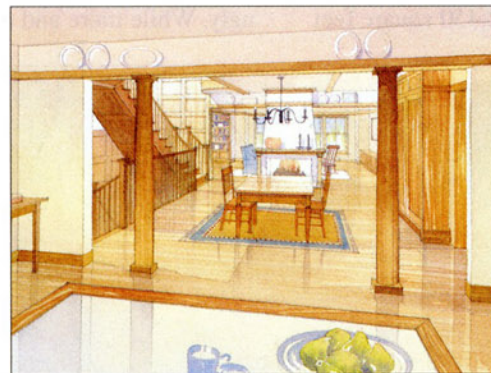
Residential design and construction have taken a dramatic track over the decade of *residential architect's* existence. Ten years ago, the number of single-family houses built in the United States each year hovered just over a million. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, that number reached a new record of 1.7 million in 2005. The greatest supply in history seems to have increased demand, almost doubling average house costs from nearly \$160,000 in 1995 to nearly \$300,000 in 2005. What happened?

Smarter heads than mine would cite interest rates that dropped from 8 percent or 9 percent just a few years ago to 4 percent to 6 percent in this decade. Others would say it is the “echo boom”—the children of baby boomers who, along with Generation Xers, bought 55 percent of all new homes in 2003, according to NAHB and the U.S. Census Bureau. Some might cite simple demographics: As baby boomers age and come into their peak earning years, they want to move up and sell their homes in order to buy new homes. Still others would cite the scarcity of buildable land near urban centers for creating a neo-land rush.



the sophisticated consumer

What do I think? I think all of the above is true, but I also think one seminal difference has led the way. As with most things in a consumer-driven economy, the buyer leads the market. Over the last 10 years, Americans have become perhaps the world's best-educated housing consumers. This is due in large measure to the realization by an ever-growing number of people that their homes represent their greatest assets and their greatest liabilities and that they need to focus on and attend to them at least as much as they do their 401(k)s. In the past, the home was often simply a place to live that hopefully would increase in value and be large enough to accommodate all the furni-



Renderings: Tom Schaller

In 1995 Dennis Wedlick Architect of New York City designed a user-friendly modern cottage (above and left) as that year's *LIFE* Dream House.

ture you like. The word “site” meant “neighborhood,” and “design” meant a prototype plan—ranch, Cape Cod, Colonial, et al.

This last decade or so has seen the realization of the American home's potential as a fully formed manifestation of any given family's hopes and dreams. How did this happen? For starters, a little over 10 years ago, Home & Garden Television came to the airwaves. Also

in the mid-1990s, Robert A.M. Stern, FAIA, and Dennis Wedlick, AIA, created homes for *LIFE* magazine that captured the public's imagination as almost nothing else in housing had in the last 50 years. And in 1998, The Taunton Press published *The Not So Big House*, a transformative, mindset-shifting book by residential architect Sarah Susanka, FAIA.

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A growing number of architects soon began to understand that designing homes was not just a point of passage in their careers. If they so desired, it really could be the focus of their professional lives. The critical factors of consumer enlightenment and professional response, along with the demographic and economic factors cited earlier, created the perfect storm of demand, product, and positive possibilities.

chain reaction

All of this enlightenment had its downsides, too. Though household size decreased over the past 20 years, NAHB says the average U.S. home size increased to about 2,450 square feet

in 2005. NAHB also reports that 20 percent of homes built in 2004 (three times the percentage built in the 1980s) exceeded 3,000 square feet in size. These larger homes consume significantly more energy than their “normally” sized counterparts. The words “sprawl” and “McMansion” have entered everyone’s daily lexicon and have an unquestionably negative flavor. While most homes have gotten bigger, they are virtually undesigned beyond accepting the developer’s list of “must-have” features, and those non-designs ignore the land they sit upon.

The result of these distorting influences is a single word that often goes unsaid: ugly. While more and more

thoughtful, innovative, and beautiful homes are being built, a far greater number insult both the landscape and the building arts in their thoughtless and wasteful design, scale, and materials.

There has been a professional response to this mixed picture, however. A few years ago, Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, Wedlick, and I agreed that the runaway freight train of the housing industry needed to have a cohesive countervailing mirror/watch-dog/reality check. So many homes were being built so badly that we decided to rally our peers, starting with the group of thoughtful, responsible architects who were attending Eck’s profes-



Charlie Brown

Sarah Susanka's *The Not So Big House* appealed to both architects and consumers and spawned a series of related books on residential design.

sional development course at Harvard's Graduate School of Design each summer. We needed to expand that group and extend it beyond architects to everyone who tries
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to make better homes for more people.

And so, with the help of *residential architect* and the early support of The Taunton Press, we created in 2004 the Congress of Residential Architecture, a grass-roots coalition with more than 20 nationwide chapters. Partly in response to this new spirit, the American Institute of Architects—an organization that had long paid scant attention to custom house designers—made a major course correction. It co-

sponsored books with Taunton about house design and, with John Connell, AIA, formed the Custom Residential Architects' Network. CRAN, as it's widely known, is working to organize and digitize useful information for architects, including feedback from a client survey and a project images gallery that the media, clients, and fellow architects can search and view. AIA's shift in thinking has been so dramatic, in fact, that I finally joined the organization in 2004, after hav-

ing abstained for nearly 25 years.

So change has been rapid and slow—rapid in CORA's growth and in the net impact of housing consumer media, slow in changing the profit-mongering misconceptions of those who build the vast majority of new homes concerning what a house can or should be for most people. It's also been slow in debunking the marketing hype that drives people to buy the most expensive item they'll ever own on the basis of a few millimeters of veneer that cloak hyperkinetic masses designed for drive-by thrills.

Even a 10-year boom will have its bust. At the precipice of the long-anticipated change to a down cycle, our profes-

sion seems better prepared to deal with it. There's a growing sense of common vision, not to mention widespread interest in the pursuit of innovation, insight, and relevance. In this time of change people need to hear our voices more than ever. Sites and regulations will become more complicated, mortgage interest rates will grow, and real estate fears will increase as home values become questionable. But we have shown we can make a difference. **ra**

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Jim Wilson