

Let's Be Frank



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Frank Harmon (left) is a gentlemanly Southerner who favors regionalism: architecture that befits its locale and climate. The Prairie Ridge Eco Station,

an open-air classroom in Raleigh, North Carolina (above), operates without air-conditioning and is made of locally grown wood.

Though many people have recently woken up to the need to go green, for a few, living in harmony with nature has been a long-held ethos. One such person is Frank Harmon, a North Carolina architect who has been designing sustainably for almost three decades. His projects—mostly in his home state—include churches, arts and educational buildings, and houses that embody the ideals of new regionalism. Harmon hews to the notion that a structure should be specific to its place in terms of materials and its relationships to geography and climate. Raised in North Carolina but educated at London's influential Architectural Association, Harmon worked for Richard Meier, the New York-based architect known for his impeccably detailed—if somewhat cold—white, glassy buildings. So what made Harmon turn toward his warmer brand of regionalism? He had a couple of very strong influences.

You're an avid proponent of regionalism.

How did you get there?

In my late 30s, I met Harwell Hamilton Harris, who became a very important mentor to me. He was the first modern architect to fuse modern principles with traditional materials like wood and stone and to illustrate a respect for climate and region. His thought was that every building is a portrait. It's a portrait of the owner, or it's the story of the site or the particular climate or materials of a region. In other words, he felt that all great architecture started with the particulars of climate or site or materials. The more I thought about that, the more I thought that was entirely true.

Also, as a child growing up, I used to love North Carolina barns and farmhouses; but, going off to school in England, then working in New York, I felt they were rather provincial. Then I moved back to North Carolina and realized the inherent intelligence in those buildings.

I was also influenced by my childhood home. I grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina, in a suburban development at the edge of the city where some very forward-thinking planner had created greenways and parks, preserving the streambeds. I grew up playing on the banks of those streams, and I can say now that most of what I know about architecture I credit to playing by those streams. To this day I thank the anonymous architect who planned those pathways.

That doesn't sound like the stereotypical 1950s alienating suburb.

No, it was built before World War II—some time around 1920—and consisted of small houses, on small lots, and there were sidewalks. There was a huge change in suburban design in the 1950s. One reason for that was air-conditioning; the other was the bulldozer, which really came into its own after the war.

I never use a bulldozer. Now don't get me wrong, it's a wonderful tool, but unfortunately ►



The Strickland-Ferris House was built for an artist on a steep hillside in Raleigh, North Carolina. Conceived as a “fallen leaf,” the structure is raised

underneath. The copper rain chain, fiber cement rain screen on the walls, and standing-seam metal roof combine to give the house a modern vernacular character.

one of the cheapest things that can be done is to level a site, which destroys vegetation and wildlife and causes polluted runoff to flow right into our rivers and estuary systems. Prior to [its inception] you had to move earth by mule, and prior to air-conditioning you had to have porches for cooling. My grandmothers spent their time sitting on porches. I am sure the storytelling tradition in the South comes from sitting on porches.

How have you woven these kinds of regional traditions, like porches, into your work?

I have just completed a church in historic Charleston, South Carolina. It builds on an existing vernacular of Charleston architecture, a wonderful building type known as a "single house," because they were only one room deep and always had [a] large porch across the south or southwest side of the house. So for this church, I said, "You need hallways, but why don't we put them out on porches to reduce the heated area

by a third?" So now it is one room deep and cross ventilated. It also has the first green roof in Charleston.

So the church is a kind of modern vernacular?

Yes, but I am not interested in vernacular to be sentimental. I am interested in what it can teach us. All vernacular architecture is sustainable. It is always inherently related to the region. But let me emphasize that regionalism should not be confused with parochialism any more than you would call Faulkner a local Southern writer.

You've been building sustainably for decades. Does the current green awareness represent a real shift?

Yes, I think it does. I've been doing green stuff for 25 years, and over that time I've had to educate my clients, and that has been very difficult. Today they all come to me and want something sustainable. The single biggest impact we have energy-wise is our

buildings, not cars, and our clients get that. I think there is general unease about how we treat the world, and people want [to] build in a sustainable way. The pastor at the church in Charleston said that building sustainably is a moral issue. Architecture is arguably the most important issue of our day.

What about suburban development, which carpets so much of the country and seems to be the antithesis of regionalism? Is the message getting through there?

It is, I think. Almost all major builders are talking about how their buildings can be more sustainable. The greatest difference I can hope for is that houses and buildings can respond to places where they are. In our country we have the greatest geographical difference, so why is it that houses in Washington State look the same as buildings in Florida? The most sustainable—and liberating—thing we can do is to acknowledge the places we are in. ■



The Taylor vacation house looks out on the Sea of Abaco in the Bahamas. It's sheltered from the intense summer sun by an inverted umbrella roof that also collects rainwater for all

domestic needs. An open-air stair leads up from the middle-floor bedroom terrace. The living room is perched on the third floor to catch the breeze and the best views.

