

Observe any designer entering a Horace Trumbauer house and you will witness an expression of sublime satisfaction accompanied inevitably by a statement such as: “ah yes ... perfect.”

Horace Trumbauer created robust, dynamic houses for robust, dynamic people. In an age of keen focus on social status and the substantial new wealth required to achieve it, Trumbauer’s work spanned a remarkable range of styles and created a distinctively rich architectural language. The titans of industry who were his champions demanded this critical component of aesthetic breadth, which encouraged personal expression, while creating signature structures of supreme confidence and unerring mastery.

Today, as we restore his masterpieces – an enviable though sometimes daunting undertaking – we are guided by the hallmarks of his exemplary work:

Grace – expressed in proportion, scale and balance
Flow – evident in logic, sequence and vistas
Elegance – celebrated in formality, materials and detail

These characteristics were expressed consistently throughout his opus. To ornament and decorate the interiors, he sought out the internationally renowned designers of his era whose expertise amplified the power of his vision. Ahead of his time in recognizing the importance of collaboration, Trumbauer achieved unparalleled aesthetic harmony, integrity and authenticity in his work.

This unmistakable synergy between architecture and design is the foundation for the appeal and longevity that his houses enjoy today. One hundred years later, Trumbauer invites us to approach his interiors with the same spirit of pragmatism and passion he devoted to them, a process of renewal that is inspiring and compelling.

In approaching the interiors of iconic buildings, designers face the same challenging question a museum curator does when installing period rooms: whether to restore to the original condition or to the condition that the room and its furnishings would have aged if well cared for. For this question, there are many legitimate definitions of “right”:

“right” for the period
“right” for the spirit of the period
“right” for the original owner expressing his own interpretation of the spirit of the period
“right” for a 21st-century lifestyle while respectful of the period

No matter how grand the house, it is first and foremost a stage on which real human beings play out their lives. The goal of the present-day designer is to create the backdrop that allows the new owners to live well, connect to their environment and cherish their experiences. When a house is truly responsive to its inhabitants, it acquires a sense of purpose and relevance, ensuring its survival for generations to come. We consider every aspect of its past and imagine every aspect of its future to encourage, accommodate, and facilitate its use and enjoyment. Animated day and night, a house exudes life and vigor, becoming a continual presence in our emotional landscape.

The process is somewhat like painting a portrait of a historical figure, having only old photographs as one’s guide. Important information and intriguing insights into a house can be gleaned from existing conditions, but, to breathe real life into it, one must reintroduce the character, the attitude and the essence of the room just like the painter must discover and express these traits in the portrait. It is vitally important for the designer to slow down, absorb visual information fully and “listen” to the house. It will tell you what it wants. As transparent images of potential realities overlap and intersect, elements settle in and a dominant aesthetic anchor takes hold.

Sometimes, a client will provide brilliant direction, as Robert Montgomery Scott did for Ardrossan, his grandfather’s house: “make her the beautiful old lady she is.” Sometimes we build on aesthetic changes that the original owner started, as when André Carlhian was engaged to (as the family amusingly puts it) “Frenchify” Ardrossan’s original ultra-Anglo ballroom created earlier by White, Allom & Co. Other times, the memory of strong personal tastes prevails, as when a rare period carpet is passed over because “it’s perfect, but alas, my grandfather wouldn’t have chosen it.” As a result, the creative process weaves a circuitous path, full of challenges and serendipity, always guided by the designer with a firm hand, while staying nimble and responsive as conditions inevitably change.

Frequently, we can attribute the design choices to the realities of changing ownership. At Ardrossan, interiors were returned to the period, honoring the taste of the original owner whose family has crystal-clear recollection of his preferences. At Portledge, armed with fewer clues, we returned the house to the period but allowed for the broad interests and exuberant expression favored by the new owner, an enthusiastic young collector. At the E. C. Knight house, a town house that was acquired by a private bank, the interiors regained their formal, early 20th century

ambience, yet accommodated the commercial needs of the new owner as well.

Opportunities abound within these gracious buildings to explore the vistas Trumbauer created linking interior and exterior, and to reinforce this message through strategic placement of furnishings. We pay attention to elements and surfaces that are frequently given too little importance in contemporary residences but were wonderfully embellished in earlier eras. These can include vast ceilings ready for the visual punctuation of elaborate ornament or, in other cases, exquisite door hardware, so finely cast that it rivals the craft of a master jeweler. We highlight the nuances of ornate plasterwork through subtle shifts in the color palette; focus attention on intricately carved moldings inspired by the work of the classical masters; and capture the interplay of the hardscape rendered in limestone, marble, wood and gilt bronze with the soft surfaces of silk, wool, horsehair and linen. Every component works together to create an exceptional visual feast.

With furnishings, we employ more liberal guidelines, differentiating things “in the house” from things “of the house.” Here, personal taste can predominate within a historical context. Assembling the appropriate furnishings can be an ambitious undertaking, whether seeking out period pieces from dealers and auctions that match the spirit of the original decor or actually tracing and reassembling the original furnishings, such as those illustrated in the pages of this book. In both cases, the essential goal is achieved: to magnify the essential character of these exquisite houses. Frequently, clues are scarce. Architectural archives, old photos and family memories give us valuable insight to the original intent. In one miraculous case, petit point renderings were found of the original rooms done by the owner to celebrate their completion.

Restoration of original ornament and detailing can be an arduous challenge as well. At the E. C. Knight house, layer upon layer of dull taupe paint almost completely obscured exquisite plaster ornament adorning the walls, requiring months of tiny brushes and gallons of solvent. At Woodcrest, the oak paneling was so dry it peeled off in layers, requiring extensive rehydration. At Portledge, the subtle original palette was obliterated by aggressive application of faux marble. At Ardrossan, decades of elusive roof leaks caused extensive damage including, crumbled plaster, rotten wall upholstery and stained limestone. Architectural archeology gives us valuable guidance for remedies to repair the envelope.

Essentially, interior design is like a dance, and we are humble partners to the gifted Horace Trumbauer. Subtly but clearly, he leads you to all the clues you need to move gracefully and effortlessly through his rooms. Staying open and responsive is the key so that as the dance changes, the renewed interiors can match his range and mastery. These are complex aesthetic undertakings characterized by myriad variables and vagaries—a non-linear path, to be sure. Ultimately, as renowned designer Renzo Mongiardino advised: “faith must be stronger than understanding ... only faith can reward the client.” Happily, the intrepid souls who embark upon inspired restoration of significant houses such as these do indeed have faith in the power of beauty.

—Barbara Eberlein

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