

C O L U M N S

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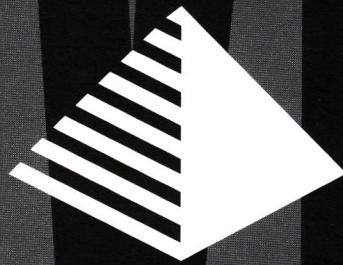


CULTURAL
-evolutions
THE MARIDON MUSEUM

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International Intrigue By Tracy Certo, editor



Like most of our international visitors, they are amazed and sometimes appalled at American culture—two common observations are the popularity of fast food and the lack of life downtown.

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On the cover: The Maridon Museum in Butler, PA designed by SPRINGBOARD Architecture Communication Design LLC. Photo by Michael Moran.

Recently my family and I had the pleasure

of hosting three visitors from Armenia, including the head of architecture and construction in Armenia, Hayk (Hike) Vardanyan. It was a great time, as these dinners tend to be, lively and informative as well as heartwarming, ending in their gracious invitations to visit them. We have been hosting dinners for several years now, through the Pittsburgh Council for International Visitors. Along the way, we've been fortunate to meet people from Nepal, Ethiopia and Malaysia, as well as Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica and even Nicaragua—two Sandinista labor activists, one in a wheelchair from battle wounds with U.S. backed-Contras. Now that was an interesting political discussion.

Sometimes they arrive in groups, with translators; other times they arrive solo, like political journalist Johan from Sweden who emails often these days to discuss the presidential campaign. Although we have met many journalists along the way, Hayk was our first architect guest. One of the first things he told us was he was very disappointed to be so close to Fallingwater and not see it for lack of time. His favorite building in town? The Alcoa Building. "It's beautiful, simple curves," he said making a gesture. "I like less is more." A graduate of two architecture schools including the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the architect now oversees the architectural office in Yerevan, where they are designing 48 buildings. One is a five-star hotel called the Golden Palace, he said with pride. In his office, he insists that his architects draw their designs by hand; only after the designs are completed do they use the computers. He feels that "computers kill the imagination."

In the course of conversation, he also mentioned that the new American Embassy in Yerevan is ugly. The two women nodded in enthusiastic agreement. Why? "It is way too big!" they all said. It's another problem they have with our society, the hugeness of everything.

Like most of our international visitors, they are amazed and sometimes appalled at American culture—two common observations are the popularity of fast food and the lack of life downtown. In Yerevan, they explained, they go home after work, change, and then out to eat and drink and stay out late—sometimes until 3 in the morning—at the

150 outdoor cafes that are open all night. Here they turn off the lights and the lights stay turned off, said Hayk, gesturing at the darkened buildings from our perch on Mt. Washington. (I take all our visitors there after dinner. It never fails to impress.) And yet, they said, if they moved to Pittsburgh they would settle in a neighborhood like ours because it is so green and beautiful and peaceful.

Peace isn't something to be taken lightly by them. Armenia is a country that has been wracked by ethnic cleansing (the genocide of 1915 where more than 100,000 were killed), earthquakes and war. When it was part of Russia, the economy was stable but after 1991 when it gained independence, the economy went into a tailspin. They told us stories of living without heat and electricity, how they remained cold no matter how many layers of clothing they wore. Together we looked at an aerial photo of the capitol of Yerevan in a recent National Geographic issue. Hayk pointed to something in the right corner. "There's my building," he said. To this day Armenia is still a cash-only society, Hayk told us. That greatly discourages home ownership and is the reason why all three of our guests live in apartments with their families in central Yerevan.

When I later mentioned our dinner to an architect friend, she expressed interest in volunteering at PCIV. If you, too, are intrigued, call them at (412) 624-7800. You can host dinners like we do or act as a tour guide around town. It's a great experience.

In this issue we're pleased to feature two articles by members, one an enlightening report from the Venice Biennale and the other a creative treatise on the Maridon Museum in Butler. We were going to feature the Maridon as part of our cultural jewel series and I told Paul Rosenblatt, AIA I wanted to do something different this time. He suggested what is presented here since he designed the interior of the museum as well. Although this is an exception to our usual m.o. at *Columns*, we thought it would be cool and we were right. Hope you enjoy it too.

Comments? Questions? Let it rip: tcerto@adelphia.net.