

Your house has a face. Is it Smiling? Part One

"Mr. Malinowski, could you come take a look at our house?" "Sure", I answered, "what kinds of changes are you thinking about?" The long pause that followed definitely made me curious. "Well..., we... were thinking... of changing its look a bit... Maybe you can give us some suggestions." A few days later, I was standing with my potential clients, looking across the street at a home that was well, "different". At first no one said anything. Then the Mrs. started tentatively: "We thought maybe we should consider - well - improving the look of our house. What do you think?" Thinking fast, I used a diplomatic approach. "Well, your house *does* have some aesthetic disadvantages to its facade in comparison to the neighbors." The husband finally cut through the ice - "It's just butt ugly" he blurted out. "What can we do?"

We all attach a lot of importance to the home we own, and for good reasons. Our house represents a huge investment, often a significant portion of our total personal wealth. It also carries a lot of emotional and personal importance. It reflects on our values and aspirations, and becomes intertwined with our families, memories and personal life story.

Given all that, it's not surprising how important the "look" of our home is. Human nature being what it is, we *do* tend to "judge a book by its cover", at least as far as first impressions go. After neighborhood setting, something that you can't do much about, your house's facade is the most important factor in creating a first impression. Just as you can do a lot about the first impression you personally create by thoughtful decisions about the style and colors of clothes you wear, you can decide what your house's facade presentation is.

Facade may not be a familiar word, but it is

one often bandied about in architectural circles. The word facade is derived from the French word for face. Yes, your house has a face. Is it smiling? Personal pride is one of the issues that make us want our facades to be attractive. It's a great feeling to be able to stand across the street from your home, look back at it, and be smitten by its beauty! It's even more astounding to see other people looking at your home with a wistful gaze.

If terms like "beauty" put you off by seeming too great a challenge, perhaps requiring mansion-proportions, design, and materials, I'd like to offer some reassurance. Sure, mansions can be impressive, but I've seen plenty of ugly mansions, too. Beauty, while in the eye of the beholder, doesn't mean big, flashy, or opulent. A tiny cottage, with simple but crisp detailing, nestled in a carefully tended frame of landscape, can be a knockout. Our neighborhood is full of beautiful homes, many of which reflect a sensitive and careful initial design and meticulous maintenance. There are also homes that were *not* so great when they were built. Old does not always mean good.

Can these house be fixed? Sure they can. I've been accurately quoted as saying, "There's nothing about a house you can't change with enough time and money! What you can't change is the look of your neighbors' houses, the mature landscape, or the character of your neighborhood."

When you start talking about money, questions about value should follow immediately behind. Your good feelings when looking back at your house's facade are all well and good, but is there *value* in a facade? In other words, will buyers "vote with their pocketbooks" for a more attractive facade? The evidence is that they will! Appraisers and real estate people have a term they like better than facade to address the look

of a house. They talk about "curb appeal," and it's a big factor in residential real estate. Think about your approach the last time you looked seriously at homes. You wanted to do a "drive by" to "check out the look" of houses before you wanted to take the time to consider them seriously.

Recently, there was an article in The Sacramento Bee about a new company in El Dorado Hills called "Tour Vision" which puts photos of houses on a CD Rom Disk. The basic idea is that "potential buyers can look at the houses on big screen TV to see which houses are appealing."

Even though in reality there are a lot of factors other than the "street face" that determine whether a house is appealing, with these kinds of up and coming systems buyers *will not even come out to look* unless a house can pass that first beauty test.

In our next column, we'll be talking about facades, style and maximizing curb appeal.

copyright 1994 Michael F. Malinowski