

Rockhouse Mountain Architects

Reviving The Ideals Of The Arts And Crafts Movement

by Stacie Leone

The proponents of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, Frank Lloyd Wright, Greene and Greene, and Gustav Stickley, believed:

- A house ought to be constructed in harmony with its landscape, with special attention paid to selecting local materials;
- An open floor plan encourages family interaction and eliminates unnecessary barriers;
- Built-in bookcases and benches are practical and ensure that the house is not completely reliant on furniture from outside;
- Exposed structural elements, light fixtures, and hardware are all considered to be decorative; and
- Artificial light should be kept to a minimum, so large groupings of windows are necessary to bring in light.

Rockhouse Mountain Architects (RMA) and the Rockhouse Mountain Crafts Guild (RMCG), based in Conway, New Hampshire, are reviving quality architecture and design through the tradition of the Arts and Crafts Movement. “The basis of the RMA and RMCG is to reinstitute crafts in the design of small buildings, to create an economy of free men and to restore quality in our built environment,” says Robert Jawitz, principal architect of the RMA and Director of the RMCG.

Rockhouse Mountain Architects’ designs are based on the reinstitution of hand made decoration into architecture to give an aura of quality and personality to the finished works. RMA’s and the RMCG’s works include stained glass, metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, fibers and other forms of craft. “Our

buildings are meant to be forever; therefore the quality has to speak of forever. The use of stainless steel, stone and solid wood are the materials of choice, earth tones are the colors of choice and relationship to nature is paramount if the design is to speak of forever,” says Jawitz.

RMA’s mission is to change the face of American domestic architecture by illustrating a new design vocabulary, based on the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement that developers, builders and other architects can use. “We have to change the standard of quality. People must expect more in their house whether they design/build it themselves, have someone else design/build it for them, or if they are just buying it,” says Jawitz. That standard includes well thought-out design (relationships of rooms, spaces, landscape and the context of the neighborhood), a renewed appreciation for decoration inside and out, good long-lasting materials, cost effectiveness (including cost to maintain) and sensitivity to the larger environment (Green Building).

Green Building And Craftsman-Type Houses

Today, the concept of designing for the environment is called “Green Building”. The rating program for how “Green” a building is, in the US, is administered by the US Green Building Council (www.usgbc.org). That organization developed a rating system called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

It developed a checklist of items that provides points for design decisions that are environmentally friendly. One can get points on selecting a site that has low environmental impact, on how one sites the building(s) to minimize disturbance, water demand, run-off and to take advantage of the sun, how water and septic/sewer is used, how energy efficient the HVAC and appliance systems operate, how the building is constructed to reduce waste and to use environmentally friendly materials, how the building is designed to reduce heat loss or control heat gain, how the building uses renewable energy and how

innovative the design is to satisfy the above objectives. Typical considerations are avoidance of materials that use non-renewable resources such as asphalt shingles and plastics in favor of natural materials, the use of local materials that reduce transportation costs, use of materials that limit heat gain or loss (metal reflective roofs), window orientation to the South to obtain heat gain in the Winter and overhangs to limit heat gain in the Summer (passive solar), good insulation performance (an average of R-11 or better for the accumulated surfaces of the building), and energy efficient HVAC systems (water source heat pumps, efficient boilers, etc.).

Craftsman homes were naturally environmentally sound, yet they were built long before the term “green building” meant anything. RMA uses as many of the objectives of Green Building as possible including good siting, good insulation, use of local materials, long lasting roofing materials, alternative energy and refraining from products made from petroleum sources.

Affordable Quality

A big part of the challenge in improving American domestic architecture, says Jawitz, is to reach the masses by making it affordable. Frank Lloyd Wright, America’s foremost Arts and Crafts architect, tried to make it affordable for the average American to own a quality home. Wright’s attempts to make quality residential architecture affordable can be seen in his budget-minded Usonian (which stands for United States of North America) houses. Usonian architecture grew out of Frank Lloyd Wright's earlier Prairie style homes. Both styles featured low roofs, harmonious landscaping, open living areas, built-in furniture, natural materials, decorative structure, light fixtures and hardware, and large groupings of glass. Wright showed us that quality houses didn’t have to be large. Usonian homes were small, usually 1400sf to 1600sf, but they all seemed large. Wright's Usonian houses had no attics, no basements, and used innovations like colored concrete floors to save the wood for the ceilings. Open carports took the place of garages. The homes were beautifully designed with natural materials, built-in furniture, and brick or

stone masonry piers and fireplaces. The typical Usonian home actually cost less than the average cost of a house in America at the time.

Jawitz believes that using the principles of the American Crafts Movement; custom quality design, use of long-lasting, local materials and skilled craftsmen, and paying attention to green issues; and by making this affordable, that the demand for quality domestic architecture can be reinstated in America.