

Esse Quam Vidire

Frank Harmon

I've always liked the state motto of North Carolina since I learned it in Latin in the fifth grade: *Esse Quam Vidire*—Be Rather Than To Seem. It has an elemental clarity that's hard to miss. Later when I became an architect it also seemed a useful thesis because buildings are characterized by firmness, logic and objectivity. A building doesn't seem, it just is. But when I drove past a cell-tower that looks like a pine tree in Cary recently, I wondered if its designer's motto had been "To Seem Rather Than To Be."

Cary is frequently in the news because of its planners and town appointed appearance commission, the Beauty Police. The Beauty Police rejected a new diner because its stainless steel skin seemed too shiny in a brick shopping strip. The Beauty Police condemned a red roof on a house because it didn't match the neighboring roofs. Whole subdivisions in Cary are landscaped with only five kinds of plants because this is what the Beauty Police will allow. Aesthetic control increases property values, they say.

I have no objection to increasing property values. Making a city beautiful is a difficult task and aesthetic controls are one way to try. When we concentrate on appearances, however, we often miss what's practical and down to earth about a building. This brings me back to the motto: *To Be Rather Than To Seem*. The cell-tower doesn't have to look like a tree—why can't a well-designed cell-tower be a beautiful object? The Golden Gate Bridge, for example, is a beautiful utilitarian object and a symbol of San Francisco. The street lights of Central Park, well designed and simple, are part of the poetry of Frederick Law Olmsted's genius.

Several years ago the Raleigh architect and engineer T. C. Howard designed a communications tower for RTP as a graceful mast of steel tetrahedrons that soared into the sky. When I saw a model and drawings of the tower it took my breath away, the same way I felt when I saw the Eiffel Tower for

the first time. Unfortunately Howard's tower remains unbuilt, but it gave me a glimpse of what was possible.

Some other possibilities, ignored by the Beauty Police, kept me wondering, *Esse Quam Vidire*, about appearance and illusion in Cary. Cary's new Amtrak station, for example, seems like an old fashioned train station, as I'm sure its owners intended. No objections from the Beauty Police here. The new station on North Harrison Avenue has a clock tower and a steel canopy to shelter passengers from the weather



like many old stations. Unfortunately the new station sits in the middle of a 300-car parking lot. The canopy is 200 feet away from the tracks. To reach the train, passengers have to drag their luggage in the rain across the parking lot. The Cary Amtrak station looks like an old depot but doesn't function like one. By contrast, the 1940's Seaboard Coast Line Station in Raleigh (now Logan's Garden Supply) was very functional. You arrived at a generous porch, walked through the waiting rooms, and stood on the track platform sheltered by wooden canopies. The old

station worked like a station. It had a clear sense of arrival and departure.

To Be Rather Than To Seem takes another body blow about two miles east of the Amtrak Station on Harrison Avenue at the Cary Academy. The new academy buildings are planted at right angles to each other like soldiers at attention on a parade ground. But the Cary Academy site is a gentle hillside, more suited to a picnic than a parade ground. There is something formal and rigid about these new neoclassical buildings. "Every child begins the world again" wrote Thoreau in Walden. He knew that discovery prospers in an open environment. The most open childhood learning environment I know is Camp Celso in the Black Mountains of western North Carolina. Here children learn and play in a rambling cluster of one-story buildings with porches on all sides opening to gardens and playgrounds. At Camp Celso, learning begins with the land. At Cary Academy, the buildings ignore the natural landscape. In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" Thoreau said his goal was to reach down "below freshet and frost and fire [to] a place where you might find a state, or set a lamppost safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time."

Thoreau might have liked the family of utilitarian park structures in Cary's Bond Park designed by Harwell Hamilton Harris shortly before his death in 1990. Harris practiced architecture in California and Texas before moving to Raleigh in 1963 to teach at NCSU's School of Design. He enjoyed making buildings of usefulness and beauty, often with simple means. Harris designed houses, schools, and churches as his main line of work, yet he was equally happy designing park benches or a footbridge. His work was acclaimed around the world, yet Harris saw the construction of practical park structures in North Carolina as an important task, not a throw-away

gesture to be disguised. To make picnic shelters, information booths and restrooms at Bond Park Harris used simple pine boards and tar shingles, crafted together like a handsome basket, exuding grace. In one of the little restrooms Harris combined generous roof overhangs with plain sawn plywood to make a serene structure that seems to settle on the hillside as comfortably as a bird landing on its nest. Understated and tenderly proportioned, these utilitarian buildings are both functional and beautiful.



Reaching below Thoreau's freshest, Harris' modest buildings in Bond Park are better architecture than the larger buildings on nearby Harrison Avenue. I wonder what Harris would have done at Cary Academy, or the Amtrak Station.

Architects can use towers, porches and canopies to create beauty, just as a poet can use simple words to create wonder. By taking our utilitarian structures seriously, and by looking at things the way they are, we can build a city where the motto is To Be Rather Than To Seem. At least we can build a cell-tower that doesn't look like a tree.

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