Learning From the Past

BY BRENT HULL

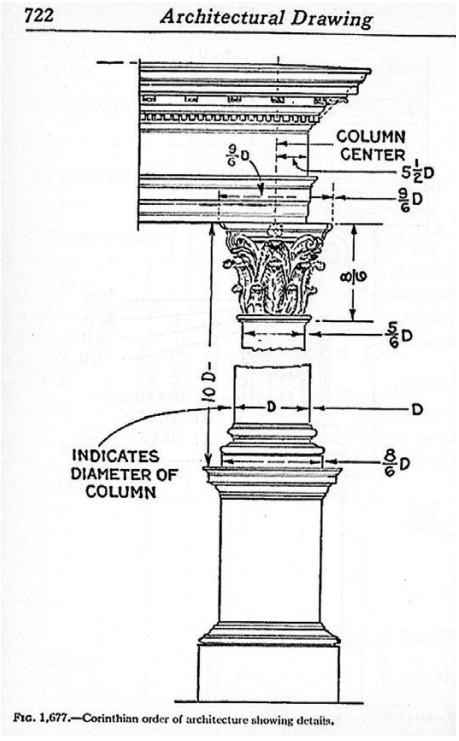
You have no doubt heard this common expression: "They don't build 'em like they used to." In response, I've heard some craftspeople say, "Thank goodness," while others nod in agreement, longing for a time when craftsmanship was celebrated over efficiency and profit. In my career as a builder specializing in historic preservation, I can see both sides. I'm usually saying "Thank goodness" when I look at structural issues. For example, framing in old bungalow houses near Fort Worth, Texas, where my business is based, can be a mess. I commonly see 15-by-20-foot rooms built with 2x4 ceiling joists. These joists often carry heavy plaster ceilings and bow 3 to 4 inches across a room. Even with joists cut from old-growth yellow pine, the weight of the plaster has overwhelmed the undersized members. It seems builders hadn't quite worked out lumber-span charts when those bungalows were built. Another example I often see is basement walls of historic houses that were poured without rebar. In our area of North Texas, we have a lot of clay in our soil that is expansive, and these foundation walls have not aged well, to say the least.

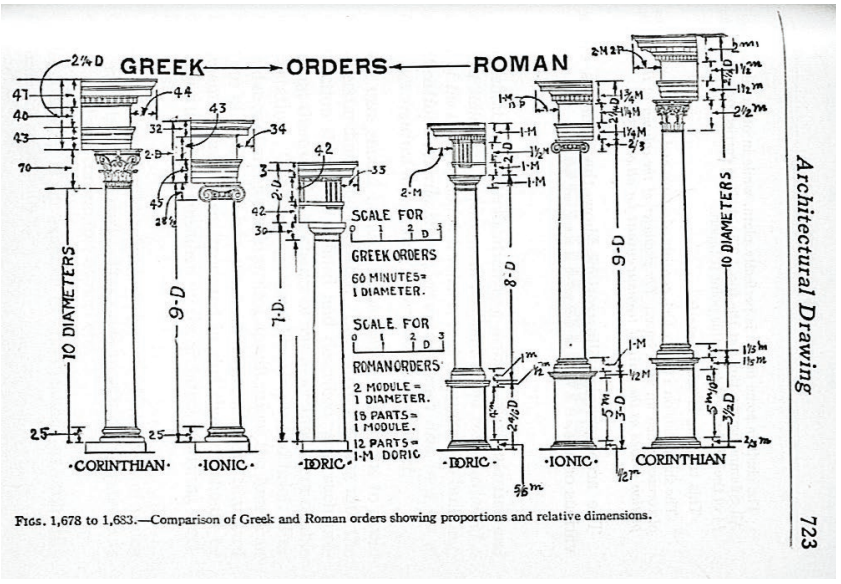
Structure aside, I would argue that historic homes surpass new homes today when it comes to aesthetics and design. Let's start at the front door for an example: The well-proportioned casing around a 1910 bungalow can be 4 to 5 inches in width, with a cap made from three different moldings. In 1920, no opening or pass-through existed that wasn't trimmed and decorated. The idea of drywall (or plaster) returns without trim around an opening wasn't considered, even on the cheapest of houses. When you add in decorative built-ins and working fireplaces, it's easy to see that there has been a change of mindset about building.

This shift occurred after WWII, led by men like William Levitt, who changed home building in the U.S. In an effort to meet the post-war surge in housing demand, Levitt broke unions, ignored craft, and adopted a cookie-cutter, one-after-another approach. This approach had grown out of "American Housing"—a long governmental report written in the 1940s that analyzed the home-building industry of the 1930s. It reduced home building to a few clear "problems"—the biggest, according to the report, was that builders spent too much time crafting homes instead of building them with a production, or "car-factory," mindset. But in the process of instilling factory-like efficiencies to home building, Levitt and his cohort also changed design by stripping any sense of scale and proportion out of the building. The cookie-cutter Monopoly houses of 1950s "tracts" evolved by 1980 to a period of "McMansions" and "starter castles"—large, cheaply built houses that completely lacked elegance in scale and proportion.

Photos by Brent Hull

The photo at far left **(1)** shows an oversized attempt at a Georgian Colonial entry. Notice how the pediment is too wide and dwarfs the columns, which look spindly by comparison. This doorway **(2)** is a proportionally correct interpretation of this style Georgian entry.





The 1926 edition of *Audels Carpenters and Builders Guide* included instruction on the Classical order of architecture. At left is an explanation of the proportion of the elements for a Corinthian column and pediment (each part sized as a multiple of the column diameter). Above is a comparison of the Greek and Roman orders showing proportions and relative diameters.

There are at least three key takeaways from the past that can help us build better today: First, by studying historic homes we can learn to infuse our buildings with a better sense of scale and proportion. Second, examples from the past challenge and encourage us to raise our level of craftsmanship. Finally, both traditional design and traditional craftsmanship provide us with a distinct sales and marketing advantage in today's home-building market.

SCALE AND PROPORTION

Scale and proportion are words that are often thrown around without much understanding of what they mean. Top designers and architects study these concepts and spend their lives honing their eye and touch because they know that when the scale and proportion of building elements are right, they are magical.

Scale has to do with size. For instance, when a pediment is too large for its door **(1)**, it dwarfs the columns and throws off the proportions (the relationship between parts). In the correct way to execute a Georgian-style door, the sizes of the elements look balanced **(2)**.

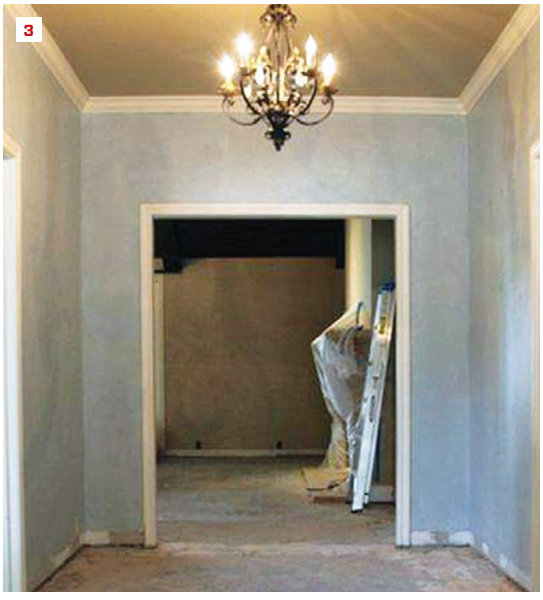
Often, historic design, like the well-proportioned door example, was based on well-defined rules for building—guidelines grounded in the Classical orders of architecture. The 1926 edition of the four-volume *Audels Carpenters and Builders Guide* by Frank D. Graham and Thomas Emery included examples of good design and taught carpenters scale and proportion by introducing the Classical orders (see excerpts, above).

Understanding the orders of architecture is a great gift from the past. Do you want to build graceful and elegant mantels? Awesome door headers? Any of the finer points of a traditional house can be learned by studying the past. Most of my teaching videos on the Build Show (buildshownetwork.com/go/brenthull) and YouTube (youtube.com/c/brenthull) are lessons gleaned from the past about every element of a house, from plinth blocks to pediments.

REVIVING CRAFTSMANSHIP

The second lesson we can learn from the past is how to become better craftsmen and craftswomen. At the North Bennett Street School in Boston, where I studied historic preservation, there was a furniture department that focused only on traditional furniture, including hand-carved ball-and-claw feet and traditional inlay and marquetry. These are challenging details to pull off, but the lessons are profound. If you can build traditional furniture, you can build anything.

The same lessons can be found in woodwork and trim. Moldings and trim on fine homes built from the Georgian period up through the 1940s are typically much more complicated and more intricate than those on houses today. Historically, an entry pediment was built by hand on site by a master builder, whereas today, pediments can be bought online and delivered ready to install. All millwork, in fact, before the industrial revolution of the 1850s was handmade. Thus, the skills of the craftsmen tended to be higher because they were required to build all windows, doors, mantels, and the like on site, and there was generally more woodwork in homes, including



A before **(3)** and after **(4)** view of an interior executed by the author's company. By focusing on well-crafted historic replication, the author has found a niche that has provided business stability for the past 30 years.

wainscot, window panels, crown molding, and interior pediments. Nothing could be ordered online. To raise your game and improve your skill as a craftsperson, practicing and copying details from the past is the path to finer skills.

I also look to the comparison between remodeling and home building. I feel strongly that remodeling is a more difficult craft than building new. Renovation work often involves a high level of complexity and requires a concentrated level of problem solving—namely, in solving for existing conditions—that is not required in new construction. For aspiring craftsmen and craftswomen, renovation work can definitely test their limits.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Of course, having more woodwork that is passionately labored over in a home does cost more. But it doesn't have to cost more to keep elements proportional, even for the simplest trim work. More importantly, I think that pushing toward better design and craftsmanship provides us greater business opportunities; in particular, a huge sales and marketing advantage.

One of the secrets to the longevity of my business has been its flexibility and adaptability. Now in my 30th year in business, I've lived through many ups and downs, and one thing I'm thankful for is that I have carved out a niche here in North Texas for historic and pre-1940 homes. We both build new homes and remodel older homes, and when we build something new, it typically has a historic flair. Being able to do both means that when the market is down and people aren't building new homes, we are still busy remodeling existing homes. And when things pick up, and people are building new homes again, they can count on us.

Our niche, which has been grounded in high-skilled work and historic replication, has also helped us gain the trust of top architects and discerning clients. We are blessed to have wealthy clients who want what we can craft. But winning the trust of these clients is hard; it must be earned.

STUDENTS OF THE PAST

Learning from the past requires being a good student. The best way to begin to learn these skills is by visiting historic houses. I suspect in every town in America there is at least one historic house that you can visit. There are at least two here in Fort Worth. I've done extensive work at both and have learned a lot in the process.

Next, travel. There are plenty of places you can go to learn how to build better. I would start with Colonial Williamsburg. It is a magical place that will have you scratching your head and drooling over awesome details. Winterthur—the du Pont home in Maryland—is another wonderland of interior trim and examples of building that I can bet you have never seen. When you go, take a sketch pad. Something magical happens when you see a historic detail with your eyes and draw it with your hand. You gain information, and it seals itself into your memory better than just taking pictures.

Architects often go on "sketching tours" because they learn firsthand how to resolve details. The process of drawing forces you to recreate the same proportions on paper that craftspeople worked out with materials. Find a challenging element and ask yourself how you would build it today. I often spend time working out details and thinking through all the parts and pieces. I think if you do this, you will say to yourself, they really don't build 'em like they used to.

Brent Hull is the owner of Hull Works (hullworks.com), based in Fort Worth, Texas. Follow him on Instagram (@hullmillwork_hullhomes), on his YouTube channel (youtube.com/brenthull), and on the Build Show (buildshownetwork.com/go/brenthull).