The New Criterion

Features December 2017

Harrie T. Lindeberg & the American country house

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On the architect Harrie T. Lindeberg's innovative yet historically minded approach to houses.

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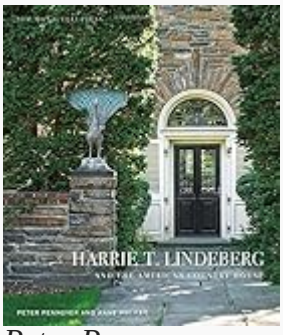

Peter Pennoyer
Harrie T. Lindeberg and the American Country House

The Monacelli Press, 256 pages, $60.00

Harrie T. Lindeberg's designs from the first three decades of the twentieth century made him famous in his day and created a legacy that sets him in the pantheon of major American architects. But along with many of his talented contemporaries, his accomplishments were obscured by the onslaught of modernism introduced from Europe in the 1930s. Lindeberg (1880–1959) documented his oeuvre in his 1940 monograph, Domestic Architecture of H. T. Lindeberg, with an introduction by Royal Cortissoz, a leading critic of his day. Many practicing architects have treasured this monograph, but the copies they acquired often bore the tell-tale deaccession stamps of libraries that recognized that the profession no longer viewed work inspired by architecture of the past as relevant. Indeed, historians starting with Henry-Russell Hitchcock had little place for architects like Lindeberg whose work was inspired by the past and whose genius was in extending the historical continuum of architecture.1

As architects began questioning the orthodoxy of modernism in the 1970s and exploring, under the banner of postmodernism, the relevance of history to contemporary practice, Lindeberg's book

became a treasury of brilliant designs that inspired a new generation. But it wasn't until the architect and historian Mark Alan Hewitt reissued the monograph in 1996 that a wider audience discovered his work. Hewitt's incisive essay went beyond the Cortissoz introduction, explaining the foundations of Lindeberg's career, his approach to design, his place among his contemporaries, and the essential qualities of his work.

American architects who began to practice in the first decade of the twentieth century, including Lindeberg and his early partner, Lewis Colt Albro, had the good fortune to enter a vibrant and creative period fueled by a vast expansion of wealth and opportunity. As alumni of the office of McKim, Mead & White, the premier firm of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Lindeberg and Albro had firsthand experience and exposure to the inner workings of America's most vaunted architectural practice. As the country industrialized, the rich—produced by the rapidly expanding economy—turned to McKim, Mead & White and others to create compelling cultural expressions of their wealth and newly achieved social status. Albro and Lindeberg—the primary designer—continued to forge their way as stylistic ambassadors, transforming the lessons of the practice into an architecture that appealed to the more refined tastes of the early twentieth century, a period when the flamboyance and florid archaeology of the earlier decades was becoming passé. At a moment when talent was in high demand and commissions were abundant, Americans were eager to convey who they were, and firms, even young practices like Albro & Lindeberg, were able to step in and influence the direction of American taste.

Capitalizing on the increased accessibility to the country created by new train lines as well as the rising popularity of the automobile, Albro & Lindeberg—and Lindeberg as a sole practitioner after 1914—chose to specialize in the design of country houses and estates. As New York's population swelled, city dwellers began to establish primary residences within commuting distance or second homes as a balance to the grind of the metropolis. Country clubs—the social hub of country life—proliferated as Americans gravitated towards leisure sports such as golf, tennis, hunting, and polo. This phenomenon was not limited to New York and its environs; Lindeberg found himself at the center of the country house movement as upscale suburbs developed around large cities across the country. His office was in New York, but he completed houses in Houston, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Terre Haute, Dayton, and Charlotte, among others. His reputation grew to the national level as his name and distinctive style of architecture garnered more and more attention—starting with the romantic James A. Stillman house in Westchester County, New York.

City dwellers began to establish primary residences within commuting distance.

Searching for a more defined American idiom, Lindeberg synthesized influences to make his houses legible, rational expressions of program on one hand and associative essays on the other. While his work captured the typical English and colonial influences that were then blossoming in

American domestic architecture, his Swedish roots were visible in the houses he designed. He admired vernacular Swedish houses and their rustic attachment to the land, their simplicity having both practical and aesthetic appeal. Rural houses in Sweden were marked by an especially close association with nature, with sod roofs still prevalent in the country until the late nineteenth century. Other features he admired included steep roofs—often at a fifty-degree slope—which efficiently shed rain and snow and allowed passive ventilation to dispel heat in the summer. He was attracted to the pure forms of Swedish houses as well with their solid massing with windows as punched openings rather than as segments of a frame. Lindeberg remarked that Swedish architects did not copy old forms literally but did adhere to their native traditions.

In much the same way, Lindeberg's work pulled from tradition—sources ranging from French, English, and Georgian to colonial—but was instilled with both personality and a supreme sense of its surroundings. Seeking simplicity, even with commissions that were inspired by classical precedents, remained one of his guiding principles. He admired the long unbroken rooflines, rhythmic groupings of windows, and low-lying masses of the English cottage vernacular—elements he incorporated into his designs time and again. He often added one-story wings to increase a project's charm and to give a low-slung effect and chose brick and stone for their colors and textures, modeling what became his signature roof after those of English cottages—thatched, quarried slate, or handmade tile rich in interest. He often arranged shingles artistically to heighten the effect of their interweaving color, to soften the ridges and eaves, and to accentuate what was often a steep pitch.

Critics saw Lindeberg's approach, novel for its fresh and idiosyncratic interpretation of the past, as essentially American because it acknowledged its own time and place first and foremost. He was particularly adept at evolving a style as the appropriate solution to each architectural problem, but making that style his own. In the introduction to Lindeberg's monograph, Cortissoz described his work as having a "definite and original personality" that was also "distinctively American," writing that "a typical Lindeberg house has a fresh, newly minted quality, delightfully unspoilt by derivative influences."

His work had the same poetic power and intuitive sense of massing as the work of his contemporaries, particularly Philadelphia architects including Mellor, Meigs & Howe, Robert R. McGoodwin, and H. Louis Duhring, who took local Pennsylvania limestone as the rustic material for romantic, picturesque villas that had both classical and vernacular foundations. Likely influenced by the architect Charles A. Platt, Lindeberg saw the floor plan as inexorably linked to the landscape plan, often setting his houses within outdoor rooms created by terraces, walls, and hedges to create special connections varying from intimate, tightly contained walled gardens to open swaths of land framing distant views.

William Adams Delano once commented that he believed that architecture was the "most difficult of all the Fine Arts. It must serve practical needs and at the same time create an emotion, and the architect's only tools for attaining [this] are such vague qualities as line, mass, proportion, and

color." "Well-trained architects," he believed, "can give this emotional quality" as Lindeberg manifests with his plans calibrated to enforce highly controlled, specific sequences of experience from entrances that are often through projected gabled forms in romantically asymmetrical façades to more formal and impressively scaled rooms set behind symmetrical garden façades.

Lindeberg's work marked something of a sea change for domestic architecture.

The critic C. Matlack Price faithfully chronicled the arc of Lindeberg's career, marking his emergence as an important architect among the second generation of the American Renaissance. As he noted, prophetically, in 1920,

> when Harrie T. Lindeberg designed the Stillman house at Pocantico Hills, it was a new sort of country house. Picturesque houses, prior to that time, had mostly been queer or freak houses, and large and important country places had always been impressively formal. Mr. Lindeberg's work at that time forecast the change in tastes and standards that now is so widely apparent.Future historians may say that Mr. Lindeberg's work was very largely instrumental in bringing about the change in our ideals in country houses.

Indeed, Lindeberg's work marked something of a sea change for domestic architecture. Rather than concentrating on formal, classical, aesthetic elements, he focused on making his houses comfortable and livable. While he did not expressly criticize the École des Beaux-Arts, he felt that modern French ideals "with [their] glorification of the past, with their beauty belonging to alien lands, with their magnificence and splendor" were not well suited to domestic living. Rather, his focus on the setting as the driving influence on his designs made each of his houses, regardless of style, all about the sense of place. Lindeberg stressed that architects should "build simply, whether a cottage or castle" by using indigenous materials, proper proportions, and a harmonious outline to create, in his words, "unity of design." Details, such as how solids and voids were grouped, the effect of light and shadow, and even the proportions of the window mullions, played into the effect of quiet dignity. This mastery of composition was matched by an inherent sense of appropriateness that the architectural historian G. H. Edgell called "the aristocratic economy of means that proudly avoids self-advertisement and as discreetly glorifies the taste of designer and tenant."

But it was Lindeberg's gift as an artist that gave his work an extra dimension. In 1940 Cortissoz remarked,

> I have known Charles F. McKim, Stanford White, Henry Bacon, John Russell Pope, and Charles A. Platt. I have seen their genius in operation and I have seen, in each case, with what inevitability the man played into the hands of the artist and how both fused into a single force, drove first and last at the production of a work of art. How inexorable was the resolution of these men to have the work in hand made absolutely right—and beautiful! Harrie Lindeberg is like that and he belongs, on the same high grounds, in the company of the architects I have just mentioned.

Lindeberg's balance of classical and vernacular forms was precisely calibrated; while there were distinct stylistic overtones— Norman, Tudor, Georgian—his blending of elements and motives prevented his work from falling into one distinct category. His houses were logically arranged with practical plans, balanced symmetries, and architectural rhetoric grounded in tradition. But they were also characterized by an emphasis on materials, novel decorative elements—however sparing—and unfolding massing that leaned toward the picturesque and romantic. Yet, as a master of proportion, he could reconcile his low-lying volumes with his massive steep roofs and soaring chimneys, making the ensemble—often dynamically asymmetrical—appear seamless, refined, and charming all at the same time. While Lindeberg's work was deliberate—every detail was studied and executed with great care—it exuded a certain spontaneity and freshness that some of his colleagues' work lacked.

Lindeberg's work is often compared to that of his British contemporary Sir Edwin Lutyens, who was also a virtuoso at weaving seemingly disparate threads into his designs: the appealing irregularities of the romantic and vernacular and the more rigorous and logical elements of the classical tradition. Like Lutyens, Lindeberg designed with a searing insight into the essential qualities of massing and detail. As the critic Talbot Hamlin observed, in the best of domestic architecture "styles came to be inspirations rather than laws and were chosen not merely by fashion or a priori wish but developed from the conditions of the design itself." Not an inventor by nature, Lindeberg—like Lutyens—was the consummate innovator, inspired by historic precedent to create a new and compelling feature. The expressive power of Lutyens's brickwork at the Deanery Garden or the blending of vernacular and classical, as seen at Tigbourne Court, is matched by Lindeberg's innate ability to artistically mix inspirations and make them personal, as seen in such details as the leaded repoussé sheathing at the base of an oriel window in a house on Long Island or his prominent chimney masses.

While Lindeberg's work seems most to reflect English precedent, his inspirations were diverse, as evidenced by the breadth of his working library. He acquired some 350 volumes over the course of his career, from the classic *Edifices de Rome Moderne* by Paul Letarouilly, to later books by Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. Ranging from the Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century, the majority of the collection focused on colonial, French, English, and Swedish architecture, French and English furniture, and included many books and articles on and by his American contemporaries. He was particularly impressed by the work of such European designers as the Swedish architects Ragnar Östberg and Ivar Tengbom and the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. As Henry-Russell Hitchcock observed, in the Scandinavian countries, architects like Östberg were able to "clothe new forms elegantly with subtle eclectic reminiscence of the past." Östberg's masterpiece, the Stockholm City Hall, was—like Lindeberg's best work—a thoroughly symphonic essay with myriad historical and regional influences marshaled by one creative eye. For smaller-scale details, such as furniture and ironwork, Lindeberg cast a wide net including models from the Vienna Secession and the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris to such designers as the Frenchmen René Lalique, Edgar Brandt, and Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, as well as the Danish designer Kaare Klint. Like Lindeberg, they too knew how to manipulate forms and color for artistic

effect.

Against the backdrop of the first decades of the twentieth century, Lindeberg's work found its place in America's canon of country house architecture—a development supported by the unbridled economic growth of the 1920s. Where Lindeberg's early work was celebrated in the architectural press for its singularly personal interpretations of historical example, his late works were designed when the profession radically rejected history. In Lindeberg's case, however, designs from the end of his career, when the nation was in the grip of the Depression and modernism had pulled the carpet from under the old guard, offer a key to understanding his entire body of work and reveal principles that underlie even his earliest projects. Lindeberg's central theme, simplicity in design, is evident throughout, from houses that look elaborate to our eyes to the spare, stripped modern approach of his last works.

Lindeberg's work found its place in America's canon of country house architecture.

The Depression halted the period's building boom, but Lindeberg held on with several plum commissions for embassies abroad. While house commissions were few and far between, he redirected his focus with a series of simpler "cellular" houses based on his system of modules. These pared-down houses, underpinned by classical proportioning, were Lindeberg's answer to the challenge posed by modernism as it swept the country in the 1930s and 1940s. Today, a remarkable number of Lindeberg's houses stand unscathed. Many continue to be private homes, cherished and maintained by their owners for what they are: comfortable houses with a domestic spirit, but at the same time beautifully executed works of art that reveal Lindeberg's pursuit of unity in his designs.

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1 This piece is adapted from *Harrie T. Lindeberg and the American Country House*, by Peter Pennoyer & Anne Walker, published by The Monacelli Press in November 2017.

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