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Forbes Global Life

Arc de Dixie

Quentin Hardy and Alan Farnham 04.07.08, 12:00 AM ET

Modernists are appalled, but neoclassic architecture is staging a comeback. Latest evidence: an ersatz Arc de Triomphe in Georgia.

Standing atop his 82-foot, classically inspired triumphal arch, Rodney Mims Cook Jr. surveys its neighbors--an Ikea, a Target, a four-lane highway and many, many condos. Cook's arch, called Millennium Gate, sits where an Atlanta steel mill used to. When it opens in May it will be the biggest classical monument erected in the U.S. since 1943, when the Jefferson Memorial opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Biggest, but far from only. A profusion of new neoclassic structures--mostly residential, others civic or commercial--are springing up. In their Doric and Corinthian columns, ornaments, proportions and materials, they harken back to the architecture of Greece and Rome. Cook's arch draws liberally upon Rome's Arch of Titus--with a scaled-down Temple of Diana plopped on top for good measure. Other new neoclassic projects range from a public library in Nashville to the Secretary of State's office in Washington, D.C. (For a slide show, visit www.forbes.com/lifestyle.)

Few of these have won plaudits from professors, who put modernists like Gropius and Mies van der Rohe on a higher pedestal than they do Stanford White. Academics find the very notion of, say, a neoclassic Laundromat foolish. The buying public feels differently, however, and has voted with its wallet.

The condo colossus at 15 Central Park West in Manhattan, built by Arthur and William Zeckendorf and designed by Robert A.M. Stern, started selling units in September 2005. In its first year it set a milestone \$1.4 billion in sales, surpassing any other condo project in U.S. history. It's classic stem to stern. All that's missing are togas for the owners.

Manufacturers have arisen to serve this retro boom, their ads for neoclassic fittings appearing in such magazines as *Traditional Building*. "There's this incredible industry producing all the things you need," says San Francisco architect Morgan Conolly--"tile, cast stone, cut stone, paneling, stair components." Conolly currently is designing a winery with neoclassic elements in the Napa Valley.

For Cook, 50, a fifth-generation Atlantan and the son-in-law of former American Express chief James Robinson, the neoclassic cause goes far beyond aesthetics: With the loss of such buildings as Penn Station in Manhattan (designed by Stanford White's firm in 1910 and demolished in 1964) came a diminishment of civic grandeur. Says Cook, paraphrasing critic Vincent Scully, "You used to enter cities through places like Penn Station and feel like a god. Now you feel like a rat."

Cook originally intended his arch for Washington, D.C., but the plan got held up by city government. He then turned to friends in Atlanta and raised \$15 million through a combination of foundation, corporate and private donations. The land was donated by AIG and Jacoby Development. Construction began in January 2007.

Though heroic arches in Rome typically celebrated martial virtues, Cook's arch is pacific. The Latin inscription on its pediment translates as "This American monument was erected to commemorate all peaceful accomplishment since the birth of Christ." Upon entering its interior, one finds rooms dedicated to Georgia history from Indian times to the Spanish period and the British colonial era. Offices and dwellings of Georgia business magnates, philanthropists and doers of civic good have been re-created--including everyone from Nobel laureates Jimmy Carter and Martin Luther King (both Georgia natives) to various Hearsts, Rockefellers and Roosevelts who spent time in Georgia. (Cook has on his board an Eisenhower and writer Tom Wolfe, whose 1981 book *From Bauhaus to Our House* satirized faddish avant-gardism.)

To promote classicism, there's a small gallery inside one of the arch's legs where computer-generated images show what New York City would look like without the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or Chicago without the Field Museum.

Cook has dabbled in architecture all his life. He still has a scale-model Arch of Titus he made when he was 6. He studied architecture at Washington & Lee, wary of the modernism with which students are brainwashed at more prominent schools. Successes in small-scale neoclassic projects put him in touch with Prince Charles of Wales, a champion of traditionalism, and won him jobs restoring monuments in Europe. (He is not a licensed architect.) As he waits for his arch's dedication he looks forward to new projects, among them a commission to build a neoclassic library for the papers of John Adams and John Quincy Adams. And after that? "America," he says, "needs a great neoclassical airport."

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