

WHY HIRE A “RESTORATION ARCHITECT” FOR YOUR HISTORIC PROJECT?

by Rommy Lopat

If you own a historic home or commercial building in need of rehabilitation, you are likely to turn to an architect for design help. But should you choose just any architect, or should you pursue someone who has specific expertise in restoring historic structures?

If you lived in France rather than Lake Forest or Lake Bluff, you might not have much choice. In France, according to Holabird and Root preservation architect Mary B. Brush¹, who spent six months studying French restoration systems through an AIA Richard Morris Hunt Fellowship, “France has protections so that only architects who are specifically educated and trained and who have moved their way up the hierarchy are working on the most important buildings. There it’s very difficult to get to work on restoration jobs. That’s in contrast to this country, where owners of even the most significant buildings are free to hire any architect of any caliber.”

We asked John Drummond, a retired residential/commercial architect who lives in and rehabbed a 1900 home in the National Register Lake Forest Historic District, if a client should hire a “restoration architect” to work on a historic building. He laughed as if the question were naive: “If you have a heart attack and need a vital operation, are you going to hire a heart surgeon or a podiatrist?”



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So what distinguishes a “restoration architect?” According to architectural historian and author Susan Benjamin², who works with owners of historic buildings to secure a property tax assessment freeze for investing in restoration work, “A restoration architect allows the building to guide him or her toward what needs to be done to respect its historic fabric and preserve its significant features while suppressing his/her own design imprint. The point is to enhance the old while rebuilding for modern purposes and a renewed usefulness. A restoration architect must be a highly creative person whose eyes notice important details of design—both original and successive—and who can persuade us of their relative importance.”

That expertise takes years to develop. A restoration architect knows that sandblasting destroys the surface of bricks. He should easily recognize that there is a difference in how the mortar was applied between the bricks on a 1950s contemporary house designed by Ike Colburn compared to its application on an 1850s brick farmhouse. The varnish used in a 1920s mantel should be removed with solvents that do not damage the woodwork; he would not only be familiar with such materials but also understand which modern paint removers are toxin-free and work quickly. From studying windows and roofing materials used in the 1880s to electrical systems adopted in the 1910s, restoration architects enjoy learning historic building techniques to adapt them to modern needs—while recognizing the architect’s original intent.

Employing a restoration architect may have financial benefits to the homeowner as well. Randell Makinson, a California restoration architect who has written extensively on Arts and Crafts style homes designed by Greene & Greene in the Pasadena, California area, believes that, “Every dollar spent correctly comes back multi-fold, but every dollar spent incorrectly comes back 10 cents on the dollar, and damages a great piece of architecture.”

With any renovation project, the key to ultimate success is marrying a good architect with a good client. Owners who know that they want to respect the architecture of the building as it was conceived for the site and the culture of the time period will seek out an architect who has the same interest. The result will be predictable and the process enjoyable. On the other hand, virtually every restoration architect can tell a “horror story” of working for the client who declares an interest in history, but who wants to cheat with inferior building materials or excessive shortcuts. The outcome is a hodgepodge of old and new and no one feels satisfied.

Happily, finding a restoration architect is much easier than it was even a decade or two ago. There are many seasoned restoration architects with extensive preservation experience. Several schools offer degrees in historic preservation. Most architects have web sites. But, like anything, “buyer beware.” Ask questions, obtain references, and you’ll be on your way to a gratifying experience.

Look to the websites for the Landmarks Illinois (http://landmarks.org/restoration_resources/architects_1.htm) or the American Institute of Architects/Chicago (<http://www.aiachicago.org>) for resource lists.

TWO IMPORTANT RESTORATION ARCHITECTURE PROJECTS IN LAKE FOREST

CHICAGO AND NORTHWESTERN DEPOT. Originally designed by Charles Sumner Frost and Alfred Hoyt Granger (Frost and Granger) in 1900, the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Depot has been “updated” several times over the last 110 years. It is in need of work again. To begin the process, the Lake Forest Preservation Foundation hired noted Chicago-area restoration architect T. Gunny Harboe, Harboe Architects (140 S. Dearborn, Chicago, 312-977-0333, harboearch.com) to create a Historic Structures Report. The report serves as a planning tool prior to the start of design work. It includes documentary, photographic, and physical information on the building’s history and condition, and lays out priorities for restoration work. A well-executed HSR runs about 150 pages. It was a unanimous decision by the Foundation Board to appropriate \$50,000 for this document. Harboe Architects’ restoration work has been recognized with over two dozen awards, including several awards from the National AIA, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. They have completed significant restoration projects on over a half dozen National Historic Landmarks as well as numerous other local landmarks and National Register Properties.

For more detailed information on the depot, please see the Foundation’s website and click on Hot Topics.



“RAGDALE,” 1260 North Green Bay Road, built in 1897 by Arts & Crafts style architect Howard Van Doren Shaw (1869-1926) as a summer retreat for his family. In this case, the process of restoring this important residence was begun in 2007 by contracting with Johnson Lasky Architects (180 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-357-1221, jlarchitects.com) to create a Historic Structures Report. In addition, they will undertake the architectural design work for Ragdale in 2009.

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² Susan Benjamin Historic Certifications, 711 Marion Avenue, Highland Park, Illinois 60035. 847.432.1865. www.benjaminhistoric.com