Taking After Town

Lafayette architect Kevin Gossen does not hesitate to give credit to the source of many of the design ideas he incorporates into his homes. The influence of legendary architect A. Hays Town of Baton Rouge can be clearly seen in Gossen's portfolio of work.

The Town-style house has been much in demand in South Louisiana during the last few decades. Reportedly, there is a long waiting list of potential clients for the architect, who is now in his 90s, but nevertheless rises every morning at 2 a.m. to work on his projects.

There are numerous instances of Town's work in Acadiana: Among the more notable are the Rickey home on Girard Park Drive, The Moody home in Crowley and the Heymann home on East St. Mary Boulevard. Town was also the architect for the Heymann Oil Center and the University Art Museum's "pink palace" building.

Gossen, who practices with his father Ronald Gossen, has studied the Town oeuvre carefully and pays tribute to his approach in many of his own homes.

The key element to the Town home, as Gossen appreciates it, is the blending of comfort with excellence in design. "There is a casual elegance to it," says Gossen. "It works for everyday living, but it is always elegant."

Another hallmark of the Town approach is the use of traditional South Louisiana architectural styles. Many of his homes contain elements of the ante-bellum plantation home, the Acadian cottage and the raised Creole cottage.

Gossen admires Town's ability to work with historical forms without falling victim to excess or gaudiness. "It's important to have that restraint and know when to stop," says Gossen. "It's not one or two details, but a combination of details that makes the statement."

Another trademark of the Town style is the construction of smaller buildings adjacent to the main house for garages, guest rooms and service functions. This gives the home the look of a compound and allows for the construction of courtyards and secret patios. "The compound look adds charm," says Gossen.

That influence is clearly seen in Gossen's design of the Latiolais House on West Bayou Parkway. The main structure, designed in a French provincial style, contains living and dining areas, the kitchen and upstairs bedrooms.

The master bedroom is housed in a wing that juts to the south, while the garage is contained in a building to the rear. This layout allowed Gossen to include several small patios and courtyards in the rear and front yards.

One of the most notable aspects of the Latiolais home, and another trademark Town touch, is a generous use of large windows, particularly to the rear of the home. The many windows in the Latiolais Latiolais home features stucco on the main building and brick on the wings. That combination is also used in the Blackstone home which backs up to the Vermilion River on Thibodeaux Drive.

Gossen also incorporated unfinished wood into the facade of the Blackstone home as well as a corrugated aluminum roof for a passageway that connects the living areas of the home with the garage. The total effect is of a home that has grown gracefully over the decades, though in fact each portion was constructed at the same time.

Gossen attempts to incorporate fountain...
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Gossen includes into the design of his homes whenever possible, particularly when there is a courtyard present. Excellent examples of the use of this soothing device can be found at the Larimer home on Kings Road and the Palmintier home on Green Oaks Road.

The interiors of the Larimer and Blackstone homes are more typical of the Town house than is the Latiolais home. The Larimer and Blackstone living areas feature the use of lots of exposed brick and unfinished wood for the beams. George and Martha Latiolais preferred a more classic look with carved moldings and mantelpieces and painted wood throughout.

In fact, Gossen is quick to depart from the Town style when he thinks it is not appropriate for the lifestyles of his clients. For example, Gossen designs his houses with very large, expansive kitchens that flow into adjacent family rooms for informal entertaining. Town’s kitchens tended to be much smaller and simpler affairs, reflecting a clientele that often delegated cooking to servants.

Gossen also accommodates the current preference for large bath and dressing areas. The Latiolais home features a breathtaking master bath suite with a marble tub positioned under a skylight. Town’s bathrooms, in contrast, are purely functional and utilitarian.

Gossen had the opportunity to visit Town several years ago at his magnificent estate in Baton Rouge. He found the architect to be a man of tremendous graciousness and charm. Though Town has a reputation for being very firm in his advocacy of a particular approach to designing a house, he is also very sensitive to the special needs of a client.

The introduction to a recently published collection of Town’s drawings recounts tales of the architect traipsing through demolition yards with his clients to look for the perfect blinds, bricks or wooden beams for a house under construction.

Gossen is also a very people-oriented individual who enjoys getting to know his clients on a personal basis and remains friends with them after their house is completed.

Gossen graduated in architecture at USL during a time when professors were still much in thrall with the modern styles of design that are diametrically opposed to Town’s historical approach. (Town himself once worked in contemporary forms.) “In school I would never have survived with this,” he says. “They wanted you to be imaginative and creative.”

But today Gossen is producing a comfortable architecture that is pleasing to people. And though Corbusier might not agree, that’s in large measure what good design is all about.

The influence of A. Hays Town is clearly seen in Kevin Gossen’s design of the house owned by George and Martha Latiolais on West Bayou Parkway.