

Archer & Buchanan, Ltd., of West Chester, PA, specializes in the design of traditionally inspired residences based on regional and European precedents. This 5,200-sq.-ft. stone house in Unionville, PA, was designed to maximize views from its hill-top perch. All photos and drawings: courtesy of Archer & Buchanan, Ltd.



# Built to Last

European and regional precedents inspire the work of a southeastern Pennsylvania firm. *By Will Holloway*

As the suburbs of Philadelphia expanded to the north and the west in the early-20th century, firms such as Mellor, Meigs & Howe came to prominence designing French Norman and English Cotswold country estates for the city's elite. At the same time and in the same environs – mainly Montgomery, Bucks and Chester counties – R. Brognard Okie gained acclaim reinterpreting Pennsylvania Colonial farmhouses.

Today, three quarters of a century later, the regional idiom created in part by those architects pervades much of the contemporary residential architecture being built throughout the Delaware Valley. By designing houses that reflect local history, terrain, climate and materials, West Chester, PA-based Archer & Buchanan Architecture, Ltd., is continuing the tradition of Mellor, Meigs & Howe and Okie – creating regionally appropriate architecture suited to its time.

## Foundations

Archer & Buchanan principals Peter Archer, AIA, Richard Buchanan, AIA, and Daniel Russoniello, AIA, are all natives of southeastern Pennsylvania. Archer and Buchanan met while working at the Berwyn, PA, office of Peter Zimmerman Architects. Archer had come to Zimmerman's office in 1989 after earning his masters in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1982 and doing commercial and institutional work for seven years. Buchanan had come to Zimmerman's office in 1990 after receiving his masters in architecture from the University of British Columbia. The two founded Archer & Buchanan in 1996. Russoniello joined the practice in 2003 after earning his masters in architecture in 1981 from the University of Pennsylvania – where

he'd known Archer – and working on institutional projects for several years at two Philadelphia firms, GBQC Architects and Ballinger Architects.

Although educated primarily in Modernism, the principles point to their studies and travels in Europe as crucial to furthering their understanding and appreciation of European architectural traditions. As an undergraduate at Bucknell University, for example, Buchanan spent a year in Florence. "That was an extraordinarily important event in my life – to study in Europe for a long period of time so that I was able to immerse myself in all of those influences that are part of why we do what we do today," he says. "While you would never mistake a Chester County farmhouse for an Italian palazzo, I think that the European influence pervades everything we do on the East Coast of the United States." A few years later, while at the University of British Columbia, Buchanan spent a semester in Spain at the *Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona*, where he says he became more flexible in his thinking about a traditional basis for architecture. "At that time there was a lot of interesting work going on that was both traditional and Modern," he says. "I would credit that experience with really jelling my enthusiasm for how the old and new can not only complement each other, but also blend together in harmony."

Archer & Buchanan's application of European traditions in southeastern Pennsylvania is not dissimilar to what Mellor, Meigs & Howe was doing almost a century earlier. "Having traveled and studied all over Europe, they combined these influences into a series of wonderful homes and large country properties that were not specifically English, French, German or Spanish, but really brought together the best of those things," says Buchanan. "As can



Top: Principals Peter Archer (left) and Richard Buchanan established Archer & Buchanan in 1996.

Bottom: Since joining the firm in 2003, principal Daniel Russoniello has expanded the institutional side of the firm's business.



A Mellor, Meigs & Howe-inspired tower anchors the uphill façade of the Unionville residence. Archer & Buchanan counts the Philadelphia, PA, firm, a major contributor in introducing French Norman and English Cotswold styles to the region between 1906 and 1940, as one of its major influences.

be seen largely in the Chestnut Hill area, but also on Philadelphia's Main Line and out toward Unionville, they developed an architecture that became uniquely their own. That is what interests us – we really like and admire their use of materials and their emphasis on traditional form. I think those traditional forms came together to create a locally appropriate architecture and, in that regard, we are working very hard to do that kind of thing ourselves."

"I appreciate all good architecture regardless of style and period – historic through very modern," says Archer. "We were all trained much more in Modernism, but I've always loved the traditional as well – the return to traditional architecture over the past 15 to 20 years has driven our practice. But it's not necessarily just the idea of being traditional, it's also the way that things are made – built well, built thoroughly and thoughtfully and built to last."

### Form and Function

While Archer & Buchanan's designs are clearly rooted in the past, the firm is not simply creating replicas of historic Chester County farmhouses or English country homes. What it is doing is applying time-tested design traditions and material choices to 21st-century homes while taking into account a century of social and technical change.

"Social differences really center on the way we live and whether we have domestic staff or not," says Buchanan. "Typically, the situation that is presented to us is to design a house that does not have full-time live-in staff, and the kitchen is very much the center of the home, no matter how lavish the house. As the kitchen has become more and more important, there has been a tendency to build all of the traditional rooms – the sitting room, the dining room, the library, the formal stair hall – and then build it all over again informally as the kitchen, family room, back stair, mudroom and breakfast bay. What you really wind up with is a house that is the same thing times two, because you have one for formal use and one for everyday use."

Buchanan says that by not duplicating rooms, the firm has been able to build smaller homes. "What we are trying to do is overcome

the tendency to build huge homes by reintegrating the way people live. We look at how we can bring the best aspects of the house – the formal, traditional, beautiful parts of the home – into everyday use the way they were in everyday use a hundred years ago, when people lived more formally," he says. "We'd rather double the cost per square foot and put the money into beautiful materials, antique finishes, antique details, hardware, handmade windows, hand-blown glass – those kinds of things – and let people really live with and enjoy those things."

On the technical side, the evolution of telecommunications, lighting, heating, cooling and entertainment systems has simplified their integration into traditionally styled homes. "Ten years ago, we were designing special built-ins to accommodate computers," says Buchanan. "Today it's all wireless internet and flat screens. All of that stuff has really allowed us to make the technology disappear. Often we find that the most technologically advanced houses are also the most successful in expressing traditional forms. That seems paradoxical, but when you think about it logically, it's terrific. Now we can conceal a flat-screen television in a vertical drawer that slides behind a panel above a fireplace, so that the television can disappear entirely. In its place you've got beautiful sconces and a lovely painting and none of this nonsense with panels moving up and down to hide the television. That has made a big difference in the way that we are designing houses now – they look and feel much more traditional because we're not burdened with the clunky technology that we've had to accommodate over the last 30 to 40 years. Mercifully, we are now into a period where technology can be so concealed that it has no form, and the house can return to a beautiful expression of traditional forms and materials."

### New Homes

New construction accounts for roughly 40 to 45 percent – about five to seven new houses a year – of Archer & Buchanan's work. While the designs vary stylistically, the firm applies a similar planning approach to each project. "Whether a Pennsylvania farmhouse style, a Shingle style, an English country-house style or a French style," says Archer, "the planning principles carry through in a lot of respects – from the experience of coming off the road, the approach to the house, the arrival at the house, the entrance to the house and then the movement through the house, as far as taking advantage of views, light, circulation, the connection between the house and the outdoors – all the things that tie a particular house to a site."

Ten or so miles southwest of West Chester in the village of Unionville, for example, a 5,200-sq.-ft. Archer & Buchanan design sits on the crest of a hill and is accessed by a driveway that curves behind the house to reveal a Mellor, Meigs & Howe-inspired tower. "The tower becomes the signal for the way you approach the site," says Buchanan. "It also allowed us to hinge the house and turn the plan to really respond to views in lots of directions." The master-bedroom wing and a kitchen/family room wing extend at slight angles from opposite ends of the predominately stone main structure. "By having the wings go off at angles, all of the spaces you go into enjoy very different views across the valley," says Buchanan. By drawing on traditional Chester County farmhouse details – a wood roof,



Above: In West Chester, the firm designed a 5,100-sq.-ft. Shingle-style residence in 2001. Characterized by a number of shed dormers and heavy bracketing, the design conforms to its setting – the slope of the site allowed for a 26-ft.-wide stone archway leading to a basement garage.

Inset: The kitchen, one of the five major spaces on the first floor of the West Chester residence, gets plenty of sunlight with its southern exposure; French doors open up to a screened porch to the east.





A stone house in Greenville, DE, was based on English and local precedents. The extensive fenestration requested by the client is offset by the stonework and heavy roof.

six-over-nine windows, 8x10 window-pane proportion – the house also seamlessly fits the character of the region.

In the rolling hills south of West Chester just over the Delaware state line, Archer & Buchanan designed a house that draws on the English country houses of the Cotswolds and early-20th-century houses of the region. The result is a stone house with a heavy, overhanging wood-shingle roof. In this case, the focus was on maximizing natural light. “The client wanted a very strong, glass-filled front of the house with light streaming in,” says Archer. “We couldn’t give them enough light.”

“To achieve this effect, we worked with the form to create shade, shadow and depth, as well as those senses of sheltering that each gesture makes – the strong chimney, the big roof, the deep overhangs,” says Buchanan. “We were able to overcome what could conceivably have turned into a glass-box kind of a feeling.”

Not all of Archer & Buchanan’s designs are based on local precedent. The firm has designed a handful of Shingle-style homes over the years, including a 5,100-sq.-ft. residence in West Chester that was completed in 2001. The Shingle style, Buchanan says, allows the firm to be much more

expressive and inventive within traditional forms. “This was for an older couple who had spent years in really wonderful, perfectly restored, genuine period farmhouses,” he says. “In building this house, they wanted to draw on the collective memories of their childhoods in the Adirondacks and enjoy a much more whimsical kind of architecture. That led us to the Shingle style and lots of playful forms – shed dormers that pop out in different places and huge, chunky brackets.” The plan also takes advantage of the site, which slopes down from east to west, by allowing for a 26-ft.-wide stone arch on the south side that admits the owner’s antique cars into the basement.

A structure in northern Chester County strays even further from local precedent. Here, Archer & Buchanan designed a structure for an avid collector of J.R.R. Tolkien memorabilia based on the imagery of a Hobbit house – complete with a 54-in.-dia. round entry door. “We said that we were not going to make it Hollywood, but that we would remain sensitive to this region through our use of materials,” says Archer. “There is an original stone wall that runs right through the middle of the property from when it was farmed 100 to 200 years ago – the front of the building actually rises out of that wall.” Because the structure appears somewhat fanciful by nature, it would be easy to overlook the quality of its craftsmanship and materials, including ornate carved elements, a butterfly window custom made by a local cabinetmaker, antique floors and handmade French roof tile. It is also, according to Buchanan, an extreme example of the firm’s philosophy of building smaller and better. “It is absolutely diminutive,” he says, “but extremely good – it’s a jewel box of architecture.”

### Blending Old and New

Renovations and additions account for about half of Archer & Buchanan’s work, ranging from urban apartments to rural estates. In the exclusive Rittenhouse Square neighborhood of Philadelphia, for example, the firm recently gutted and renovated two adjoining apartments composed of dark, boxy rooms, combining them into one 4,000-sq.-ft. open-plan space with an emphasis on natural light. “This was a departure from our typical work,” says Archer. “We are of no one style – in this case the architecture is expressed in a very contemporary manner.”

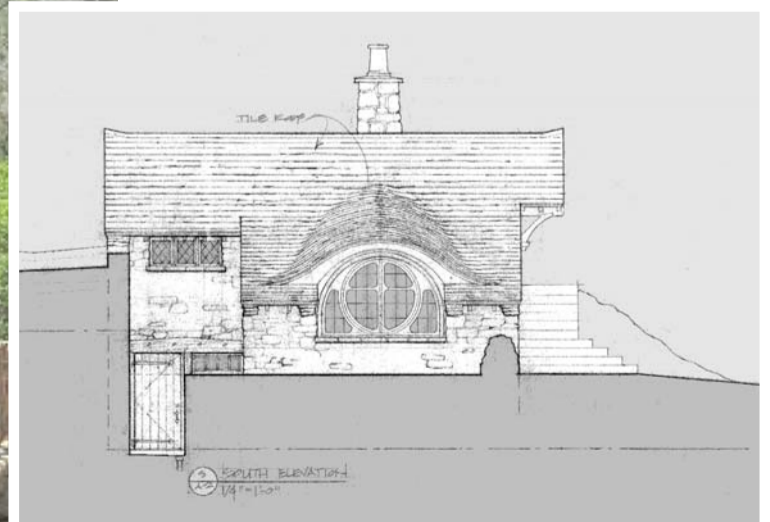
The renovated apartment showcases the client’s art collection and facilitates social events; Archer describes its ½-in.-thick floor-to-ceiling glass doors as being akin to modern sculpture. “Because the clients had always lived in houses and had much more contemporary tastes, they wanted something along those lines in their new space,” he says. “We took them another step into Modernism, which they appreciated – they loved it so much that they moved in when it was only about halfway complete.”

Over the past 10 years, Archer & Buchanan has completed five projects in a 10,000-sq.-ft. house in Bryn Mawr that was designed by R. Brognard Okie in 1934. As a child, Buchanan went to school with the original owner’s grandson and played in the house; it seems appropriate that he would be designing its alterations 30 years later.

“In Okie’s particular adaptation of the Pennsylvania farmhouse, the work tends to incorporate smaller windows and a diminutive scale of things,” says Buchanan. “While it is a large house, it tends to be a little bit of a dark house. Rather than blow holes in this wonderful, marvelously crafted piece of work, we elected to do things like add a traditional conservatory to one end that allows the owners to really live in a sun-filled space year-round. In those ways, we adapt traditional forms to the way that people want to live today.”

Other projects in the house have included a new master-bedroom suite and a new kitchen. “We were able to open up the kitchen, the butler’s pantry, the maid’s dining room, the larder and the breakfast room to create a much more open series of spaces – the kitchen/family/breakfast space – and then a nice family entry coming up from below,” says Buchanan.

“The great success is that it is absolutely seamless as to what was original and what has been done over the past 10 years there,” says Archer. “The home has clearly maintained its harmony.”



A small structure based on the imagery of a Hobbit house, which was designed for a collector of J.R.R. Tolkien memorabilia, appears to have literally grown out of the earth. The south façade (above) features a butterfly window fabricated by a local cabinetmaker.



The interior of the Hobbit house, replete with Tolkien memorabilia, is accessed by a 54-in.-dia Spanish cedar door adorned with a hand-forged, single-pivot hinge.

### Institutional Work

Archer & Buchanan's institutional work, a small but growing component of the practice, began when Russoniello joined the firm in 2003. "As Richard and Peter expanded the firm, they started seeing that a number of the residential clients who sat in influential positions started passing on some work of a non-residential nature – whether from businesses they owned or boards they sat on," says Russoniello. "With my background being almost exclusively on the institutional side, they thought it might be a good time to not let those kinds of commissions go by and invited me in to help expand that aspect of the practice."

The firm's institutional projects in the last few years have ranged from the master planning and the design of additions at the Sagamore Resort in upstate New York to projects on the campuses of Swarthmore College and Drexel and Immaculata universities. In 2003, in a project known as the Marshall Square Park Development, the firm redeveloped an outdated nursing home in West Chester, transforming it into family housing. "The property includes an historic mansion, and when that mansion was no longer used as a residence it was bought and used as a nursing home," says Russoniello. "Added to the mansion were a series of single-story wings. It was set in the middle of a residential neighborhood – so it took on a very institutional use that was out of place in the neighborhood. The developer bought it with the idea of tearing off the wings, restoring the mansion and building a series of individual houses based on a prototype design."

"The project was very successful because it restored downtown housing for families in a neighborhood that really deserved it, took advantage of the park, saved the old mansion and brought people back into the downtown."



Between 1898 and 1945, R. Brognard Okie designed Pennsylvania Colonial residences throughout the southeastern part of the state, including this residence in Bryn Mawr. Buchanan knew the house as a child; over the last ten years, his firm has designed five renovations in the 1934 house.

On the campus of Drexel University in Philadelphia, Archer & Buchanan orchestrated the renovation and adaptive re-use of a turn-of-the-20th-century mansion that had been vacant for almost 20 years. "Drexel was faced with an historic building in the center of campus. Like a lot of institutions that have residential-type buildings on campus, the challenge is how to best adapt the structure for modern institutional functions and yet remain a good neighbor by contributing to the historic fabric of the community," says Russoniello.

Drexel opted to use the mansion as a student common, adapting individual rooms as study areas, dining areas and offices for club organizations. Public bathrooms, an elevator and fire stairs were also added. "Our task was to work within the original footprint of the building to provide for new uses, but also to restore the elements that reflect the period of the house and the craftsmanship that went into it – leaded glass in the staircase, a beautiful monumental stair. Since the rooms are more period in style, we brought in colors and finishes around the fireplaces that preserve the integrity of the spaces while really giving them a lively kind of flavor."

"This project was among our first that combined bringing traditional residential craft and detail orientation to an institutional client," says Buchanan. "The university architects were concerned that the building would be destroyed by the students if we made it too 'nice.' We contended that, by making it nice and doing it well, the students would respect and look after the space. It's been in use for four years now and it looks great. The students really enjoy it – I think it gives them a sense of civility and pride of place."

### Durable Design

Whether a new home, renovation, addition, institutional project or barn – the firm has completed some 50 barns from Virginia to New York – Archer & Buchanan's designs share in common an emphasis on quality materials and enduring design. "We took a tour of English country houses a couple of years ago, and looked around the Hampstead Garden Suburb, which is a mixed-use community built at the turn of the 20th century," says Buchanan. "All of those wonderful old houses continue to be so appealing because their materials – clay, brick and protected woodwork – all aged so beautifully. I think that if an investor or a developer took a very long view of those kinds of construction, they would study Hampstead Garden Suburb rather than luxury mass housing, and really learn something."

"We're trying to apply that to the work that we're doing for our clients, who come to us because they are at a point in their lives and in their thought process where they want to make an investment in quality construction. So we encourage them to use slate, clay tile, heavy wood – the kinds of materials that are going to age beautifully."

"We want the houses, additions and renovations that we design," says Archer, "to be the houses 50 and 100 years from now that are looked upon as wonderful examples of architecture at the turn of this century." ■



The new housing units of the Marshall Square Development, part of the redevelopment of an outdated nursing home, restored family housing to downtown West Chester.