

# The Ugly Truth

Most of today's single-family houses are unattractive and inauthentic, says this author-architect, who lives in Newton.

**On the spectrum from public housing to trophy mansions, where do your interests as an architect lie?**

I am interested in any house if it has a sense of quality.

**In the introduction to your new book, *The Distinctive Home: A Vision of Timeless Design*, you write, "It was time for me to stop talking and finally do something about the sad state of single-family houses in this country." Tell me about that.**

There were 1.5 million single-family houses built last year. Most don't belong to the site and don't function well inside in terms of the way people really live. They are ugly on the exterior. They have no details that mean anything of quality.

**People reading this will feel self-conscious about living in ugly houses.**

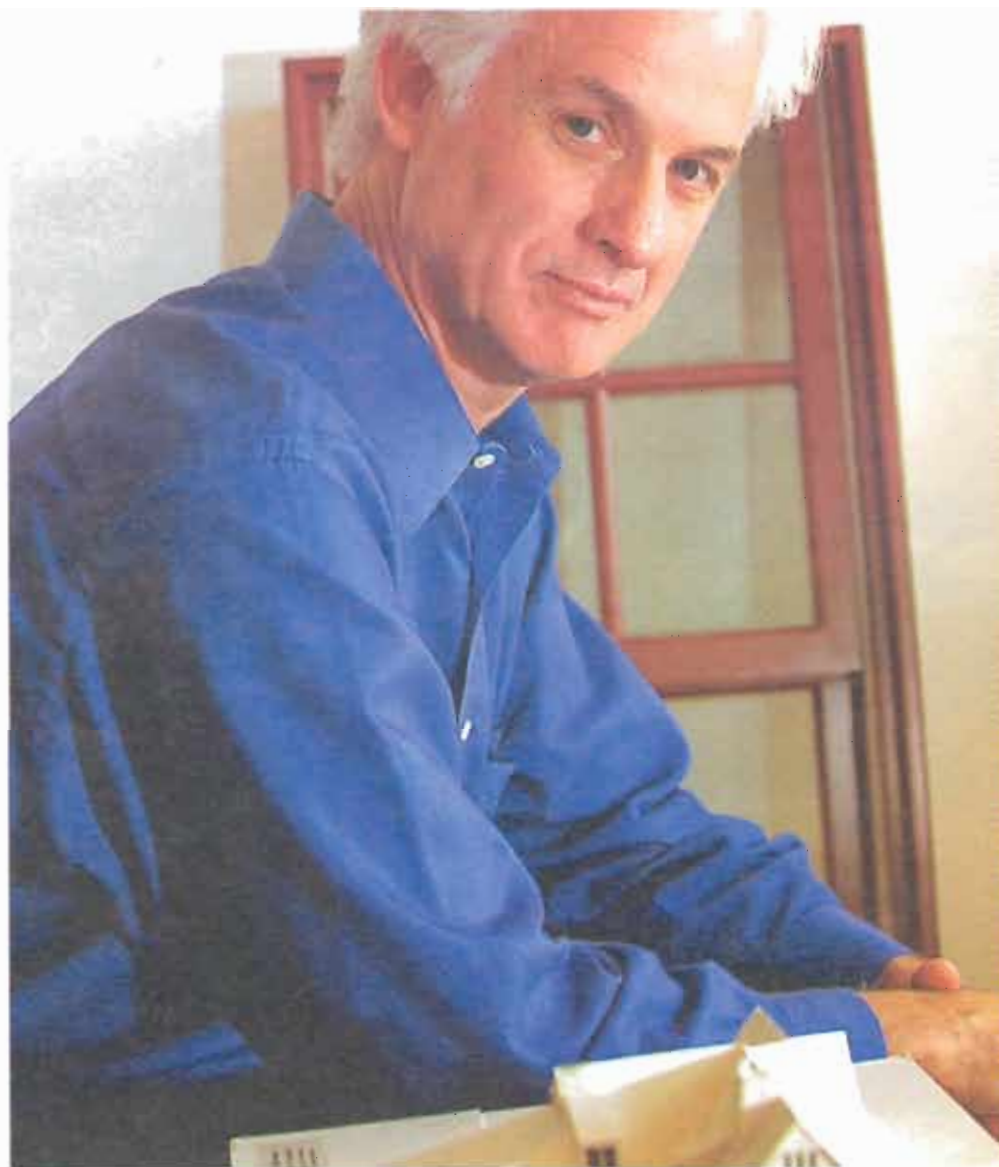
I want people to think about it so if they move to their next house they don't get sucked in by terms that are meaningless, but actually look at how the house is sited, how the house is built, does it have quality details. The most typical details are windows, fireplaces, stairs, floorboards, and built-ins like bookshelves, cabinets, niches, and benches. They should be highly crafted with quality materials.

**What's so great about "distinctive"? Wouldn't blending beauty and function be a better goal?**

"Authenticity" is another word to use for distinctiveness. Houses that have authenticity are houses that belong where they are. A house that works functionally for the way people really live has a certain authenticity.

**Your book is divided into sections on siting the house, the floor plan, the public face, and details. What makes a great early-21st-century floor plan?**

Generally, people live more informally



than they used to. Generally, people don't need a formal living room, although sometimes they want a formal dining area. Generally, the kitchen is the center of the house. Generally, some rooms have double use, like bedrooms for offices. A floor plan should reflect in no uncertain terms how you actually live. That sounds kind of stupid, but you'd be surprised how many are based on market-driven ideas that are usually behind the curve.

**One reviewer states: "If you are the sort of person who dreams of building your perfect house someday, this book**

**will give you corruption fits, and leave you absent-mindedly drawing little floor plans on napkins in restaurants." Do you take that as a compliment?**

I take anything that is vaguely complimentary as a compliment, but I get a little miffed at people who are cynical about the issue. We need to care about our houses passionately again. We seem to have left the world of house to other people: We've left it to the contractors, to the brokers, to the bankers, to the marketers. It's become a commodity. And I think our houses need to be less commodities and more homes.

— Eric Goldscheider