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Columns support both past and present opinions

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It's hard to resist the allure of columns.

Many of our best public buildings hold up their roofs with massive columns that were borrowed from Greece before it became a debtor nation. As any third-grader can tell you, the three styles of Greek columns are the Doric, Ionic and the Santa Marie.

Columbus carried breeding pairs over to the New World in 1492. He figured they would either adapt or die. They now run wild in many states and foreign countries.

Some years after the first voyage, my wife, Melissa, and I needed to buy a house in a small, historic city in the Shenandoah Valley where she had just been hired out of law school as a first-year associate.

After rejecting several fixer-uppers that had been blasted by the Yankees during the "late unpleasantness" and never rebuilt, our broker introduced us to a massive antebellum brick affair whose front porch was supported by four five-story, white columns that looked like Saturn rockets.

This had been the central building of the Virginia Female Institute, started by the Episcopal Church in the mid-1840s. Its resident females were expected to improve their characters and perform daily recitations. One window pane still bore the signature of a spunky, antebellum female who had cut in her name with her pre-marital diamond ring.

I was taken with the idea of contributing my two females to the Institute's honorable history. They, too, could recite; they, too, could sign the window.

The place was big, funky, quirky and even affordable. It had cascading chandeliers, two carved marble fireplaces and a 1920s wraparound shower. A patched-in elevator ran from basement to top floor, and the cupola was large enough for a roomy writer's office.

I felt the hypnotic Tara breezes blowing out of "Gone With The Wind." A grand staircase was ready for my wife, Scarlett O'Dowd, to make a memorable entrance wrapped in a curtain. (If that didn't suit her, I'd spring for a slipcover.) I could imagine a dashing Rhett Seltzer -- half cad, half romantic -- cutting a wide swath through...through whatever one cuts wide swaths through these days.

As with every older home, a few...issues emerged during my look-around.

All basement pipes had been conscientiously wrapped with asbestos insulation, all of which was calmly disintegrating. The seller had attached a one-story, one-car garage on a basement wall that stuck out like a turnip on the nose of the Mona Lisa. The neighborhood was a little sketchy, but so was I.

It occurred to me that we owned no furniture scaled properly for 14-foot-high ceilings and a ballroom that could double as a basketball court. Where females of good character once reeled, the best I could come up with was a dump for my six-year-old's ever-expanding line of inoperable kitchenware and her dismembered Barbies..

And while occurrences were occurring, it also occurred to me that this old house required a full-time maintenance department. Who might that be, I asked myself?

The 150-year-old mortar joints needed to be repointed, a job I conservatively estimated to take five years and about \$50 million. On the back of a very large envelope, I estimated that my annual heating bill would be triple the cost of a four-year Ivy League education—and that was assuming, we three huddled in the smallest room next to a woodstove wrapped in buffalo robes year-round.

I could see Rhett Seltzer dashing from ATM to ATM, cutting a wide swath through local lenders and

bankruptcy lawyers.

On the other hand, what carpet-baggin', book-writin', bald-headin' Yankee could pass up those four phallic columns? So I made an offer, pretty close to full price.

And just in the nick of time—it arrived one blessed hour after the seller had accepted another contract. Otherwise, I would have devoted the remainder of my life to maintaining the brick-and-mortar memory of the Valley's finest females.

The upheaval in the Middle East, which we in Virginia might refer to as the "recent unpleasantness," got me thinking about things we become allured to—things like columns that hold up roofs as well as rights that hold up societies.

It's not that hard to write a constitution that "guarantees" a smorgasbord of human rights and political liberties. The trick is cutting them in to stay like the window signature, and then adapting and protecting them over time.

Individual political rights are always threatened by authoritarian heads of state who try to eliminate public opposition. In every type of political society, from ours to theirs, these knights of their own tables erode rights with hunts for their witches du jour.

Getting a decent constitutional government up and running may be the easy part, though it's not clear that the Tunisians and Egyptians will even get that far. Iraq and Afghanistan aren't there yet, and Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan and Jordan, to name a few, have barely begun to start.

Democratic rights once established are, like the bricks and columns of the Virginia Female Institute, a matter of diligent, costly maintenance—forever.

Over the years, I've worked out two simple rules of political thumb. First, any government that sends tanks against its own people ain't no good. Second, the way you beat tanks is to get enough fed-up people to stand in front of them.

A well-placed column can hold up a roof or tear down a crackpot dictator.

Maybe, I should have moved faster and offered full price.

Those fine Virginia females would have liked having Melissa and Molly around. I might have even had enough money left to buy an artificial diamond ring. Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted. He also writes for www.landthink.com.

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