



Confessions of an Architecture Victim

» I thought building a new house would be easier than fixing up an old one. I was wrong.

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SHORTLY AFTER we moved into the weird modern home we'd just built for ourselves, the trash man showed up for the very first time. "So where's the house?" he asked genially.

"It's that building right behind me," I replied, trying not to sound testy. "The one I just came out of."

"No kidding!"

We get that a lot. In our semi-rural area—about equally divided between 200-year-old clapboard farmhouses and vinyl-clad Colonials that, except for being beige, wouldn't look out of place on a Monopoly board—we have the weirdest house around. It's kind of a gull-wing contraption covered in corrugated steel and divided into two main sections. We've taken to calling these the North Trailer and the South Trailer, because when we finally finished building the house, that's about all we could afford to live in.

We decided to build modern because we didn't have the energy to tackle the older fixer-uppers that were available. Columns? Pediments? We thought, Hah! We don't need no stinkin' egg-and-dart moldings! We're free! But we soon learned that building modern comes with its own obsessive demands. In our house, we treat plywood with the reverence other people reserve for antique chestnut flooring. We fret over where to find streamlined address numbers, or whether people will recognize that the green glowing object outside is actually a doorbell. Even the kids can't escape: When we built them a playset, it had to have a corrugated roof to go with the house.

Committing such an eccentric piece of design in public is guaranteed to make people question your sanity. Your builder will look at the plans, look at you, look back at the plans, and look at you again, over and over. And your neighbors will see you for the pathetic architecture victims you've become.

From their perspective, the best thing about our place is that it's invisible. We're set way back on a long, curving driveway obscured by trees. Nonetheless, I can tell it makes some



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people unhappy just knowing this alien interloper has alighted back here. Ours is the house everyone mentions when asked why the village suddenly felt the need to set up an architectural review board.

The steel skin seems to bother folks most of all. Once, when my sister-in-law made a comment about it, I asked what was on the outside of her house. "Aluminum siding," she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. People do wonder about it though, so let me answer some of the standard questions right off the bat:

- 1) It's fine in summer. It has regular walls underneath with insulation and everything, although on sunny days the reflections sometimes vaporize the geraniums.
- 2) That's why we have lightning rods every few feet along the roof. So far, so good.
- 3) Because they were out of beige vinyl at the home center that day.

Okay, that last one is a fib. We chose corrugated steel because it was inexpensive to buy, quick to install, and never

needs painting. Okay, that's another fib. Those practical things are valid, but to be honest, we thought it was sexy as well as cheap—just like me, as I never tire of reminding my wife.

When people wonder why anyone would build a house like ours, they rarely consider the many advantages of a home that looks like a lunar research facility. For instance, our house goes great with the satellite dish. And when the tax assessor comes by to produce a valuation, we're sitting pretty, since it doesn't take much convincing for him to conclude that nobody in his right mind would buy the place.

Because we're architecture victims without money, we often find ourselves perverting various honest items from the hardware store for purposes other than their maker intended. "You want a bunch of electrical conduit for a curtain rod?" the guy at Lowes asked in some puzzlement. "Why not go over to the aisle where they have the actual curtain rods and just buy one of them?" Because I need one 60 feet long, and it has to be in keeping with the general theme of naked steel.

My office, which is inside a grain bin (obviously), is a case of this misappropriation writ large. I ordered it by phone from a company out in Kansas, and the helpful fellow who worked there asked if I'd be using it to store grain. I hesitated, ashamed of the effete purpose to which I'd be putting this burly, round building. "Just a little whole wheat bread at lunchtime," I said at last. "Does that qualify?"

I like my round office, and, surprisingly, most of my visitors like it too. People around here are familiar with grain bins, and an office isn't the same as a house, so they'll give it more leeway to look weird. What they don't know about is my trauma upon discovering, when it was finished, that there was no room for the sofa I find essential for deep thinking, particularly the deep thinking I do after a big lunch. The solution to this involves an electric recliner/daybed thing I got at a local charity auction. I think deep thoughts in it every afternoon.

The tragedy of modern design inevitably falls hardest on the children. My sons have borne up remarkably well under the crushing stigma. One friend told them the place looks like "a pair of dumpsters," and another asked thoughtfully whether it was bulletproof. I'm not saying our house is scary, but in eight years we've never had a trick-or-treater. (Note to kids: eight-year-old Reese's still taste pretty good!) When my sons finally get the counseling they need—once they're old enough to pay for it themselves—they'll no doubt insist on a therapist with a couch by Le Corbusier.

Fortunately, their delusion is so complete that they claim they never want us to sell the place, which is just as well. Our architect advised us to strip off the steel and replace it with cedar if we ever decide to move. But I figure that sooner or later the Pentagon will commercialize all that stealth technology they've invented, the way NASA did with Tang. Then maybe I can talk the local architectural review panel into taking up a collection for some high-tech siding that will make the place vanish altogether. ■

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