

The Philosophy of Design

Quentin Parker on Architectural Design

What is Design? **Definition of design**

transitive verb

1: to create, fashion, execute, or construct according to

plan : devise, contrive

- *design* a system for tracking inventory
 - 2a : to conceive and plan out in the mind
 - he *designed* the perfect crime
 - b : to have as a purpose : intend
 - she *designed* to excel in her studies
 - c : to devise for a specific function
 - 3 *archaic* : to indicate with a distinctive mark, sign, or name
 - 4a : to make a drawing, pattern, or sketch of
 - ... a curious woman whose dresses always looked as if they had been *designed* in a rage —Oscar Wilde
 - b : to draw the plans for *design* a building
 - *designing* a new bike
- ##### intransitive verb
- 1: to conceive or execute a plan
- 2: to draw, lay out, or prepare a design
- was trained to *design* for homes and offices

Modern life is synonymous with a lot of stress. Everyday the necessity of making important decisions instantly increases stress when we decide to address and modify the architecture we live in. The complexity of this task, the involvement of many people and trades, the huge investment involved, and overlapping of a critical timetables and people tasks exacerbate stress. If you hire the right architect this problem is eliminated.

Much of what we in society collectively build, and how we do this, is reflective of our senses and perception of beauty. We take great pride in what, how, and where we reside. It is our own home and this place carries a good amount of pride. Usually, in the alteration process, much foresight, planning, design and conformity issues - rules are employed and enforced to achieve good results. How we choose to address this process, what conditions are resolved, in this maze of protocol, every community tries to bring a concerted effort to understanding and conforming to specific planning matters, zoning laws and density requirements.



Mallorca Residence, by W. Wagner, architect with an appropriate site to scale, indigenous finish and scope.

As beautiful as many of our streets are, there is also at times notable excess in this effort to control size and appearance. In terms of residential architecture, 'abusive design' is an out-of-scale design not suitable for a particular site, due to gross insensitivity to the surroundings. We are aware of this 'mansionizing', where 6,000 sqft homes are wedged into 9,000 sq. ft. lots, with fancy fascia details and stylized window treatments- to distract from the context: "My interpretation is not in consideration of an appropriate design to this site." In the late 1920s, Frank Lloyd Wright created the 'Nine Principles to Design', which relate a house layout and finish to its' site, to materials used and to the scale of what we perceive as beautiful.

Much of our initial design intent focuses on the basics, size, height and layout. This is defined by the shape of the property, its' features, access, vistas and type of design style. Throughout history new have emulated specific styles for their perceived beauty. Often, however I have to ask my clients why. Today green building and a responsive use of materials in context to our neighbors, to energy and material conservation, to adaptive climate use - shows consideration beyond our own self-guided issues.



Frank Lloyd Wright, Walker Residence, Carmel

What constitutes an abusive design approach, when architects are relegated to strict zoning conditions, by reviews and clear planning determinations? Many clients force their commissioned

architects to a design methodology to circumvent the intent of setback rules, the floor area ratio and height determinations. The squeeze-every-last-inch-of-volume adds to an 'overbuilt look', a Faustian agreement where the sense of artistic appreciation in architecture loses to inflexible client issues.



Some of the most beautiful places are actually..... empty!

A huge foyer with an impressive, curving stairway defines an inviting volume that then leads to cramped 12 ft. by 10 ft. bedrooms. Excessively high floor to ceiling heights and perceived scale of volume are obliterated unless considered as a whole! The reality of basic Design 101 vocabulary to enhance curb appeal has hijacked the creative process when greed for volume is overriding. Small thinking define opulent oversized 'entry' foyers, two steps away from the street curb. It is a sad interpretation of design that carries the consequence of limited visualization on how to build a huge \$500.00/sqft. mistake. It is NOT easy to follow Mies van der Rohe's basic design aphorism: "Less is more."

A while ago working on a 2,460 existing sqft. Malibu Beach house, I had to convince our clients to reduce the number of rooms to increase the appeal of a simplified design layout. Instead of five tiny bedrooms with four small bathrooms, I proposed an expansive, three bedroom, three bath alternative. With huge, open rooms this real estate evaluation for a high-worth Carbon Beach house depends upon every square foot, perceived.



Karns Residence, Powder Room

Every home renovation/builder should read about the methodology of enriching effective home design where The author points at the efficiency of residential space, where criteria is by the appreciation to our senses:

“A Home For The Soul” by Anthony Lawlor.

"The approach I discuss in this book differs from those spiritual attitudes that disconnect the soul from the body and environment. It also differs from the materialistic view of modern life that separates spirit from matter and mind from body. These perspectives see the material world as a prison that traps the freedom of a soul. They make happiness and meaning seem attainable only by escaping the bonds of the world. Since having a body and dwelling in the material world are part and parcel of being human, these attitudes put off sacred experience until those times when one transcends daily existence or ascends to a heavenly realm."

Lawlor simplified his conceptual approach to design by referring back to the four basic elements of nature: Fire, Water, Earth and Air and how these elements define the rooms of our homes. He asks his clients to critically examine their specific lifestyle and based on this understanding, define the effective use of their space as a function of the design.

How much space do we really require to live in comfortably? Well, the King of France always thought Versailles was too small to meet his “needs”. With many clients constrained by budget and the size of their remodel, the main focus is on the application and use of your living style.



Siegel Living Room

In the Siegel residence in Castellamare, we created a program that suited their particular lifestyle. The kitchen, open dining and flow into their living room serves several functions, from food preparation, a place for congregation, as a work study area, as entertainment area, and central to main traffic patterns within the house.

I suggest the following exercise before you define your design program: Sprinkle talcum powder on your floor. After a week look back at the tracks you've made in your living environment. If there are few tracks in your major living spaces, revise your thinking on YOUR use. An even, well-tracked floor plan throughout defines the best, most efficient use of space. If it's not ineffective, it is worthless for your particular lifestyle! Modify uses to fit your applications. I am amazed at how many people spend hours in a cramped, dark room home office, and the generous living room is unused.



The Siegel Kitchen, with skylights

Several years ago, the Wirth family on Charm Acres Place in the Palisades, commissioned us to add on to their existing house. A working office/study was needed, and soon we realized a modification to the scope of work was required: a total re-design and the new pool/terrace/patio became necessary. What once was a rear yard unsuited by poor drainage conditions, soon became the extension to the rear family room. The design necessitated a comprehensive planning review process. I contacted immediate neighbors to show our proposal and to address their concerns in the design phase. Due to this preparation, we had many replies, critical response, which resulted in extensive communication between all parties. In the follow-up planning review meeting, the first vote cast was to decline our proposal.

When I pointed out the other options available, maintaining the existing height garage and adding an additional story on top, it became clear how reasonable our design approach was. While it would have been less costly to build taller, within the framework of our planning design guidelines, my clients persuaded our neighbors to allow us to lower the level of vehicle access to limit the scale of the new addition in height. The balance between a project costs, and a less imposing mass allowed the planning review participants to approve our proposed addition.



Gruman Residence, Brentwood

What makes one home more desirable than the next is the understanding of a lifestyle in the design context. Clients often provide pictures of cute kitchen layouts in a \$4.95 magazine devoted to kitchen plans. A Tuscany-style home, 9,000 miles away from the high Italian plains requires alternate methods to modify excessive solar heat, leaky window and non-draining, enclosed balconies. We have different realities in southern California living conditions and for our particular climate. Each climate condition requires a sensible design approach of each house - which is unique to each area as far as being a 'viable' solution.

When you decide to build, consider the tracks your footprints make on your floor, on a daily basis. How often do you use a particular room, a specific nook, a certain layout or design feature? What rooms are you most comfortable in? Which part of the house is empty and why is it rarely lived in? What is essential, what is effective, what is conforming to your particular use?



Wagner's generous use of space with vaulted ceiling

Between choices of functional, sensible and stylistic appearance, which attribute is predominant in the design process? Often we copy imagery without understanding the reason for function. In consideration of great architecture, all details must work well, at all times.

Some details in a decorated shed never will be satisfying, no matter what the context or function may be. Dwelling design, as in a habitable shelter from the elements, must include the context of our human element, as the combination of function, effect, use and appearance together we live under.



Ceiling Detail, Living Room

The most beautiful places I know are those which resolve the 'living function' with an artful perception of space. It is not by size, by intricate finish details or juxtaposed material choices that we appreciate buildings. Where the new meets old, where geometries clash or conform, where context rules, our best architectural response in design is the simple statement.



Gund Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge,

When we understand this aspect of design context, -how the simple solution is usually the best, whether by Santiago Calatrava, Richard Meier, Frank Gehry, Robert Stern, Zia Hadad, William McDonough or other notables, the one common denominator to their work is the expression of joy within the magnificent structures and built forms they have created. The admiration for clarity in the built statement is paramount. Where juxtaposition of form and function, of sculptural extravagance is one of perceived beauty, and there our spirit learns to soar. Where we look not once- but repeatedly perhaps, we understand a new, artistic expression is successful. When architecture breathes generously, there is art.



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