

Big Ideas in Small Buildings

The Residential Architecture of R. Brognard Okie

James B. Garrison, AIA

Richardson Brognard Okie (1875-1945) was much more than a significant early 20th century regional architect. His Philadelphia-based practice was closely tied to the national development of “shelter magazines” that originated in Philadelphia with *House and Garden*, *Ladies Home*

Journal, and others at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries. Okie’s work as depicted in these journals went on to inspire thousands of homes throughout the nation. The houses he actually designed (many survive) are highly prized by their owners and greatly appreciated by the public.



The Stenton mansion in Philadelphia, whose Colonial style inspired Okie’s designs. *Photo by Philip Wallace c. 1915. All period photographs are by Philip Wallace.*

Okie's genius was the application of a disciplined, personal style to historical sources from Colonial high style and vernacular architecture. In partnership with H. L. Duhring and Carl Ziegler between 1899 and 1918, his personal style slowly emerged from the Colonial Revival milieu of the firm. For the next thirty years he produced a body of work ranging from small houses which became suburban prototypes to larger estates with full complements of agricultural outbuildings. He differed from his contemporaries in drawing his inspiration from both high style Colonial homes such as *Stenton* and *Mount Pleasant*, as well as the local vernacular of the coastal Middle Atlantic region. He was as interested in agricultural outbuildings as the manor houses of the landed gentry. The synthesis of high and low style made his architecture uniquely adaptable to local markets by incorporating specific references to local landmarks within a larger personal, identifiable style.

Several themes run through the work of Brognard Okie. From his early work rooted in the Colonial Revival, he developed a highly personal style based on the adaptation of traditional forms and motives drawn from the rich melting pot of the Middle Atlantic coastal region. Whether building new, or incorporating an existing structure, he infuses the work with his own personality, at once shy and retiring, yet witty and charming. In the pursuit of simplicity and an architecture drawn from folk tradition, his designs show a very studied approach that relies on artistic vision and a firm academic foundation.



"Dear Little Brog, aged 9 mos."
Courtesy of Penny McClain, Okie's granddaughter.

R. Brognard Okie was born in Camden New Jersey on June 26th, 1875, the younger of the two sons of Dr. Richardson B. Okie and Clara Mickle Okie. The family moved to Chester County while the children were young, soon after their father had re-married following the death of Clara Okie. Recollections of Dr. Okie suggest

that he took a strong personal interest in his patients, making house calls and becoming well known in the area. The children seem to have readily adapted to the more rural/suburban lifestyle. After a false start at Haverford College, Brognard Okie enrolled in the architecture program at Penn, graduating in 1897, then traveling to Europe on a study tour. In addition to drawing and painting, he built up his library with books illustrating the historic domestic architecture of England and the continent. His own house, Hillside Farm, served as a laboratory for his evolving design motifs as the views from the early 1920's and present show (see pp.42-43).

In partnership with Duhring and Ziegler, he reaped the rewards of the prosperity of the middle and upper classes, and the suburbanization of much of the countryside around Philadelphia. The firm of Duhring, Okie, & Ziegler was known for its fine country houses in a number of historical styles ranging from the Tudor to Colonial Revival. During this period, the Colonial Revival was characterized by overscaled ornament and a free interpretation of precedents as is evident in the 1902 Percy Wilson residence in Devon (see p. 36). Much of the picturesque feeling of the preceding Victorian and Queen Anne periods was still strong, though the vocabulary had changed.

In some works of DOZ it is difficult to sort out the specific contributions of Okie, yet when he went into independent practice in 1918, his personal style seems almost fully developed.



Devon Garage Tea Room. Courtesy of the author.

The *Devon Garage Tea Room* is an interesting building designed during the DOZ years. The exact reasons for the combination of the cabin with an automotive facility are unknown, but the

A Colonial House at Devon, Pa.

Percy Wilson, Esq., Owner

Duhring, Okie & Ziegler, Architects



HOUSE OF PERCY WILSON, ESQ., AT DEVON, PA.



PLANS OF A HOUSE AT DEVON, PA.

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*From "American Country Houses and their Gardens", John Baker,
published in Philadelphia by John Winston for House & Garden, 1906.*



THE DEVON GARAGE TEA ROOM, DEVON, PENNA.
DUHRING, OKIE AND ZIEGLER, ARCHITECTS

From the 1915 Philadelphia T Square Club publication.

building is located adjacent to the former Lancaster Turnpike, a route steeped in history, and studded with the works of Brognard Okie. Whether the irony of the combination of buildings was planned is not known.

to place their doors and windows, and how to design their cornices; and whether the roof pitches were as steep as in the earlier houses or flatter as in the later ones, they look just right and could to good advantage

The oversized chimney with datestone, the porch with built in seats, and the multi-part form suggesting an additive construction history are all typical of his later independent work.

History, craftsmanship, and traditional building were all very important to Brognard Okie. He was an avid sketcher, and explorer of the back roads of southeastern Pennsylvania and the tidewater Chesapeake region. His interests in traditional architecture were shared by a core group of architects in the T Square Club, and paralleled the growth in the interest in regional vernacular designs throughout the country. Philip Wallace, a photographer whose studio was a few doors away from Okie's office on Smedley Street in Philadelphia, recorded examples of the disappearing farmsteads of the region. He also photographed a significant number of Okie houses for several publications. One of the more notable books was Eleanor Raymond's *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania*, published in 1930, with photographs by Wallace and a forward by Okie. This extended quotation embodies as much about his own design process as that of the original builders:

Those who built these old buildings, whether in stone, brick, logs or frame, had certainly a keen sense of proportion. They knew exactly where

be more often heeded today...Often the simpler the house, the more interesting the arrangement of small wall cupboards, boxed in stairs, and so forth, and the ingenious use made of space that in larger houses would be wasted.

No mill was complete without its miller's office with wide board floors, fireplace, and a combination of wood and plastered walls, all as simple as possible and more pleasing for being so.

We shall see several examples of his own work, both new buildings and restorations where these words come alive in the details and massing.

In the early 20th century, there was a period of consolidation of landholdings within a day's drive from Philadelphia, from the smaller mostly played-out farmsteads to new larger estates and gentleman's farms. There are still some examples of the modest farmhouses or tenant farmhouses which have survived with little alteration as the estates grew up around them. Such houses provide a glimpse at the raw material and inspiration Okie had available.

Joseph Hergesheimer of West Chester has been called the perfect Okie client. He was a prolific author of fiction, historical and otherwise, with a romantic bent. From a small office in downtown West Chester he wrote novels of distant places and times. His imagination and sensitivity was well suited to the dialogue he would enter into with the architect, and later write about in *From an Old House*, the story of the "restoration" of the Dower House for his wife and himself.

It begins with the initial design meeting and a process of reduction and simplification.

In the context of Okie's work, simplification does not mean a reduction of detail, but instead creating a harmony, where the details are subordinated to an overall theme of tranquility. Hergesheimer writes:



Frontispiece from *Early Domestic Architecture of Pennsylvania*, by Eleanor Raymond, A.I.A., 1930.



Joseph Hergesheimer residence, "Dower House".



Rear elevation of Dower House.

...we had started a process which it was not in our character to stop. A special connection with my inordinate love of detail: it might be reasonable for another man in my

circumstances to rebuild this house, but where do I stop? That however did not bother the architect; he listened to the tale I liked and demanded with a growing and

unconcealed pleasure. My passion for detail was his.

Note the references to a narrative story embodied in the building. He describes the quest for the right materials, antique hinges, a crane for the fireplace, and weathered stone from old barns. He goes further on the design process with the architect:

...Mr. Okie had the problem of making the shower-bath conform to his rigid requirements for the early tone of the whole. He provided it with a fine door in the earliest paneling, with H-L hinges and an old latch; but still I watched him steal toward it a bothered and resigned glance.

Mr. Okie showed me his drawings for the walnut rails – a beautiful narcotic for the pain (of the bill). Then he indicated to Dorothy several more closets he had been able to work into spaces and corners; closets over

doors and under...nearly everything, were his specialty; and Dorothy, faithful to a domestic tradition, welcomed them all with an inexhaustible pleasure. Their usefulness was her opiate.

Excellence in details, seen and unseen is a hallmark of Okie's work. His drawings often included assembly details for the joinery, and most pieces were drawn at full scale. This approach came from the traditional method of architectural study, measured drawings and a detailed analysis of existing or historic buildings. With the knowledge gained from the prototypes, very convincing reconstructions were possible, especially when accessorized with antique hardware or components. The fireplace in the Haughton house shows how the utmost simplicity of the kitchen fireplace could be adapted to a more formal setting in a study or dining room.

The Haughton House is a virtual dictionary of Okie's vocabulary. It makes fine use of a spectacular site at



Interior of Dower House.



Haughton Residence, Malvern. *Courtesy of the author.*

the Great Valley Mill and the artifact of the miller's residence. The link between old and new is articulated by the arcade and change in materials. This void contrasts with an adjoining overhang with a huge chimney whose base, hidden in shadow, obscures the support for the massive object. Another chimney marks an edge, growing out of the corner by the terminating pavilion. This chimney responds to both the topography and the need to provide a firm ending point to the linear grouping of elements. The complexity of the entrance court contrasts with the other facades that rely on varied eave lines and window patterns rather than changes in massing, solid and void.

In the Haughton Residence, the paneling for the living room came from a house in New England. He used molded plaster to make up the pieces needed to complete the new room. It makes one wonder about the fireplace in the next room and the authenticity of

the huge header and other artifacts incorporated into the interior architecture. In the portion of this house occupying the oldest part of the pre-existing building (near the road), there are similarities and contrasts between the first and second floors. The framing is exposed on both floors, with the nail holes from former plaster lath strips visible. This framing co-exists with the more formal paneling and mantelpieces below and this very unique fireplace above. In this house more than others, there is the sense that this wing is an artifact attached as an example or exhibit with the rest of the house as a foil.

The pursuit of simplicity and purity was not without challenges. Narrow stairs, low ceilings, and sometimes small rooms were part of the design ethos. Okie himself eschewed modern conveniences where possible. He lived on a 90 acre farm in Easttown Township, but worked in Center City. He rode the Paoli Local like countless other commuters, but arrived at



Living room in the Haughton house. *Both photos this page courtesy of the author.*

Devon Station via horse, since the livery stable there was better than the one at Paoli. He was also an active participant in the Devon Horse Show.

The palette of materials and details was more or less consistent, yet each house has its own persona. The materials and the woodwork details might not involve elaborate profiles, but there is a level of thought that goes beyond the ordinary. The simplest bedroom gains texture through the beaded paneling, and the mirrored sconces. The thinness of the wood contrasts with the deep window embrasures and the flat board lintels. The window sills are rendered in several ways, either perforated for radiators, or with lift out panels for more storage when the space below is a void.

Much of his work depended on finding the right materials, craftsmen or artifacts. Many of his houses incorporate antique hardware, but he also had local



Hillside Farm, Okie's Devon residence.



Rear view of Hillside Farm. *Courtesy of the author.*

sources such as Marshall Forge on Latimer Street in downtown Philadelphia. The company manufactured hand made reproductions of early American designs, and no doubt designs sketched by Okie. He had sources at lumber mills to get timber, and also the men to put the woodwork together, drawn from Chester, Berks and Lancaster Counties.

We have seen some examples of details, and heard an account of the experience of a client. What are the big ideas in the small buildings? Sometimes they show when a larger building is dissected.



Hillside Interior.

Appleford represents Okie at his finest, and to a modern preservation architect, his most confounding. In this house for Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Parsons, he incorporates an existing house, itself the result of several building campaigns, and several outbuildings into his own kind of unified whole. The existing house, purchased in 1926, had a core dating to the early 18th century. Subsequent additions more than doubled its size before Okie's long engagement by the Parsons family.

The narrative relies on compositional devices that weave the various strands of architecture into a coherent story. The strands can be composed of a dialogue between the old and the new, or the unfolding of vistas as the building is approached and circled. In the Parsons Residence, the 'T' shaped plan looks like it might consist of four or more separate buildings that have somehow come together with an order that only slowly reveals itself. The composition is picturesque, but not random. The architectural plan is functional yet does not adhere to a simple geometry or symmetry. The same can be said of the exterior wall elevations that changed in their rendition of stone as the house grew and the formal gardens were developed around it. More of the stone was whitewashed



The Appleford estate, Villanova. *Courtesy of the author.*

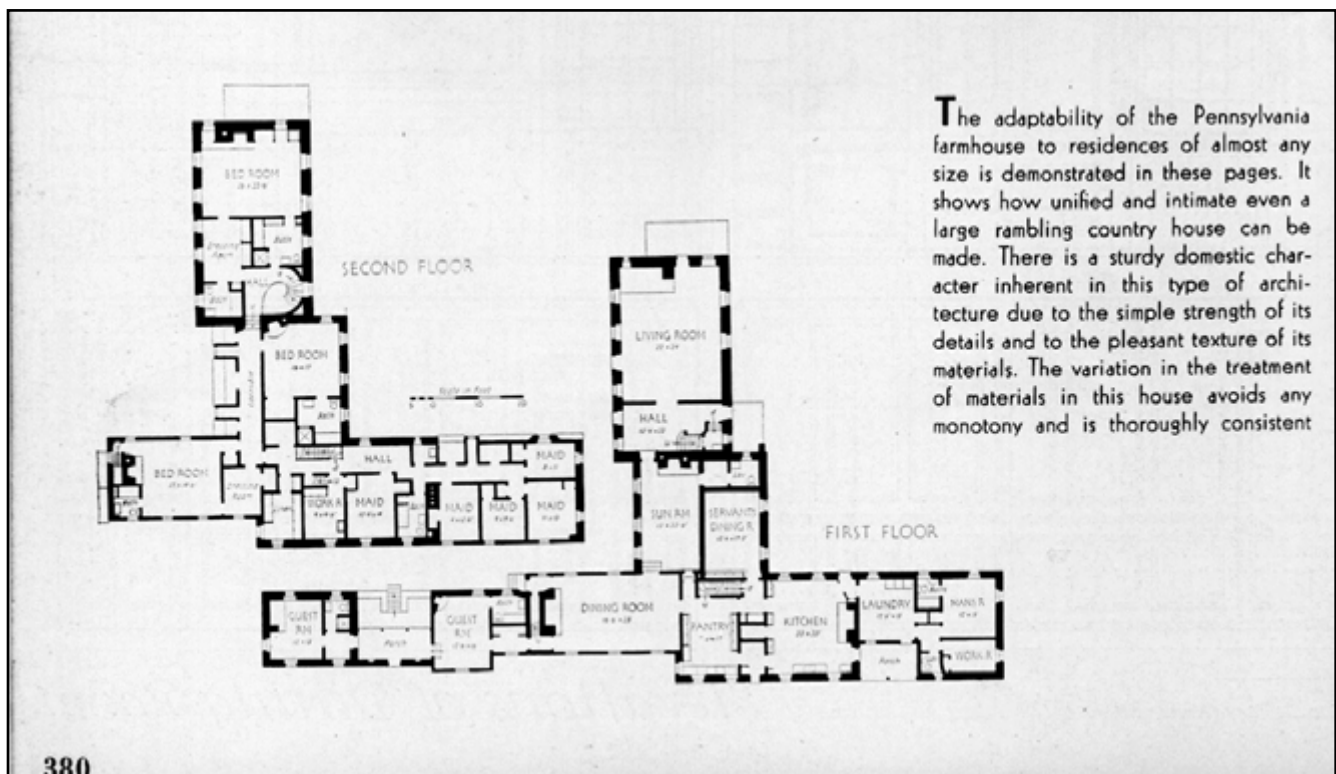
out, so its texture would form a background to the boxwood parterres and the large stone terrace that replaced a lawn and trees.

The individual words in his vocabulary included gutter and downspout boxes, the biscuit top fences, and

beaded clapboard siding. Other favorite motifs included the flat board porch and stair railings, exterior bells and pumps. His porches employed the traditional whitewashed wall surfaces reported to keep the flies away from the doors and windows. The arched spanrels at the porch posts also are an interesting device when juxtaposed with the massive masonry walls where one might expect a true masonry arch. *Appleford* was published in a 1930's *Architectural Forum* "Master Details" section (below) that provided the construction details for some of Okie's signature elements such as box cornices, porches and special millwork.

The details also included interior millwork from another widely published building of much smaller size.

The 1926 *House and Garden Second Book of Houses* was a comprehensive guide to home design and decoration, covering many period and regional designs. In the portfolio of homes, the Mary Gyger residence in Bryn Mawr was given a full page (see p.46), and rep-



Appleford Floor Plans as published in *Architectural Forum*.



Staircase at Appleford. *Courtesy of the author.*

Though *House and Garden* was meant for a general audience, all of the houses in the portfolio were high quality, architect designed buildings. The Gyger house, regrettably demolished c. 2005, incorporates the best of Okie's design motifs.

Office records list the cost of the house at \$7,969.12 in the mid 1920s. The house is on a modest lot near similarly sized residences by other architects, and does not call special attention to itself. At first glance, the contrast between the stone and mortar emphasizes the texture of the walls and the brightness of the trim and window shutters. In being drawn to these details, the shutter hardware, the seat at the porch, and the deep paneled front door surround vie for attention. Only when seeing a side of the house does its true size become

apparent. The plan is

resented a prime example of a stone colonial style dwelling that could be built for a moderate cost. *House and Garden Magazine* was founded in Philadelphia in 1901 by two architects also active in the T-Square Club and interested in the artistic country house. *House and Garden* soon attracted a national following, and put Philadelphia, and other east coast architects at the center of the residential design world.

almost square, making it extra deep for its frontage. The combination of stone and siding on the gable ends emphasizes the depth. There is also a very subtle shift in the ridge line in height and depth that allows the rear façade to gain emphasis for the sleeping porch at the higher eave. The sleeping porch, rear stoop and side porch create a complex arrangement of solids and voids on a small elevation. On this side he turns the stone far enough to create the illu-



A small house which is really small, while entirely fulfilling its requirements as a dwelling. Its exterior is thoroughly in character with the local colonial types

The details of the porches and shutters follow, with an unusual degree of architectural fidelity, the precedent of early farmhouses in eastern Pennsylvania



PENNSYLVANIA STONEWORK

The plans are necessarily compact, yet adequate in the accommodation of a large living room. Conservation of space is the secret of planning so small an area

The sleeping porch has been contrived in a manner not too incongruous with the early Pennsylvania farmhouse type which was used here as the architect's model



The second floor plan provides a surprising number of bedrooms. The architect is R. Brognard Okie, and the owner, Miss Mary C. Gyger at Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Wallace



Gyger House Interior

sion of extra thick side walls, and further plays with the building scale through the introduction of three small square windows, a favorite shape of his. The windows are the periods to the sentences as the chimney is the exclamation point.

The plan is an original creation floating between formality and informality. A large living room takes nearly half of the first floor, while the stair is tucked between walls in the width of the chimney. The stair splits at the bottom to allow access to either the kitchen or living room. The powder room off the back porch is an unusual touch, and one wonders if it was built that way. The second floor is a compact arrangement of 2½ bedrooms and one bath. The front left bedroom must be very small, yet it is shown with a fireplace.

Twenty-five years after the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, architect R. Brognard Okie and photographer Philip Wallace, whose studio was adjacent to Okie's office, formed a collaboration that changed the way people would see the surviving Co-

lonial relics. Wallace's books and photographs provided a glimpse of the past era that combined romance with an analytical eye. Wallace photographed much of Okie's finished work, and also likely accompanied him on trips to the countryside in search of unrestored relics. A close examination of the published photographs of the Gyger Residence points to telling details in the placement of iconic objects such as colonial settee and chair on the side porch. The chair appears again on the back porch, and the settee in an interior view published in the 1925 T Square Club journal. The interior view also shows the customary built-in millwork with H-L hinges, brass knobs and the special recessed pulls and thumb turn stops for the drawers over the windows. An even closer look shows the box lock with key on the door, a door which must require one to duck when passing through.

Okie lavished extraordinary care on the design of his buildings. The trained eye picks out the academic influences and the nuances of composition that speak of a laborious process of drawing development. To a casual observer, there is charm, wit, and a sense that there is something special about the building. There



Gyger house entryway. Compare to the Devon House Tea Room, p. 35.

is a timeliness and a timelessness about the designs. The proportions may be a little different from other contemporary houses and the plans may offer challenges to the inhabitants, but the houses are designed for living. Okie's vocabulary was rooted in traditional forms but his architecture was highly influential since there was also such an academic rigor to his design. On an abstract level, the relationship of shapes, solids and voids was highly developed. On a detail level, the quality of design was exquisite, with a seamless combination of antique components or buildings with new construction and contemporary programs.

Joseph Hergesheimer takes a more romantic view of his passion for the past, which he shared with Okie, in these thoughts about his home and its timeless quality of design:

Its beauty and utility would be obvious as long as stone stood on stone, as long as the beginnings of Pennsylvania were remembered. It would be a memento of a time, before me, when women were a part of their dwellings and men of their fields, of a healthy and unrealized hardship. The town was reaching out, down the hill, toward the Dower House now; but the tide of raw brick and ornamentally cut stone and plate glass would never, if the faintest trace of country pride remained, obliterate it. It would remain to show men, deafened by what they had gained, a simplicity of quiet forever lost.



R. Brognard Okie on the porch of Hillside Farm, c. 1940. *Courtesy of Penny McClain.*

Notes on Sources

The best reproductions of the original Wallace photographs appear in the Philadelphia T Square Club annuals. In 1931, the Architectural Book Publishing Company printed a three-volume set in large format that lacked some of the subtle tones of the earlier printing. The later Bonanza and Dover reprints were even further removed from the original quality. Similarly, Schiffer Publications reprinted the Raymond book in a smaller format with coarser images. The Hergesheimer book is out of print but still readily available over the Internet. Okie's original drawings and correspondence, as well as hundreds of original photographic prints are in the archives of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Most have never been published. There are hundreds of buildings by Okie and his peers still in existence, and easily over a hundred in good condition and accessible for photography. They vary widely in size and location, from small suburban lots to large rural parcels.