

## ARTICLE FOR THE PRESERVE NEWSLETTER

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### PRINCIPLES OF THE MOST-LOVED PLACES: REPETITION

This is the first of what will, over time, be a series of articles concerning the Principles of the Most-Loved Places. This one concerns repetition: when is it good, and when is it bad?

Obviously, many things can be repeated, from fence designs to sidewalk designs to entire houses. It is clear that repeating the identical fence from house to house is a bad idea; it makes the place look like a project rather than like a neighborhood. It is just as clear that repeating the same sidewalk design from house to house is a good idea. Imagine how silly it would look to require each house to build a different style of sidewalk in front of the house. Entire houses are categorized visually by style and by type, both of which may be repeated. But should they be? Before we can answer that, we need to define style and type.

The style of a house is the architectural language in which it speaks. Within a given style, there are rules for how to design an eave, a dormer, a door surround, a porch, etc. As a matter of fact, it is this collection of rules that describe the patterns that make up the style. The rules of style are similar to the rules of language. The patterns are similar to words. Just as the English language, the French language, the Spanish language, etc., each have a spoken word for “eave,” the Greek Revival architectural language, the Federal architectural language, the Italianate architectural language, etc. each have an eave pattern. So patterns are like words in this respect. There is one important difference, however: Within spoken language, there is just one way to write the word “eave” in English. But within any given architectural language such as Greek Revival, there are choices of how to build an eave. As a matter of fact, there are hundreds if not thousands of ways of building a Greek Revival eave; it’s just that all of these ways occur within a very narrow range, so the differences are fairly small. This is an important distinction we will come back to later.

The type of a house is established by certain broad characteristics of the main body of the house, which is the part that fronts the street. Type is defined by massing and refined by window arrangements. For example, a shotgun is a simple narrow box with a gable to the front and either two or three doors and/or windows on the front elevation. In most cases, shotguns have a front porch. The pyramid house type is square with a roof that slopes up equally on all sides to a center point, hence the name of the type. Type can be mixed broadly with style, but not entirely. For example, you can do a Greek Revival shotgun, a Federal shotgun, a Classical Vernacular shotgun, but not an Eastlake shotgun, because the Eastlake style requires more complexity than the shotgun type can provide.

Those are the basics of style and type, but there is one additional distinction we need to add to the mix, which is the Classical/Vernacular Spectrum. All architecture occurs somewhere on the

Classical/Vernacular spectrum. The extreme classical end of the Spectrum is something like the state capitol or a good Greek Revival county courthouse. The extreme vernacular end of the spectrum is a simple country farmhouse with no refined style whatsoever. Every style occupies part, but not all, of the Classical/Vernacular Spectrum. For example, the Greek Revival occurs in the top one-third of the spectrum; it is extremely classical. Its settings on the spectrum vary from V0.3:C0.7 to V0.0:C1.0 (the most classical). The Federal occupies a similar, but slightly broader range. The Bungalow Vernacular style, on the other hand, occurs significantly lower on the spectrum, starting at about V0.7:C0.3 and running to about V0.5:C0.5. For each setting on the Spectrum, each style has slightly different details. The Spectrum is the primary creator of variety within a style. House types are similarly affected by the Spectrum.

So what about repetition? Here at the Preserve, we operate on a set of principles known as the Principles of the Most-Loved Places. Everyone, when coming into a neighborhood for the first time, has a toggle switch in the back of their mind. Initially, that toggle switch is set on “ordinary.” If we can get it to flip to “authentic,” they will value the place much more highly than if they consider it “ordinary.” People have been moving back into the Most-Loved Places for decades now, paying \$200, \$300 or even \$400 or more per square foot for houses with leaky roofs, bad electrical systems and plumbing that works about half of the time. My job as Town Architect is to learn from the Most-Loved Places and apply these same principles to the Preserve. Quite frankly, this helps the developer and the builders because the houses initially sell for more money. But it helps the homeowners much more, because the Most-Loved Places increase in value over the years far more than the nearby ordinary places.

One of the first things that you’ll notice about the Most-Loved Places is that they usually have a great degree of agreement over building style. Within any single quarter of a neighborhood, there is usually one, two, or three at the most Main Ingredient Styles, although there may be a number of Spice Styles. And most of the Main Ingredient Styles are fairly similar. You will notice how we have focused the Preserve in the past two years or so on just a few classical styles. Most houses are either Classical Vernacular (the most dominant), Greek Revival or Federal. These are all styles that are found in the Most-Loved Places of north and central Alabama, and we speak in the regional dialect of these styles to make them resonate more.

Another thing you’ll notice about the Most-Loved Places is that the building types are very limited. The French Quarter, for example, has only about five building types. The Back Bay of Boston only has two. Charleston only has two, one of which is hugely dominant, and is known nationally as the Charleston Side-Yard House. House after house in block after block of the Most-Loved Places may be the exact same type.

So what about variety? Don’t people want to all be different today? Overblown variety is one of the great mistakes that developers have made in recent decades. Differences in style or differences in type that are jarring seldom create beauty. Subtle differences in a type or in a style create beauty.

But doesn't this approach run the risk of creating "cookie-cutter" places? And aren't these bad? "Cookie-cutter" places are the result of an industrial mentality where you make the most money by cranking out a lot of exactly the same thing. This generally is very bad because nobody wants to live in a factory-produced subdivision. For this reason, we do not allow a house to be totally duplicated closer than 1/4 mile from the original with one exception: The Triplet is three exact duplicates, down to the paint color, that occur side-by-side and are of a classical style. Triplets can be quite striking if used properly. The Honeymoon Cottages at seaside are four sets of triplets, and they recently sold for over \$1,000,000 each, which worked out to close to \$1,000/square foot!

In general, a factory cannot efficiently produce subtle variety. Neither can a large production builder. But the builders at the Preserve can. So we are using this ability of moderate-volume builders to create a place of authentic variety within a narrow range of style and type, knowing that this is the way that the Most-Loved Places were built. We know that if we stay this course, it is likely that the Preserve may one day join the ranks of the Most-Loved Places. There is no higher aspiration for any neighborhood than this.