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Last update: March 17, 2004 at 7:49 AM

Architect says houses should be things of beauty

Star Tribune
 March 17, 2004 ECK17

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In the "Not So Big House" series, former Minneapolis architect Sarah Susanka took on the monster houses sprouting in the American countryside and showed how to build smaller ones. "In The Distinctive Home," (Taunton Press, \$40) Boston architect Jeremiah Eck takes on bland, predictable and ugly houses of every size and shows how to design attractive ones.

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Eck will speak Saturday at the International Market Square Home Design Show. Over his 25 years of residential design, he's devised a set of simple principles that he hopes can guide people who are buying, building or remodeling a house.

"The principles I espouse are very old ones. They are as old as the history of houses," he said by phone from his Boston office. "I'm really trying to reintroduce a simple language so that anyone -- a builder or architect or homeowner -- can understand them."

Here are his thoughts on what makes a distinctive house.

Q What does it matter if a house is distinctive?

A I guess the question is, why does quality matter? Most of us admire quality in our clothes, our foods, the vacations we take. It amazes me that we don't demand the same quality in the houses we live in.

Q What's wrong with the typical house in an American subdivision?

A For me, it's the feeling -- the lack of quality, the thinness, the sense of isolation. I get a kind of lonely feeling when I visit a subdivision. It feels like people are imprisoned in their houses.

Q Why is there such lack of individuality?

A The problem is the delivery system. When two or three or four home builders build hundreds of thousands of homes across the country per

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year (last year the number was 1.8 million), the system is skewed to time and cost.

We've done good houses in this country but we've forgotten what a good house is.

Q How do you start when you're designing a house?

A I start with the site and look for its uniqueness. Where is the sun? It gives a quality to the light and warms the interior. I think about where the weather comes from -- the wind in the winter and the breeze in the summer. And I look at the lay of the land and the vegetation.

Siting is the hardest and most mysterious part of the design process and it's crucial.

Q What comes next?

A I move into the plan -- the fundamental expression of how we live. We need to rethink the way we think about rooms. I often encourage clients and students to give rooms different names that describe the way they will be used. [A living hall, for instance, is a place where people gather for conversation or meals.] And of course the plan relates to the site, the views, and the location of the private and public parts of the house.

Then I move to the exterior, which should express both the interior arrangement of rooms and the qualities of the site. You should end with a style, not start with one.

Q Finally?

A I look at details. Both within the house and outside, they make the difference. A beautiful fireplace or staircase or built-ins shows that someone embellished the house with a caring hand. And, again, the details should reinforce the site and the plan.

Q Your principles are hard to implement when someone is buying a spec house in a subdivision. What will it take to improve the vast majority of houses built?

A I honestly think it's art education, which has been overlooked in my lifetime. In the end, building an object like a house isn't adding one and one, it's creating a three-dimensional object with a look. It's like doing a sculpture or a painting. We need to educate people to see, to understand aesthetics. And people have to learn it when they're young.

Let's call these houses what they are: ugly. There is a difference between what is ugly and what is beautiful. We can go to Italy and love it. Why can't we have a culture that appreciates the visual world here?

Linda Mack is at lmack@startribune.com.

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Home Design Show

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Sopranos."

When: 11 a.m. Saturday

Where: International Market Square, 275 Glenwood Av., Mpls.

Tickets: \$15 ticket provides admission to the two-day International Market Square 2004 Home Design Show. Tickets are available at the door only.

Call: 612-338-6250.

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