Why Grow Old?

By David L. Perkins
A.I.A. Architect

Many of us were dismayed recently when we read in the local paper about the destruction by fire of another of Louisiana's priceless antebellum homes near St. Francisville. I have visited and admired this stately reminder of the past on numerous occasions.

Now I am certain that some of you may wonder why an architect writing a newspaper column can jump from week to week from admiration for and concern with our buildings to exhortations for 100 percent modern architectural design with no concern for the seeming disparity in these two endeavors.

The truth is that our original old plantation buildings (the good ones, at least) are closest to the spirit of what is called "contemporary" architecture than perhaps 90 per cent of the buildings being built today.

Just as the physician upheld the Oath of Hippocrates, so does the architect invoke upon himself an oath of truth and a sense of duty "to love, honor and obey" that which is good, that which is true, and that which is beautiful — even though it may be old.

Now mind you, I said old — not "old" (as a fad) — and this includes faithful restorations. Most architects are not only aware of traditional styles but are well grounded in the historical, aesthetic and evolutionary significance of the antiques and classical as well — it is from these styles that we live so heavily for our sense of form, proportion, beauty and truth in architecture.

The last quality, I think, is the significant one; for only the true examples, those which faithfully reflect the real purpose of the structure and handsomely express the materials and methods of construction available at the time and place of building, are deserving of our concern today. More age does not make a building great.

Today's architect builds upon the foundation of knowledge and understanding of these past glories, and expands this framework of essentials with contemporary reasoning, requirements and facilities.

And what an array of facilities is available to us today — climate control, design by computer, manufactured materials and equipment that didn't even exist a hundred years ago, mass production planning and construction techniques, sophisticated financing, radio and television, not to mention air conditioning. Certainly, there is something a little unrealistic in expecting an architectural style of the 1830's to "come off" in this milieu. What this country needs, in addition to Irving S. Cobb's famous "Forced Cigar," is a significant architectural expression of our time.

If anyone wonders why an architect hesitates to do a "colonial job," consider first that the nomenclature itself is completely misleading — the real "colonial," of course, referred originally to the "styles of architecture, ornament, and furnishings of the British Colonies in America, in the 17th and 18th centuries, mainly adapted to local materials and demands from prevailing English style" (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language) and what we see so profusely and so poorly imitated is just that, which is by no means indigenous to our climate.

We should concern ourselves with "southern colonial" or "plantation architecture," if anything at all.

Secondly, consider that a true colonial architecture is architecture built in earlier centuries. Anything built today is imitation colonial architecture, which may be O.K. for dilletantes, but not for others.

True colonial, both the Northern and Southern variety, is noteworthy for its fine craftsmanship and for the fact that each style was especially well adapted to, and reflected the extremely different influences of the vastly different environmental and climatic conditions.

Consider the even greater disparity in today's social and economic factors, to say nothing of the tremendous advances that have been made in building materials, equipment and construction technology, especially in the environmental control equipment. Compare these architectural advances with the decline of the handcraftsman who in this period was the hallmark of our era.