



Frederick L. Bissinger, Jr.

F.L. Bissinger, Inc.

“Style is like a language with its grammar of proportions and vocabulary of details,” comments architect Frederick L. Bissinger, Jr. He maintains that while the novice can only copy, those who are fluent in these languages can use them to write totally new architectural poetry. When pressed to label his own work, he typically answers The Artisan Revival Style. He developed this name to celebrate the current revival of fine craftsmanship details and high quality materials commonly found on the best pre World War II suburban houses. His designs especially draw upon the diversity of cultural heritage that inspired the “fine old houses” of Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill and the Main Line.

His knowledge of these architectural traditions came largely from outside his architecture school (University of Pennsylvania). His undergraduate days at Yale, however, included hours in Sterling Library studying dust covered volumes of architectural magazines of the 1920s. In addition, he spent time driving



Above: This quantity of craftsmanship challenges the cliché “you just can’t get it anymore.” The imposing front doors were carved in England to the architect’s design. Stair railing is crafted of hand-forged iron work leading down the limestone steps.

Photograph by Don Pearse

Facing Page: Heavy slate roof, massive brick chimneys and sculpted limestone trim give character to this new Artisan Revival home.

Photograph by Jay Greene



through the suburbs of various American cities. "I never took photographs, except with my eyes," he explains. "Then if the ideas re-emerge in some later design they are filtered and re-shaped to fit current circumstances."

Bissinger typically completes 30-40 design projects per year. These range from an architectural make-over of an existing front doorway to formidable mansions graced with complimentary out-buildings.

Bissinger describes his firm as "small sized but with big output and big ideas; a sort of Jack Russell Terrier of residential design." (Not surprisingly, the Bissingers live with Olivia and Henry, two members of this "small-but-think-big" breed). Fred Bissinger does all of the design creation, meeting directly with clients. Drafting, including CAD drawings, may be done by others, but all initial schematic design drawings (which usually include a bird's eye view) are hand drawn by the architect personally.



After leaving school Bissinger fortuitously met a local builder open to creating a business partnership to build eight high-end townhouses. Shortly thereafter, F.L. Bissinger, Inc. was established as a design-build firm. The result was a high degree of hands-on construction experience few architects could match, and a drive to seek special sources or invent techniques to provide his clients truly custom work.

Although Bissinger no longer builds for others, he did recently renovate a substantial historic carriage house on his property in Villanova. Perhaps his most challenging feat there was building a stone groin-vault ceiling in a lower level room serving as a caterer's kitchen. Massive blocks of Styrofoam acted as formwork temporarily supporting cut limestone rib pieces, with rough stones set between. Finally, concrete was poured over the stones to provide a level, structural floor above. When the forms were removed a ceiling emerged reminiscent of a medieval cathedral.

Above & Facing Page: This aerial view captures the rambling plan of this stone mansion with limestone trim and tile roof. Cupola contains stair to third floor billiard room. Eight garage spaces array about a courtyard. The rear façade reflects the philosophy that it should be as well designed as the front.
Photographs by Don Pearse



"Architecture is essentially a service business, although the product is art," Bissinger believes. This attitude leads to strong respect for deadlines and a preference for fixed-price contracts.

Bissinger specializes in residential design because of the high degree of artistic expression it offers, encompassing elements like distinctive fireplace mantels, sweeping stairways and chimneys that punctuate the skyline. In addition, he especially enjoys the quick feedback of working closely with individual clients. Bissinger anticipates continuing to indulge in his favorite pastime, designing custom houses, "until the Lord who has blessed me with so many creative ideas decides it is time for me to hang up my pencil."

Left: The first new house in 70 years built on Newport, Rhode Island's historic Bellevue Avenue.
Photograph by Greenwold Pictures Inc.

Facing Page Top Left: A century-old antique door provides a charming entrance to an even older Chester County milk house which has been converted to a studio.
Photograph by Don Pearse

Facing Page Top Right: Dramatic stair curves around a circular brass inlay which bears the names of the owners' children.
Photograph by Don Pearse

Facing Page Bottom: This new home grew around an old barn frame relocated from another site. Much of the stone came from the "bank barn" lower level excavation.
Photograph by Jay Greene



O&A

more about Frederick...

What task in your everyday life would you most wish to eliminate?

Answering questionnaire forms. However, I once enjoyed describing my Labrador, Abigail, on a U.S. census form as my adopted three-year-old daughter.

Best advice received about becoming an architect.

"Don't be one unless you *have* to be."

If you could have apprenticed with any architect, past or present, who would it be?

Sir Edwin Lutyens, Edwardian English architect whose highly innovative use of traditional forms displayed wit and consummate craftsmanship.



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