

STATEN ISLAND ARCHITECTURE: WE CAN MAKE IT BETTER

By David Businelli, AIA

Several Factors Contribute to Staten Island's Problematic Built Environment

Staten Island's Built Environment: Who or What Is to Blame?

Architecture on Staten Island has been in the public eye more than ever this past year, with the Mayor's Task Force on Growth being a huge newsmaker. But is it architecture that is really the issue? Is the issue about overdevelopment, or about the lack of sound planning and zoning? Is it the city's myopia when it comes to infrastructure, or the 9/11 impact that has affected the state of building construction in this borough?

As a practicing Staten Island architect and President of Salvadeo Associates Architects for the past seven years, I have dealt with all of the issues that face Staten Island. I have designed everything from town-

houses to cutting edge preschools. I have dealt with all the city and state agencies that are involved in the building process. Through these experiences, I can say that the design of our built environment here is due to the myriad regulations and a marketplace that opts for the most building for the least cost over design excellence. This is not to say that it's the builders who are at fault, or that it's the clients, or the Building Code or the Zoning Resolution, or the real estate industry—it is all of these things.



The F. Zaumeyer Residence by Timothy Boyland, AIA. This was a substandard 1950's modern ranch house transformed into a Prairie Style gem.

Historically, Staten Island has been a place to find well-designed buildings. Noted architect Ernest Flagg lived and practiced here. Flagg was a contemporary of Frank Lloyd Wright designing innovative buildings in the early 1900's. St. Charles Seminary was his residence, and his estate contained the daring houses built in to the serpentine wall along Flagg Place. The Huguenot Reformed Church at the corner of Huguenot

Avenue and Amboy Road is another fine example of his innovative work. Flagg was not the only architect to create fine buildings on Staten Island. Several of the older houses on the North Shore are nice, and New Dorp has fine smaller houses. However, all of these buildings pre-date the bridge and the 1961 Zoning Resolution.

The Zoning Resolution of 1961

Contrary to a popular belief, what is currently being built on Staten Island is not due to architects and builders "flouting" the law by utilizing the Professional Certification option of filing projects with the Department of Buildings. It is arguably the result of what was intended—wittingly or not—by the City Planning Commission, via the Zoning Resolution.

The Zoning Resolution was first implemented in

December of 1961 and was written, in part, to alleviate the complicated and rigid 1916 zoning laws. The 1961 Zoning Resolution was intended to lay out the rules for development so that a person could develop his or her own property without the bureaucracy.

Since its inception, the Zoning Resolution has not changed in any significant way. Instead it has been amended piecemeal. Recent additions to the Zoning Resolution were implemented in response to overdevelopment here. However, the additions have done nothing to lessen more development or to foster more creativity. The changes in the Zoning Resolution were intended to satisfy the demand for downzoning and to eliminate the proliferation of townhouses. Instead, the changes to the 1961 Zoning Resolution have allowed the same number of dwelling units on a piece of property. They even allow for building units that turn their backs on their neighbors.

What a wonder it is that the document intended to foster creativity and good design on the Island has in fact allowed thoughtless repetition while inhibiting design innovation. The city has placated the citizens of Staten Island while doing nothing to decrease density and foster development that's contextual with the neighborhood. All of the residential development now taking place here—with the exception of variances—is allowable by the Zoning Resolution.

What Architect and Client Can Do Together
Architects must deal with a great number of limitations here. Zoning limits the building form by controlling exterior dimensions, yards, open space and floor areas.

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PORT RICHMOND

Once referred to as a "model village", Port Richmond was described as "inviting and pleasing" in appearance in 1886 (1)*. The village of Port Richmond was a distinct place with stately mansions and a vibrant commercial center. It possessed a Board of Trustees who faithfully enforced the village bylaws and were credited with holding off rioters with a loaded cannon during the Civil War Draft Riots.

Today, Port Richmond is no longer a village, but part of a larger county and a grander city. Like so many villages or towns, Port Richmond has lost much of its control over day-to-day affairs. Bold action and local leadership has been replaced with bureaucracy and powerlessness. However, if one lingers longer, one can see how Port Richmond's sense of place, and its history, survive despite local and national impact.

The Dutch settled the village of Port Richmond in the 1690-1700s and soon the Dutch Reformed Church on Staten Island became the center of village life. Its original building, a small hexagonal structure, was built in 1715 by Daniel Corson. Mr. Corson operated the local ferry service and the village was called Corson's Ferry. Many other names would follow. The original church was destroyed by British troops during the Revolutionary War but the present day Sunday school building is reminiscent of the original structure. It is a unique multi-sided dome, built in 1898 by architect Oscar Teale, who later designed Houdini's tomb. A third church exists near the original site with a stained glass window that some believe is a Tiffany original. Some names are

* (1)-1886, it was referred to as a "model village" by S. C. Judson

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Clues to its History in its Architectural Treasures

By Angela D'Aiuto



Veterans Park in Port Richmond

Staten Island Architecture: Can We Make It Better? (continued from page 1)

The Building Code limits exterior material choices due to fire protection requirements. Last but not least, clients place limits on design due, in part, to a lack of exposure to any viable alternative examples.

In my years of practice, I have made an effort to bring new ideas to the table when designing a custom home or residential renovation. I interview my clients to get a feeling for how they live. I notice their personal taste. I ask what they want their house to be—and how they want live in it.

Most clients have a particular style in mind when the design process begins. They bring in pictures or tear sheets of houses they like and ask me to give them a house that looks like what's in that picture—rather than requesting a home that reflects their lifestyle. Why does this happen? The client does not have a lot to draw on locally, so they turn to the home plan books, older houses and large builder developments for design ideas. Instead a client might consider whether the center hall colonial is really the ideal house for their family. Is building the largest house possible on their property the desirable approach—or is building a smaller house with a great design and quality craftsmanship a better use of the same money? The best designs are the result of a client who trusts the architect and an architect who keeps the client fully involved in the decision-making.

Drawing on the Familiar vs. Taking a New Approach

Will Staten Island ever get tired of quoins, pilasters, fake cedar shakes and fake shutters? Maybe not.



The Mullen Residence by Vincent McDermott, AIA — familiar forms in a new way.

People want houses that look familiar—like a *house*—however, familiarity *can* be achieved without resorting to the ersatz pervading the Island. Look to the context of your block, or to your town—for inspiration, or for what *not* to do!

A vernacular found in older homes may be applied to newer buildings without copying them. The North Shore Victorians, the ranches of Todt Hill and even the farmhouse-style homes of the South Shore constitute, to me, a local vernacular. There is much to draw on for inspiration without resorting to tired decorative notions.

On the architect's side, new ideas for house design *should* be introduced, along with new materials. For example, are architects taking into account contemporary family living when they design their floor plans? Are they taking into account the reality of the television and "home theaters in a box" as the modern hearth? The semi-detached house provides another opportunity for change. New forms can be developed; new ways of addressing the design of yards and their integration with the building should be investigated. Familiar materials can be used in new ways.

Exterior Materials

A big part of the problem with homes on the Island is the material chosen for the exterior. Architects and builders are limited by such factors as cost, fire protection requirements and the desire to have a "maintenance-free" exterior. But vinyl siding, exterior insulation and finish systems (EIFS, synthetic stucco), and brick are not the only materials available that



David Businelli's custom-designed home in Eltingville, Staten Island. His design radically altered a 1954 Cape Cod while incorporating his family's lifestyle, keeping historical Cape Cod design references and blending them with modernist ideas. The materials were chosen to reflect both solidity and lightness, old and new.

will meet code. For example, fiber cement siding—a fireproof, cementitious product similar to tile backer board—is being used increasingly in the rest of the country. It comes in profiles similar to wood siding and looks richer and more substantial than vinyl. Modern homes that utilize familiar material in new ways can be seen in the work of architects Miller/Hull, Lake/Flato and Australian architect Glenn Murcutt. Closer to home, you can take a drive to Long Beach Island in New Jersey and see innovative residential design in the town of Loveladies.

Now for the "Up Side"—Excellent Architecture on the Island

Does this mean there is no decent architecture on Staten Island? Not at all. In fact, there are many good buildings and yes—even good townhouse developments here. Some are on a par with projects published in architectural journals—the main difference being the exterior materials and the zoning that guided the design. The best of the townhouse developments such as *The Oaks* on Richmond Hill Road and *Four Brothers* on Rockland Avenue feature group parking facilities, low scaled buildings and green space. *Port Regalle* and *Captain's Quarters* are also quite good. The Frank Lloyd Wright house (*Crimson Beach* on Lighthouse Hill) is the obvious standard-bearer for modern homes here. But there is a wonderful modern example on Highland Avenue on Grymes Hill. It is a small house that fits its triangular site perfectly. Vincent McDermott, AIA, designed a modern home on the waterfront—Zephyr Place. It illustrates the use of familiar forms and materials in an innovative way. On Todt Hill there is a masterpiece of modern architecture located on Circle Road.

Fine Commercial and Institutional Building Designs by On-Island and Off-Island Architectural Firms

Fine examples of commercial/institutional architecture are easy to spot on Staten Island. They include the Society of St. Paul on Victory Boulevard, Monsignor Farrell High School, St. Joseph/St. Thomas Church by Rampulla Associates, PS 56 by Mitchell/Giurgola, Richmond County Ballpark in St. George by HOK Sport, the Social Security building by Vincent McDermott, Independence Community Bank at the Staten Island Corporate Park by Landy Verderame Arianna Architects, the Gardens Office Building by Victor Han/Land Planning, and the landscape and outdoor classroom at Eib's Pond by Marpilero/Pollak Architects, to name just a few!

A Great Talent Pool

Staten Island boasts many talented architects. They include Timothy Boyland, AIA; Marcus Marino, AIA; Englert and Norton Architects; Rampulla Associates; Vincent McDermott; Lawrence Mandarino, AIA; Ciro Asperti, AIA; Buday and Shuster; and Dennis Del-l'Angelo, AIA. Seek them out and see their work. Some of the firms I've mentioned are national (HOK Sport, Mitchell/Giurgola) and we've even had international architect Peter Eisenman, FAIA, design a museum for the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

For years, architectural design excellence, independent of financial concern on Staten Island, has gone unrecognized and unevaluated by any organization. For years, members of the Staten Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects have debated and worked to offer solutions to the problems that we face here. In 2000, local architects were finally recognized by their professional peers when the chapter created the AIA Staten Island Design Awards program to independently evaluate and recognize architectural excellence on Staten Island. The program has attracted national and international architects. Past keynote speakers have included Peter Eisenman, FAIA; Steven Holl, AIA; and Terence Riley, Curator of Architecture, Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). Jurors have included recognized architects Thomas Hanrahan, AIA, J. Max Bond, Jr., AIA, George Ranalli, AIA and Laurie Hawkinson, AIA. Furthermore, the Staten Island AIA Chapter, through President Robert Englert, AIA, was represented on the Mayor's Task Force, and has provided solutions in the form of simple zoning text changes to help address these housing development problems.

Public Dialogue and Professional Recognition Point the Way

The public is talking more about architecture, especially since September 11th. The call for the redesign of the World Trade Center site has drawn proposals by avant-garde, international architects. Imagine the avant-garde in the forefront of the biggest commercial architecture project in the world! In the greatest city in the world! And the average person on the street is talking about it.

AIA Staten Island plans to stay at the forefront of meaningful discourse about architecture and planning here on Staten Island. Linda Pollak, winner of Honor Awards for Landscape Architecture, has said that AIA Staten Island "created a culture of architecture here on Staten Island."

It is imperative that the discourse continue, and that Staten Island become a place where architecture is spelled with a capital "A."

—David Businelli, AIA ■

Architect David L. Businelli, AIA, is president of Salvadeo Associates Architects, P.C., on Staten Island. He holds a BS Arch from City College of New York School of Architecture and Environmental Studies, and is licensed to practice architecture in New York and New Jersey. Businelli designs homes, commercial buildings, medical facilities and restaurants throughout New York City, and has won numerous awards, including the 2002 Honor Award for Interior Architecture from the AIA Staten Island chapter. He serves as President-Elect of AIA Staten Island and lives here with his wife Joan and daughter Noel.