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# A History of Invention

*New Classic American Houses: The Architecture of Albert, Righter & Tittmann*

by Dan Cooper, with foreword by Robert A. M. Stern  
The Vendome Press, New York, NY; 2009

224 pages; hardcover; 200 color and b&w illustrations; \$50  
ISBN 978-0-86565-253-8

Review by Christine G. H. Franck

In *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* W. Jackson Bates questions whether the best way to address the history of modern English poetry, and the arts in general, might be to examine the anxiety felt by the artist in the face of past achievements as the artist asks himself: "What is there left to do?" From the diverse work beautifully presented in *New Classic American Houses* it is abundantly clear that Boston, MA-based Albert, Righter & Tittmann Architects (AR&T) suffers not from any burden of the past. Rather, AR&T respects and revels in tradition, converses knowingly with it, quotes from it, questions it, adds to it and in turn creates work equaling the tradition the firm's principals clearly admire.

With their combination of knowledge, skill, intuition and strength of imagination, architects Jacob Albert, James Righter and John

Tittmann have collectively created a body of work that is truly a delight to study in the drawings, text and plentiful photography of *New Classic American Houses*. All three architects are graduates of Yale University's School of Architecture and their work seems to grow out of early experiences there. As Robert A. M. Stern, founder and senior partner of Robert A. M. Stern Architects and dean of the Yale School of Architecture, points out in the book's foreword, senior partner Jim Righter's time at Yale was in the late '60s and early '70s when Postmodernists were flirting with history. In subsequent years when Albert and then Tittmann studied there the context of history was approached by some with greater scholarship. And indeed AR&T's work is enlivened by kernels of Postmodern irreverence and guided by a passionate interest in history and place.

Opening the cover of this book is to discover architects highly sensitive to the character of a place. Whether being inspired by Shingle Style traditions for Rocksyde, Gothic Revival traditions for Six Gables, or Japanese, Grecian or Modern traditions in other designs, the firm manages to skillfully create houses that feel distinctly suited to their particular place. AR&T's attention to materials and ability to subtly adjust house and site to fit one another reinforce the sense of place present in each house.

Throughout the work showcased, one also finds attention to both constructive and decorative details. Virtuoso shingle details, rafter ends cut in every imaginable way and the pattern of wood



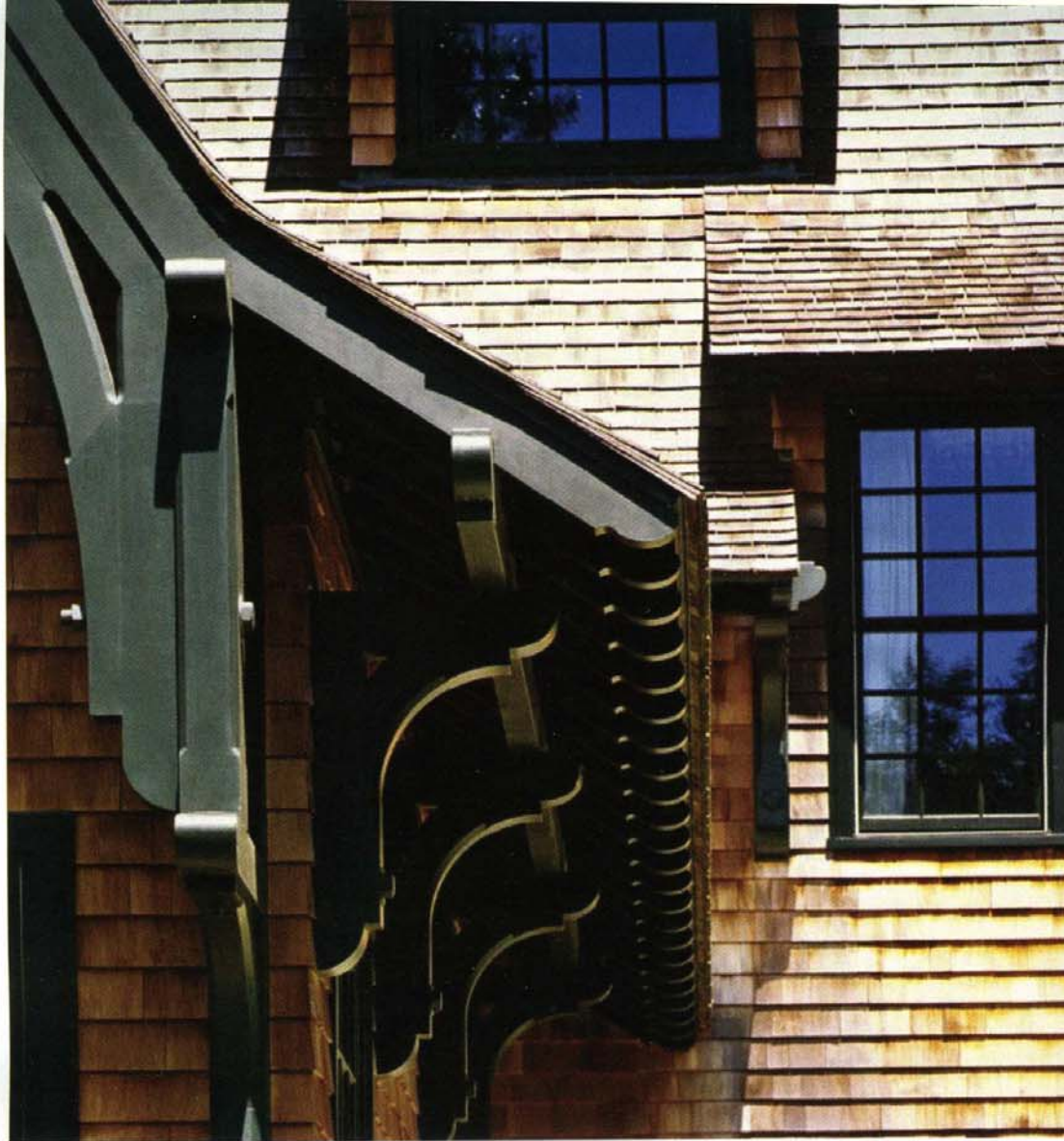
Six Gables, located in South Hamilton, MA, draws on both French Gothic Revival and American Stick Style precedents. Photo: Robert Benson

graining used to decorative effect, for instance, provide one moment of surprise after another. Examining these details – some from the past, some transformed and some invented – one is tempted to borrow a few here and there.

A well respected writer on architecture, interior design and antiques, author Dan Cooper brings the body of AR&T's work into careful focus. For clients or general readers who may be less familiar with architectural terms or ideas about Classical and traditional architecture, Cooper gently offers explanations along the way. He does this while not compromising the level of discourse for the professional or more informed reader as he explains the compositions and details of AR&T's work. Perhaps one of the most captivating parts of the book is Cooper's grouping of quotes from Albert, Righter and Tittmann addressing the subjects of history, clients, design and the art of architecture. It offers a rare glimpse into the minds and process of thoughtful, talented architects.

From cover to cover, AR&T's new monograph is a delight. Also unburdened by past typical monographs, The Vendome Press has given us a new and highly useful monograph format. Instead of presenting one project after another, the book is organized as one experiences a house. Beginning with a look at houses from the exterior grouped roughly by stylistic similarities, the book then moves thematically through the elements that so richly animate AR&T's work, from courtyards, towers and exterior details to main rooms like libraries, living and dining rooms, to staircases, kitchens and baths, and even to barns, guesthouses and pools. No doubt clients and architects alike will enjoy browsing through such inventive solutions and erudite turns of phrase.

While many architects, designers and critics today are encumbered by self-consciousness about creative work's relationship to the past and the present, which leads to so many tired phrases, Albert, Righter and Tittmann confidently set their work before the finest of their craft without obsessing over whether their work is defined as this or that. They do what they do and they do it well. This is architecture. It is a refreshing



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attitude pointing to a bright future, where a dichotomy between the past and the present is no longer assumed or necessary. ■

*Christine G. H. Franck is a designer, author and educator with a practice in New York City. A recognized leader in education, she was the first executive director of the ICA&CA, director of its academic programs from 1998 through 2005, and has been a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame and Georgia Institute of Technology. Currently, Franck serves as trustee of the ICA&CA and member of INTBAU's College of Chapters. In 2002 she was honored with HRH The Prince of Wales' Public Service Award for "her outstanding contribution to the study of architecture and design." Her practice's debut project, Chadsworth Cottage, won a 2007 Palladio Award. She is co-author of the recently published Winterthur Style Sourcebook: Traditional American Rooms.*