

What's an "Architectural" House?

By
Richard Stanley

Inevitably, a group of people working together long enough will invent its own jargon. No exception, real estate is rife with arcane "terms of art", e.g., we go to an "open" to look at a "1.3 Spanish 3+2" only to find ourselves "in multiples" making an "over-asking" offer with "80-10-10" financing. Another term that has gained popular use is the "architectural" label, which is often applied indiscriminately. What, however, does "architectural" mean?

Strictly speaking, "architectural" means having the qualities of architecture. Using that definition, just about any "shelter in the open" (which is how Frank Lloyd Wright defined "architecture") could be "architectural". However, in real estate, "architectural", as applied to a house, usually means that an architect has designed the house. It is a house with the signature of a trained and licensed professional. It is not necessary to hire an architect to design a new house, but the result of a professional's input is usually money well-spent, because the superior quality of the finished product is palpable. Good architects know where to place the house on the lot to best advantage. They know how interior spaces should flow from one to the next. They are sensitive to the views from windows, how high ceilings should be and what materials and fixtures blend harmoniously. Most important, a good architect listens to the client and exceeds the client's expectations. A successfully-designed home has dramatic spaces, elegant details and harmonizes with its surroundings.

Hiring an architect does not however, guarantee superior results. Dull architects abound in today's "super-size it" world. Too often, dull architects produce new homes that rely on huge scale for cheap, imposing effects. The results are banal, graceless and insensitive to surrounding homes. These homes are no better than builder-grade efforts that are more about square footage than anything else. To call these notorious "McMansions" "architectural" is to misapply this term.

"Architectural" connotes a higher level of excellence—and quite often that the home was custom-built. Los Feliz, Silver Lake and Beachwood Canyon abound in architect-designed homes, especially the fine period revival styles of the 1920s and '30s that display the craft of the best-known architects of the day. These homes represent a golden era of premium home building—an inventory that deserves protection.

"Architectural" applies also to homes of the post-World War II era that were custom-designed by architects. This more-specific appellation grew out of the

recognition locally by the late realtor, Bob Crane, that owners of distinctive, architect-designed homes could realize higher sales prices if these homes were marketed as superior to the middling mass of most Post-War housing. In the 1960s and '70s, Crane began to use striking photographs by Julius Shulman to sell the classic homes of Post-War Los Angeles. The legacy of both these men is that interest in fine 20th Century architecture lives on today more than ever. In time, however, “architectural” was over-used and misused to describe a style rather than a provenance. Today, “Mid-Century Modern” or “Modernist” is a more precise choice to describe what could arguably be, 50 years or more later, a period style.

It is important to recognize that once a house is “architectural”, it might not always be so. Recently, a house sold that was designed by the noted architect, Raphael Soriano. Much was made in its marketing of its distinguished provenance. However, the house had been greatly modified over the last 70 years—and not by Soriano. Further, the sellers sold, along with the house, plans for even more remodeling. While these plans looked fetching, one had to wonder how much of Soriano’s original work would be left. Could one legitimately call it a “Soriano”?

In summary, houses with the signature of a fine architect command premium prices--about 15 percent in a good or stable market—***if the integrity of the original design is respected***. This general rule applies to all styles of homes. Remember, too, that we are blessed in our neighborhoods by “architectural” excellence of all sizes and descriptions.

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