

**Communities By Design**, a  
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organization, in cooperation with the  
**City of Redwood City**,  
is pleased to present:

# The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



## SUSTAINABLY MODERN ARCHITECTURE: The New Vernacular

2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #8  
WEDNESDAY, MAY 3, 2006  
LITTLE FOX THEATER  
2209 BROADWAY  
REDWOOD CITY  
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On May 3, 2006, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted its final presentation of the 2005-2006 Forum season. The Forum featured a presentation by architect and author, Steve Mouzon, Principal and Co-Founder of The New Urban Guild in Miami Beach, Florida, and author of the book "Traditional Construction Patterns." Mr. Mouzon, a proponent of classical and traditional architecture, spoke on "Sustainably Modern Architecture: The New Vernacular."

In his career, Mr. Mouzon has attempted to counteract the alienating effects of mainstream Modernist architecture, which he believes has resulted in un-relatable and sometimes less than ordinary buildings. According to Mr. Mouzon, most of we've been building for the last 50-75 years has been ordinary at best. "All we've been getting is cartoons and cardboard," Mr. Mouzon asserts, and as a result, we value the places we've been building less than we ever have. Mr. Mouzon believes the time has come for architecture to adopt a "new vernacular," driven by patterns that are easily perceived, easily loved, and easily executed.

### **The New Renaissance**

Mr. Mouzon believes that the decline in noteworthy modern architecture began in the mid-nineteen twenties when buildings were reduced to oversimplified remnants of Greek, Italian, and Colonial styles. This "Dark Age" in architecture continued and worsened through the post World War II era with the spread of vacuous and monotonous neighborhoods we now know of as "suburbia."

But by 1980, signs of a “new Renaissance” began to emerge as architects sought to recover wisdom from the classical end of the architectural spectrum and proposed a new “classical vernacular.” Mr. Mouzon believes that to be successful, this new vernacular must represent wisdom held not just by a few elite architects, but wisdom held by the people. Critics argue that there must be a separation between high and common architecture in today’s world, but Mr. Mouzon disagrees. One of the ideas that Mr. Mouzon strongly objects to is the notion that to be a great architect, you have to do something that is different than anything that anyone before you has done. The result, claims Mr. Mouzon, is that “we are getting a spiral of work that is getting weirder and weirder.” We have to get past that notion if we really want architecture as a profession to be sustainable, Mouzon asserts.

“The state of architecture today is recovering... but it is still fairly sick.”

-Steve Mouzon

Mr. Mouzon believes that above all, traditional architecture is architecture that is most worthy of love. It starts as a great idea and resonates with people who want to repeat it. When an element within architecture is repeated enough, it becomes a pattern, and when this pattern is loved enough, it then becomes a tradition. “We’ve been building horrible cartoons of traditional architecture,” Mr. Mouzon declares. Now is the time to change that.

### **The Classical-Vernacular “Dial”**

Mr. Mouzon defines classical architecture as “that which is most refined.” This means that it has been designed by a trained hand and uses the most elaborate materials and ornamentation. Vernacular architecture is driven by simpler patterns that are easily executed by builders untrained in architecture yet also easily loved and still resonate with people. Mr. Mouzon believes that rather than forming two distinct groups, the classical and the vernacular, instead, create a spectrum, or a “dial.” The most special and most public buildings, such as city halls, should be turned toward the more classical end of the dial, whereas simple houses should be designed from the vernacular end of the dial. Many buildings are somewhere in between, using elements of the classical and the vernacular.

Another useful application of the “dial” is in cost savings. If a house design will cost more than the budget will allow, the answer isn’t to use inferior materials such as vinyl siding. The key is to adjust the design more toward the vernacular end of the dial. This will cut costs while still resulting in an attractive, enduring design.

### **Six Realms of Architecture**

Mr. Mouzon identifies distinct patterns that make up “six realms of architecture:”

1. Personal Patterns
2. Local Patterns
3. Regional Patterns
4. National Patterns
5. Continental Patterns
6. Universal Patterns

On the smallest realm sits personal patterns. In order for a personal pattern to graduate to the next level of a local pattern, it must resonate. Likewise a local pattern must identify with its citizens to become a regional pattern. Regional patterns are where sustainability must really play a part because it should cater to the needs of the region and climate. Realms of architecture proceed from the regional patterns to national patterns and from national patterns to continental patterns. The last realm of architecture and the most timeless, Mr.

Mouzon says, is the universal pattern. This is where caution must be practiced because the builder or architect speaks for the most people. Universal patterns should follow rules of basic proportions, using the human body as the best model. Vertical and horizontal elements should be set to harmonic arrangements. Like a person, a building can't turn its head to its back--it must face the public, and keeping in line with our phototrophic nature, seek the sun.

### **Sustainably Modern**

Asserts Mr. Mouzon, "If we accept that something is sustainable when it does more good for most people, then we can extrapolate and create criteria by which architecture can be judged." Good modern architecture strives to sustainably do the most good for the most people and "good" can be measured by the extent to which patterns are copied and spread. The reviews by critics are irrelevant because admirable architecture is self-evident and it will be its own defender. The opinions of the people who use the building are most important.

"Re-firing the engines of the vernacular may well be the noblest task of this entire generation of builders and architects if they will do it."

-Steve Mouzon

The outcome of sustainable architecture should be wellness, delight, firmness, and hold as a true commodity. The places where we reside, Mr. Mouzon frankly puts, should last longer than the mortgage. Sustainably modern architecture has to be the property of the masses, according to Mr. Mouzon, because it is the architecture "of us" and remains "the only true architecture of our time." The design, because it must be accessible to the common citizen, must continually evolve through millions of minds. In contrast to sustainably modern architecture, "fashionable architecture" hasn't passed any tests, and it is the most intensely fashionable that goes out of style the most quickly.

### **Tools**

Mr. Mouzon suggests that the use of theoretical, interactive and pre-assembled tools can aid in the process of creating most loved places within the classical vernacular spectrum. Mr. Mouzon recommends site tours, virtual tours, design workshops, face-to face reviews, architectural boot camps, and guild charrettes as useful interactive tools. Mr. Mouzon believes that it can be useful to practice "calibration to places that are great" and he states, "there is no shame in actually tracing places that are great." He has images of his favorites in a "catalog of most loved places" that he shares with anyone who is interested.

Although prefabricated construction has a bad reputation, assistance from plan and pattern books and syntax codes, as well as the use of properly designed manufactured architecture, may be realistic options for many. This was especially the case after Hurricane Katrina left so many without a choice but emergency housing. As a tireless volunteer in Katrina's aftermath, Mr. Mouzon co-designed the "Katrina Cottage." The Katrina cottage is a small home meant to serve as a replacement for FEMA trailers. It is designed to be manufactured off-site and inexpensively assembled on-site. They are attractive, inexpensive, and designed to not only be permanent but easily expandable as well. This cottage will be an efficient, welcoming home for many who were rendered homeless after the hurricane, and serves as an outstanding model in preparation for future housing crises. "Why can't you be smaller and smarter?" Mr. Mouzon asks.

Mr. Mouzon closed by conceding that we can still be fans of innovation, but that everyone – including the public at large – needs to be creators, and not just a few architects. He proclaimed at the conclusion of his presentation, "Let everyone think again!"