

Brent Hull: Building a Timeless House

Description

Brent Hull has a bone to pick with the builders who foist their oversized McMansions on the American public.

“The way houses are built today, whether new construction or renovation, you get shot down this cannon toward something you may not really want,” he says.

The author of the new *Building a Timeless House in an Instant Age* is well-qualified to criticize. He’s a nationally recognized authority on historic design, and architecturally correct moldings and millwork. From 1991-93, he attended North Bennett Street School in Boston, the nation’s oldest trade school – one that’s evolved into jewelry making, bookbinding and museum-quality historic preservation.

“I was learning about use of hand tools versus nail guns – the way we used to build and the way we build today,” he says.

At a time when oversized, 23-bedroom, 20-bath cottages are being built on North Carolina’s Outer Banks – and presumably elsewhere – Hull takes strong exception.

“If you look at the Pyramids, you understand the Egyptians by what they were building,” he says. “McMansions are not really what we want to say about ourselves.”

They are the products of a mechanized disconnect between worker and automated tool, even between architect and computer. “Most architects draw by hand and then enter the drawing into AutoCAD, and there’s a separation between the hand and the head,” he says. “It’s the same thing with craftsmen looking at their computer while a router cuts the wood.”

What’s lost is the classical sense of scale and proportion – and a cultural heritage.

“There’s a separation that’s taking place that’s not good for us – we’re falsely assuming that we’re improving as we go to AutoCAD,” he says. “The beauty is in the human quality of the hand-cut piece, but a machine puts an impersonal imprint on that.”

His new book from Brown Books Publishing Group makes his points in a number of ways, with images of classical architecture – Monticello, the Colosseum in Rome and the curving Georgian buildings at Bath, England – contrasted to Levittown and the Seagram Building.

The fault, he proposes, lies in the technology we’re addicted to. Scan the Villa Rotonda into a computer, he says, and the structure built from those plans would be a mess.

“Our industrialized society is becoming like our industrialized food, like Twinkies and Tang – we’ve eaten too much sugar and now we realize we’re overweight,” he says. “Now we’re realizing that we’re building houses that we shouldn’t be building.”

So how to stop the builders?

Stop buying the McMansions, he counsels.

But in a time when, as Mencken noted a century ago, no one ever went broke underestimating the American people, is that possible?

The homebuilding industry's now is on an upswing – so we're about to find out.

For more, go to <http://thetimelesshouse.com/>

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Author

mike

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