



you are
what you live in

Childhood recollections spur predictions about who really lives behind a home's facade

by Bruce Giffin

Walking through neighborhoods, looking at houses, imagining who the people are who live in these homes and thinking about what the homes say of their owners' personalities is a pastime of mine. This interest in residential architecture probably grew from my childhood in Los Angeles, where the eight-block walk to my elementary school took me past a variety of homes, both grand and small.

No two houses were alike in my Toluca Lake neighborhood, with Tudor next to Mediterranean and Craftsman adjacent to contemporary. The most unusual usually belonged to movie stars.

Boris Karloff's house always set my imagination running, especially around Halloween. Mr. Karloff (who played "Frankenstein" and other monsters in the movies that I was afraid to watch) lived in a home created in an architectural vernacular style I recall as "Early Transylvania Scary Movie." European influences of Tudor, stucco, exposed beams and brick with a steep

shake roof merged with storybook elements of turrets and a pair of gate houses. A dark, deeply set front door guarded the entry. The end result seemed intentionally decrepit, creepy and run down. Even the garden was falling apart around the edges of the property. That edginess added to the intrigue, as I wondered about the old man who lived inside. The public side of his home certainly confirmed the uniqueness of the inhabitant.

Not far from Frankenstein's house lived "Curly Joe" Derita, one of the Three Stooges. Joe resided in a tidy redwood-sided Craftsman cottage. Joe, along with Larry and Moe, was someone I saw almost every day on television after school. And, for some reason, the Three Stooges' brand of humor resonated with a generation of young boys across the country. For my buddies and me, the fascination in riding our bikes past Joe's house was the incongruity between Joe's public image of manic mayhem on the screen and life in his neat cottage, with its manicured lawn and flower beds. Having learned that good comedy is a highly crafted art that relies on tight timing, it's no surprise that Joe's

home reflected that sense of control and timing. Perhaps it provided balance to Joe's public side.

Another noteworthy home in the neighborhood belonged to Bob Hope. It too reflected his personality. The grand English-style manor was situated behind a six-foot high, ivy covered fence with a backyard nine-hole golf course visible to small boys peeking through gaps in the ivy. Each year, it was rumored that on Halloween, to the first fifty trick-or-treaters, Mr. Hope gave out silver dollars. It was always our gang's first stop. On my first Halloween in the neighborhood, I proudly told the rather stiff and fussy butler who was handing out Hershey chocolate bars that I'd seen him on TV. The poor guy, he'd drawn the short straw. Here he was, all dressed up in a traditional butler's uniform with tux and tails, suffering through an evening of handing out large chocolate bars to hordes of little ankle biters like myself. He disdainfully looked down his nose at me and informed me in a rich English accent that I was mistaken, as he'd never been on TV. That was certainly a surprise to me as I was sure he was Bob Hope dressed up in costume greeting his fans. Mr. Hope was never to be seen in all the years we lived there. His home confirmed that he was a private man who savored his time alone...and on the course.

Growing up amidst Hollywood personalities and their homes, I saw the connection between the façades of our homes and who we are as individuals. Perhaps this is an American thing, creating custom homes based on various architectural styles from around the world and then making them our own. Today, as I construct and remodel homes that reflect the hopes, dreams and fantasies of the people that inhabit them, I see that each part and piece of our homes and gardens tells a story of who we really are.

And what did I build for my own family's home? A California Craftsman, of course...

Bruce Giffin, of Giffin & Crane, is a Santa Barbara native who has been building and remodeling homes in Santa Barbara since 1978.