

ABOVE: This home is an 1820-1860 colonial revival designed and built for the modern family lifestyle in 2006. Its authentic classical detailing includes details particular to Tennessee and Kentucky homes of this period. Its richness, attention to detail and function is the tradition of fine residential architecture.

LEFT: (Before) The existing home's five bay design was classically inspired and fashionable in the '40s. It was tired and did not reflect a modern family's needs.

BELOW: A fine and correct use of the Doric order's entablature. Its detailing is part of a 3000+ year old tradition.



Traditional Architecture, *a Timeless Art Form*

BY CHRISTIAN T. OWEN
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ERIC STENGL ARCHITECTURE, LLC, ESTABLISHED IN 1991, IS A NASHVILLE-BASED FIRM THAT SPECIALIZES IN TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE. WITH A BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS FROM PARSONS SCHOOL OF DESIGN IN MANHATTAN, A MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE FROM HARVARD UNIVERSITY AND EXPERIENCE IN DECORATIVE ARTS FROM THE MUSÉE DU LOUVRE IN PARIS, IT IS NOT SURPRISING TO LEARN THAT STENGL IS KNOWN FOR DESIGNING ACADEMICALLY CORRECT, CLASSICAL HOMES. BEFORE RETURNING TO NASHVILLE, STENGL WORKED AS AN ARCHITECT IN SAN FRANCISCO, BOSTON AND NEW YORK CITY.

Q: When did you turn your focus towards traditional architecture?

A: I rediscovered architectural tradition after moving back to my hometown, Nashville. I had been practicing in San Francisco as an aspiring modernist, when I was asked to move back to Nashville by my father to help with the family business of commercial real-estate development and management. In Nashville, the culture is distinctly traditional (“Athens of the South”). And being one to accommodate my clients’ wishes, rather than force-feed a hidden agenda of modernism, I quickly realized I needed to better learn the language. It didn’t take long to realize its beauty, complexity and difficulty. It was what modernism promised but couldn’t deliver; a real thinking person’s architectural language, and I’ve been in love with it ever since.

Q: Of the many periods considered classical, what architectural style is your favorite?

A: I’d like to point out that classicism is not a style but a philosophy. Having said that, Palladio and Vignola’s architecture are arguably the most influential ever, and their influence on me is strong for sure. They are undeniably my most important teachers. So I enjoy Georgian’s adaptations and all its nuances. It allows for many building types and levels of detail. It’s a richness and complexity that’s always a joy.

(Andrea Palladio [Nov. 30, 1508–Aug. 19, 1580], was an Italian architect, widely considered the most influential person in the history of Western architecture.)

(Giacomo [or Jacopo] Barozzi [or Barocchio] da Vignola; often simply called “Vignola” [Oct. 1, 1507–July 7, 1573].)

Q: Do certain elements of different styles appeal to you more than others?

A: Style to me is the expression of a language. Classicism is a language, like English is a language; it has words, grammar and syntax. In English, the words can be put together in various styles—a textbook of biology, a novel by Faulkner or poetry by Keats. Syntax sets the rules of correct combinations, and it’s these rules that allow for the different styles to emerge. But don’t confuse rules with truth. $2+2=4$ is a rule of truth. The glib practice of breaking rules in architecture quickly leads to mistakes, just like someone stating $2+2=5$ is always a mistake. Ironically, the argument is that ART has been made. The real art is in the correct use, not the mistakes. Many people use the parts of classical architecture, but they often put “all the right pieces in all the wrong places.” All classical expressions appeal to me at some level. While some classical expressions do not suit my personal taste or ambitions, there is



The complete Doric language in the Renaissance style is beauty personified. Note the hand-cut French limestone fireplace. This room is a conservatory with a solid mahogany, classical interior. It has a walnut floor in the pattern from Chateau de Versailles’ Hall of Mirrors.

always something instructive in them. Any good example of a type is worth one’s attention, just like in the other arts.

Q: Do you have a favorite “Southern” form of architecture?

A: I enjoy the colonial styles: from the cottage to high Georgian. A general favorite is a southern Georgian home with casual elegance. It’s not over-enriched, but very elegant and restrained. It’s a kind of quiet confidence when an old Georgian home has a proud façade but no grand steps into it. When one simply steps right in off the front lawn, it conveys the culture of hospitality that to me is our greatest cultural asset.

Q: Period-specific restoration must be the result of painstaking attention to details. Point out a few defining details that make the first impression of a traditional home even more magnificent.

A: I would say that the first key to traditional architecture is “hierarchy.” This word covers a wide range of issues that the architect must address. Firstly, a project’s massing. Thomas Jefferson understood this quite well. The main house with its hyphens and dependences establishes the basic hierarchy. Secondly, and just as important, is vertical organization of hierarchy. A simple Doric column is clear and instructive. It has a base, middle and top. This organization applies to almost everything classical; from the house massing to the windows, to the interior walls and furniture.

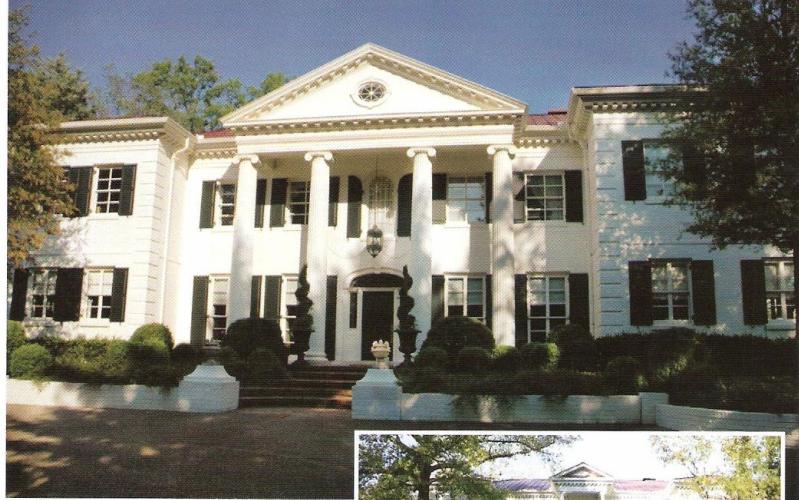
In most styles, a house needs a plinth to sit on (the base) so it doesn’t look extruded out from the ground (the way modern structures do). The wall (the middle) has surface and texture, and the eave is the capital. Like the exterior, the interior walls have a baseboard, wall and crown. All done correctly, there is a “nesting” of this progression throughout the architecture.

A progression that addresses these five levels of scale makes up our world.

1. The scale of your hand, and the things it touches. Chair arms, railings, knobs, etc.
2. The scale of our body to furniture.
3. The scale of furniture to the room.
4. The scale of the room to the building.
5. The scale of the building to the street and landscape beyond.

Q: What details are commonly overlooked by homeowners, which must be addressed for a successful restoration project?

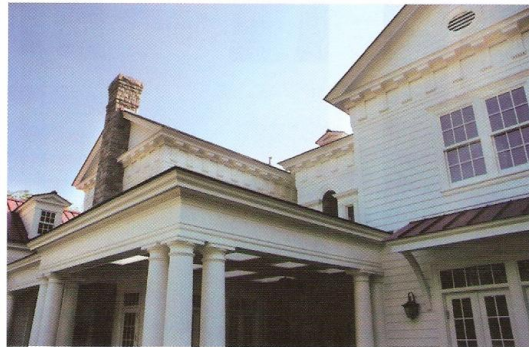
A: A detail commonly overlooked is the inappropriate hierarchical organization of the new massing, like when an addition in the back looms up over the existing house.



The new front porch as added for architectural clarity and hierarchy. The "before" condition was confused and out of scale with itself.



before



The rear of the colonial revival home has picturesque massing, covered porches and is generally informal to suit the family's lifestyle.



This photo taken during construction shows a hand-carved limestone window header for an English Georgian, circa 1720–1760. Note that the lead-coated copper flashing remains yet to be trimmed and finished.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The classical language is the language of stone. This conservatory refers to that tradition with the use of rustication lines to express the joints, had it been a stone building.

The Doric pedestal with raised panels. Note how the column shaft sweeps to meet the base. This sweep, the *congé*, is correct and must be custom made. It's an all but lost detail in today's world. Also, the columns have 24 flutes with points like Palladio's rather than the 20 flutes Vignola used. One would have to go to Italy to find this level of academic accuracy.

The classic jib window of colonial architecture—a tradition when maximum airflow and porch access from all rooms was necessary.

Another detail commonly overlooked is poor attention to the detailing itself. The use of “pork chop” eaves and other tract home details does nothing for the tradition of fine architecture. One of the most important details is how the roof meets the wall. The eave of the house must have careful and complete detailing. It is the entablature for the wall, and it needs to have the scale and progression necessary to relate wall to the roof and sky.

Q: Do you also design new homes that are period-specific architecturally?

A: Yes. Many of my clients learn to love the language when exposed to it and want that language to be a part of their lives. There is a quiet satisfaction for everyone when you make something that continues a conversation with a 3,500-year history. It is standing on the shoulders of giants.

Q: What are some of the greatest challenges you have faced in restoring a home according to its original style?

A: The greatest challenge is a time-honored one for all architects: budget. There was a time only a few generations ago when the cost of a project was 30-percent labor and 70-percent materials. Now it's the opposite—70-percent labor and 30-percent materials. The good news and bad news is that money can solve all problems—and that's the problem.

Q: Do you ever make adjustments to classical or traditional designs that bring modern function to the home? If so, how do you disguise these elements?

A: Always. The classical language is more than 3,000 years old, and part of its elegance is its ability to accommodate constant cultural change. My houses must function for the modern family first. Otherwise, there is no utility to the building—a paramount classical doctrine. Just read Vitruvius. (Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, born circa 80/70 BC; died circa 25 BC.)

Q: Are there any resources you recommend for people in search of information about period restoration?

A: Yes. There's never been a better time to be a classical architect or owner of a classical home. Many manufactures are remaking pieces and parts to accommodate this trend.

In my mind, there are two excellent places to go for more information about classical architecture and how to accomplish it.

1. The Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America, www.classicist.org.

2. The publishing house, Restore Media. They publish a group of trade publications that is both instructional and resourceful to homeowners, builders and architects. www.restoremedia.com. ●