

# Where Did We Go Wrong

by Robert Jawitz

American domestic architecture is dreadful. The average family looking to purchase or build a new detached single family dwelling is faced with three apparent styles: Ranch, Split Level or Colonial. Ranch is just a single level, split level has the entrance ½ way up with two stories to one side and 1 story on the other, and colonial is 2 stories. All have low pitched roofs (3/12 or 4/12) with a shallow overhand. They are devoid of individuality and decoration. They are monotonously placed on tree-less streets with featureless yards of toilsome grass. They are made of the cheapest materials; aluminum or vinyl siding, plywood designed to mimic real wood, pressed wood windows covered by a thin layer of plastic, thin asphalt shingles, and light fixtures that fall apart if you pull on them too hard. There is Formica trying to look like stone, vinyl flooring trying to look like tile, and pressed sawdust cabinets with a vinyl surface made to look like wood.

This is in-fact a non-architecture. They are all done by builders with no design experience or aspiration. They litter our landscape and make our domestic built environment cheap and shallow.

But it didn't used to be this way. Builder's used to have an appreciation for style. While they were not architects, they used handbooks which helped them make good design decisions. One such handbook was Audel's Carpenters and Builders Guide. Guide #4 was published in 1923 as a "practical illustrated trade assistant on modern construction for carpenters, joiners, builders, mechanics and all wood workers". Its frontispiece had a quote from John Ruskin:

**“When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight  
nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for;  
and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones**

**will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, “See! This our father did for us.”**

And so, where did we go wrong? During the period of Audel’s use, Colonial was not a cheap adaptation. It was a fine continuation of our revolutionary classicism as created by Thomas Jefferson. The American Farmhouse style with its generous wrap-around porches and its gothic detailing was popular from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930’s. In 1923, the Craftsman Style developed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Greene and Greene and others was happening all over America due to the marketing by Gustav Stickley in his Craftsman magazine (1902-1916). This created a rich domestic architectural landscape.

Europe, as well, was developing this craft-oriented approach. In 1919, the German Bauhaus was started based on creating workshops of crafts.

But 1923 was a defining moment at the Bauhaus. Between 1920 and 1922, Walter Gropius, its director and the “masters” there, were being lectured to and influenced by a painter named Theo van Doesburg, a theoretician popularizing the Dutch De Stijl movement. Doesburg rejected the crafts and called for an orientation to the machine. By 1923, Gropius made a manifesto calling for “Art and Technology: A New Unity” embracing industry and the machine. Since the Bauhaus was born because of the poverty after the 1<sup>st</sup> world war and the devastation of German Industry, this was a natural development. The Bauhaus called for the simplification of design and the elimination of decoration so that objects can be easily made and duplicated by machines. The next director, Hannes Meyer (1928-1930), a socialist, championed industrialized housing, projects of repetitive elements, “providing for the People, not catering to Luxury”.

In 1930, Mies van der Rohe became the director of the Bauhaus. He had just finished his Barcelona Pavilion in 1929 where he displayed a building that defined space purely by planes and posts. In 1930 he

exhibited a house, based on the principles of the Barcelona Pavilion, in the Berlin Building Exhibition. The outgrowth of this is the design style called “minimalism”.

Mies rejected Doesburg’s idea that the architect/artist must subvert his individuality for the function of the building, and, in the hands of a good architect, minimalism makes a striking and beautiful building.

The problem is that builders are not trained architects. A minimalist building, designed by the untrained, makes for a clumsy and ugly building. There is no Audel to help them along.

And so was born the ranch, the split level and the so-called colonial styles. They are devoid of decoration, craftsmanship and style. Without the standards created by Audel, builders would seek the cheapest machine-made materials and methods of construction. Without good style, they are free to build clumsy and ugly buildings, and they did, all over America.

And it’s not just a question of money. No one should blame the poor for their poverty. The problem is that even the rich have lost the appreciation of the qualities expressed by the Audel guides. The rich just build bigger versions of the tasteless builder’s houses. It is common now to see 5,000 sf houses using factory-made fake brick or stone, factory made fake wood flooring, and rude distortions of the classical styles.

And so, here we are.