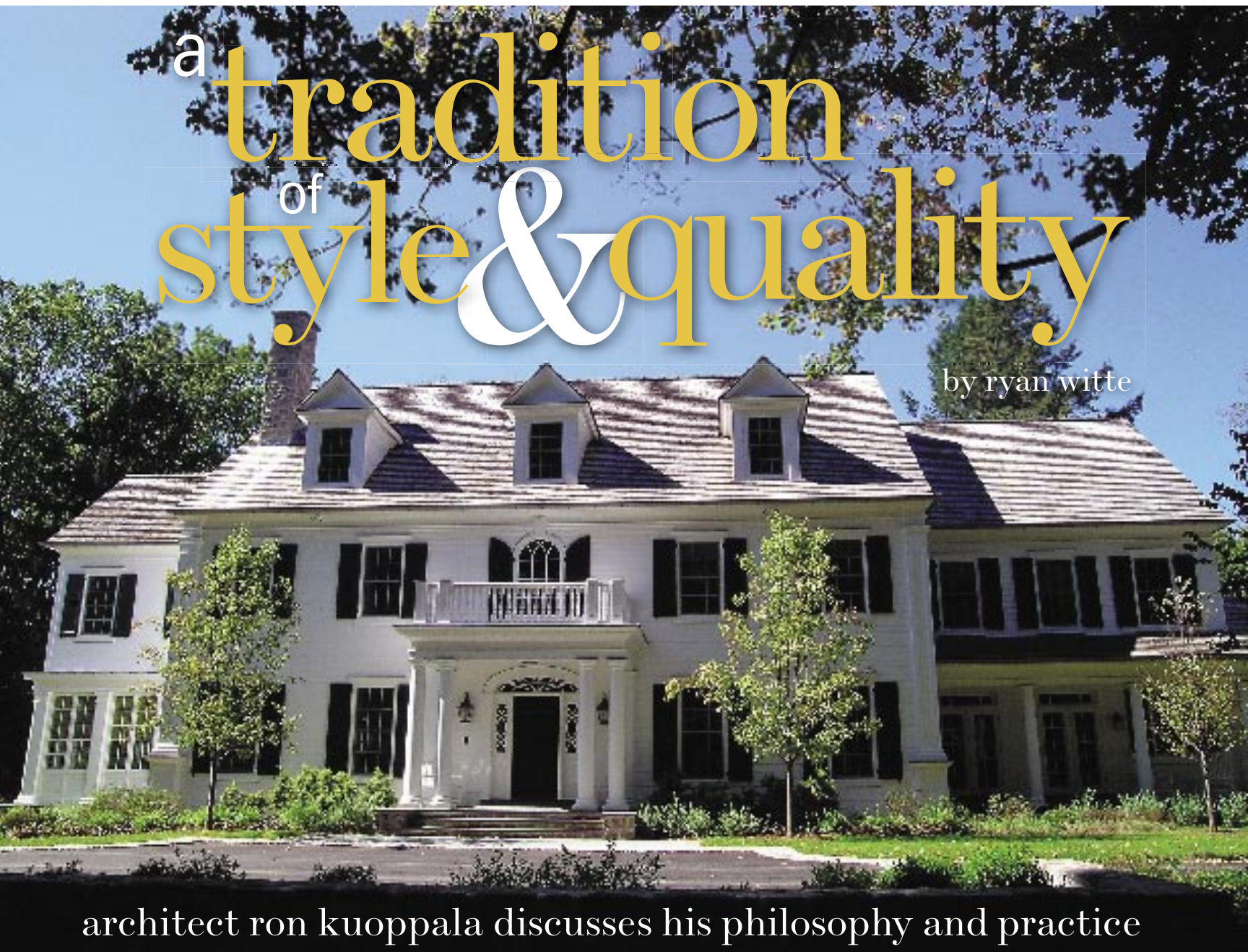


# a tradition of style & quality

by ryan witte



## architect ron kuoppala discusses his philosophy and practice

In this day and age, how does a person build a new home and preserve quality? With architects' potential clients instead choosing floor plans out of generic books and periodicals, it's a wonder anything of real design quality gets built anymore. Aside from the fact that such collections of floor plans are designed to be more or less acceptable to the widest possible audience—and therefore not at all tailored to one's personal family type or lifestyle—they also display none of the savvy of an artist who will take real pride in a well-designed structure.

Luckily, there's an alternative to be found in Long Island architects like Ron Kuoppala.

Kuoppala learned hands-on from Modernist master,

and Long Island-based architect, Norman Jaffe. While at the late architect's firm, Norman Jaffe Architect, FAIA, from 1988-92, Kuoppala benefited from seeing him juggle discerning clients and Modernist designs that would baffle contractors without his guidance. He also learned to appreciate the attention to detail needed to create real quality architecture. "Jaffe would actually go on-site to monitor the contractors. He had to, because a lot of times, they weren't familiar with modern design," Kuoppala recalled. "He'd have them move a roof down by six inches or move a wall over, to really perfect the look of the house while it was under construction."

Kuoppala believes bad design to be contagious. "People see that all their friends have these badly designed homes that just look expensive, and then they get the mistaken impression that it's the right way to do it," he explained, listing as examples, "huge columns

As per the client's request, the new 7000-square-foot home has the stately look and the savvy of construction from a century ago.

completely out-of-proportion with the rest of the house and stuck right up under overhangs with no entablature...rooflines not extended out enough so the house doesn't leak... It's not all that difficult; Palladio spelled it all out," he exclaimed, referring to the Renaissance architect who catalogued the rules of Classicism.

Perhaps this is what separates an architect like Kuoppala from others who make what he considers to be awkward and needless design errors for the sake of gaudiness. He does his homework. It used to be that architects were trained in the classical tradition, whether some would graduate to Modernism or not. Things aren't that simple anymore. And while most architects might prefer the creative freedom allowed by more contemporary design styles, it takes a very specific client—with trust in his or her architect—to want to build a Modern house. On Long Island there isn't as much call for them. Here, clients tend to want more traditional styles, often to match those of their neighbors.

So Kuoppala researched for himself how to successfully design traditionally-styled homes. And he gives his clients more than they ask of him. People hire architects because they aren't architects themselves. So to help them through the process, Kuoppala explains to his clients how good design results in a better-proportioned and subtly—but tangibly—more aesthetically-pleasing home. This may mean the added cost of a wooden mullion or a window molding that a bottom-line contractor might call unnecessary, like on the rear of the house, for instance. But it means the difference between a home with lasting credibility and one that has it only until you take a closer look.

"After Bill Levitt," he said of the man responsible for Levittown, "it all went downhill." While that famous post-war community may have been the pioneering monument to the contemporary housing tract, it nonetheless set the bar a bit lower for construction quality.

### COLONIAL, CHAPPAQUA

One client recently asked him for a Colonial

Kuoppala explains to his clients how good design results in a better-proportioned and subtly, but tangibly more aesthetically-pleasing home.

### CASE STUDY

house to be built in Chappaqua and wanted it to look like it could have been there for 100 years. It's a request that can be met only by an architect with high personal standards, not to mention expertise. The clients got just that. Putting his words into action, Kuoppala gave them a five-bedroom home with traditional appeal and the sophistication of a building constructed at the turn of the century.

The residents are a family of four who could have completely remodeled the house built in around the 1890s that sat on the four-acre site. The home was so small at around 1500 square feet and was in such horrible disrepair, however, that Kuoppala suggested the more economical solution would be to just raze it and start anew. The client took him through surrounding neighborhoods talking about homes she particularly liked, and the constant seemed to be Colonials. The style was a good match for the existing carriage house, and Kuoppala was able to borrow a few details like circular gable windows and crown moldings from the original main house.

The new 7000-square-foot home stands on top of the original foot-



stylistic integrity in the Colonial, Kuoppala devised clever solutions like a front porch that wraps around to become a port cochere.



print on the site. To improve the orientation, however, the new home was turned to be parallel with the carriage house and therefore also the street in front. Important was the preservation of an old oak tree to the side of the house and a cluster of pine trees in the front. They'd have been expensive and irresponsible to replace and even more expensive and difficult to replant. Since the carriage house containing the three-car garage isn't attached to the house, Kuoppala

allowed a covered front porch to wrap around the side to create a porte cochere, shielding those arriving by car from the elements.

In addition to the challenge of working in an historical style with specific rules and proportions, the symmetrical formalism of the typical Colonial interior just isn't compatible with most modern lifestyles. For example, the side entrance needed to lead to a mudroom, kitchen, and family room, while a formal living and dining area would need to be oriented to the front entrance. The main entrance is traditionally located in the middle center of a Colonial front façade, which wouldn't be so far from the side entrance under the porte cochere. To give the homeowners the right arrangement of rooms to complement their lifestyle therefore required some careful planning so as not to create an awkward interior. Christopher Corcoran Inc., whose office is in the city, collaborated on the interiors of the house in Chappaqua.

▣ *The new Colonial was reoriented to be parallel with the existing garage and also the street in front, while preserving a large oak tree.*

▣ *Kuoppala reconceived the layout of the four-acre site to give it better flow.*

▣ *Period details and solid craftsmanship went into the bright, friendly interiors.*



*Grosvenor Atterbury's 3600-square-foot Tudor carriage house provided the perfect bones for a small home.*

## CASE STUDY

### TUDOR RENOVATION, SOUTHAMPTON

Another project that shows Kuoppala's prowess is the renovation of a carriage house in Southampton, built around 1900. Originally, it had been an auxiliary structure for a Tudor mansion designed by Grosvenor Atterbury, the architect responsible for Forest Hills Gardens in Queens. The huge, original main house had been destroyed by fire, but its carriage house was more or less the size of an average modest home: around 3600 square feet. The challenge of converting a utilitarian building into a functioning home went to Kuoppala, as well as the honor of getting in touch with Long Island's illustrious architectural past.

The original carriage house shows Atterbury's ability to use modern and cost-effective materials to give the structure a warm, friendly texture. The house's base is actually concrete, but he had local stones added to the mix to give it a rusticated look. Kuoppala's team was able to replicate this technique for the remodeling of an existing three-sided extension on the rear that would contain the dining room. Above this base, between heavy timbers, Atterbury used what was called over burnt Lammie brick, a waste product,

in fact, from local kilns. The irregular or chipped bricks were less-expensive but gave the building a weather-worn texture similar to what gives centuries-old English Manor houses their warmth and charm.

The clients were a couple familiar with the design process. They asked Kuoppala to help them alter the structure in such a way

▣ *The house shows Atterbury's clever use of inexpensive materials to give the building added charm.*





*Kuoppala's new interior spaces feature clean, modern lines in natural, rustic materials that complement the existing exterior.*

as to make it more livable and pleasant. Opening up some of the walls with more windows and replacing the wooden garage doors on the front façade with French doors brought in significantly more light. He also replaced the bottom half of double hung windows with antiqued glass, minus the diagonal muntin bars, to allow in more sunlight and improve views. "I'm interested in the feelings evoked by the interplay of light and space, how light changes from East to South for instance... something few architects pay enough attention to," Kuoppala explained.

He also gave them a modern kitchen and a sophisticated climate-control system that monitors the temperature in every room separately. The sleek interiors feature clean, modern lines, while leaving brick exposed for its beautiful textures and using natural materials and surfaces appropriate to the home's exterior.

*The challenge of creating a functional new home in an historic style was successfully met in the fully modern kitchen.*



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— Ron Kuoppala

### PROCESS

It's not a huge surprise Kuoppala's clients are satisfied; he makes the process not only informative but also an enjoyable one. While few architects can get by anymore without the aid of a computer, he does most of his creative work on paper, then moves on to models. The computer is merely a tool for construction. The models are essential, he believes, because you don't benefit from peripheral vision when looking at a computer screen. His reasoning is that the animated "walk-through" in a computer rendering is fixed, and doesn't allow the client's eye to follow its own voluntary path.

He also occasionally lets the client hold onto a model for a while, to mull it over and get used to what will be their new residence. "The computer rendering isn't out on the table for you to see when you come home from work," he explained, "whereas a model is right there so you can see it and think about it when you pass by." He's also had clients throw themselves a party to celebrate the building of their new home. "They can invite their friends over, and say 'this is our new house!'" With so much invested in such a project and much at stake, enthusiasm can be as great an asset as explanation.

*By opening certain walls with large windows and French doors, Kuoppala bathed the remodeled interiors with natural light.*



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