

# **Every Home Needs an Architect**

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“Let’s face it. There are a lot of ugly houses out there. Many of them are massively overscaled, designed more to impress than to inspire with towering facades and schizophrenic rooflines” (Eck 3). Our streets are being littered with more and more of these monstrosities every year, soulless boxes sitting on sterile lots plagued with protruding garage doors, disproportionate posts, and contorted entryways. With 101,673 registered architects in the United States, (NCARB 1) how can such an infection be so widespread? All too often, the main reason given for this is that no architect was involved in the design process.

A house is more than just a place of refuge and as Witold Rybczynski illustrates, the concept of “home” has evolved over time; from its initial conception by the European bourgeois of the 1600s, through great advances made by the American working class of the 1800s, and is continuing to be redefined to this very day. Therefore, since every family is comprised of a unique group of individuals, each of whom has specific personal needs, isn’t it obvious then that each new house should be uniquely designed exclusively with regard for these needs? Toby Israel writes “Our basic need for shelter must be satisfied. Yet once we have achieved the security that a house provides, [...] it is then possible to transform that house into a home. At this level the house becomes a setting for meaning; it becomes not only a physical structure but a symbol” (2).

But without including an architect in the design process of this house, this fundamental leap to becoming a home will not happen. An architect listens attentively to the needs and wishes of the client and learns what elements and functions must be integrated into the house’s plans to satisfy the family’s requests. He/she then interprets

these requirements into a language that the excavators, builders, plumbers, electricians, and roofers can all understand. Doing so is no easy task; it requires a knowledge of , among other things, psychology, ecology, geology, sociology, concrete, wood, steel, soil, windows, insulation, ventilation, plumbing, and renewable energy. Perhaps even more importantly, it requires an understanding of how to get all these systems to work together seamlessly. The architect must produce drawings and details that adhere to several codes including life safety, energy, accessibility, and fire, thus ensuring the occupant's protection under loads of snow, during hurricane winds, and in the event of fire. In addition to all these restrictions, an architect must remember to incorporate creativity and innovation into the house's design. Henry Glassie captures the essence of an architect's responsibilities when he mentions that:

Buildings, like poems and rituals, realize culture. Their designers rationalize their actions differently. Some say they design and build as they do because it is the ancient way of their people and place. Others claim that their practice correctly manifests the universally valid laws of science. (17)

Good architects, in fact, must take both of these into consideration, and as you will soon find out, much more.

Learning these skills requires years of dedication, not simply to a college education, but also years of working in the field under the guidance of an experienced and licensed architectural mentor. Only after completing his/her internship can an aspiring architect sit for the ARE; a battery of seven nationally recognized all-encompassing exams which on average last over four hours each. It is during these

exams where his/her knowledge is literally put to the test. Not only does he/she need to know, as John Brebner mentions, the “age-old golden section, for example, where a space is divided into two parts, A and B, in such a manner that the ratio A:B is the same as the ratio B:A+B” (154), but also what piece of firefighting apparatus a “Siamese” is, how high up the side of a parapet rubber roofing should extend, and even how each classification of soil reacts during an earthquake. It is only with this vast knowledge, experience, and testing that one has the opportunity to become an architect and is prepared to begin creating homes that address the needs of all its occupants, respect nature, blend in with their surroundings, create a sense of place, and, of course, are attractive.

A new house should look “new”. Given, as Henry Glassie declares, “no building is entirely new. If it were, it would be utterly incomprehensible. Rejecting every old convention, lacking windows and doors, serving no function of shelter or social division, the thing might be sculpture, but it would not be a building” (70). A new house however should be exactly like no other, nor should it be a copy of something that was built 100 years ago. Instead a house should be thought of as an individual, because as Jeremiah Eck suggests:

The point is that houses, like people, have personalities [and ...] all of the components must harmonize with one another.[...] A well-designed exterior should have balanced massing and scale[...] the color [...] of exteriors [...] should be coordinated [...and its] details should flow naturally from the other choices that have already been made. (18-33)

That is, a new house should be an integrated symphony of parts, systems, and finishes all functioning in harmony, composed deliberately as a coherent and original work of art.

This coordination of elements should not just be an erroneous façade that has no relation to the function and layout of its interior. Eck continues “in a well-designed house, the plan shows itself on the exterior; what we see as we look at the house from the outside is a kind of guide to its interior” (22). It is obvious that Rudolf Arnheim agrees when he states that “in architecture, only when inside and outside fuse in one integrated vision are we dealing with a work that carries meaning and can be understood as a whole” (109). This concept certainly isn’t new, it has been around for several hundred years, and, according to Henry Glassie, a good example of it can be found at “the Wealden house of southern England [which] displays its internal arrangements to a viewer from afar. [...] From the relation between the offset entry and the lofty hall in the middle, visitors are able to predict accurately the route they will travel from the wet, windy world to the warm place of rest and social exchange” (52). Frequently this fundamental rule is ignored and when it is, instead of offering guests a warm reception, the house, according to many people I recently surveyed, has a “foreboding and ominous” presence.

A house should be beautiful, but defining just what makes a house beautiful is a daunting task. In the eyes of Toby Israel, “‘beautiful’ architecture [...] is relatively dependent upon the public’s notion of beauty.” (115) John Brebner adds “aesthetic judgments depend mainly on the ability to integrate the sensory information into a unified structure” (158). But that doesn’t mean beauty is unachievable or unique to but a few buildings on the planet. Using both halves of their brains, architects create structurally

sound yet still beautiful new homes every day. Unfortunately, as Brebner finds, “aesthetic considerations will continue to be easily outweighed by factors of convenience and economy, and their possible advantages lost” (163). As a society, we must look beyond the perceived cost of instilling beauty in a building and instead, embrace the potential it will create for immeasurable rewards. After all, as Alain de Botton proposes, “beauty is a likely outcome whenever architects skillfully mediate between any number of oppositions, including the old and the new, the natural and the man-made, the luxurious and the modest, and the masculine and the feminine” (195). He also mentions that a “great work of architecture will speak to us of a degree of serenity, strength, poise and grace to which we, both as creators and audiences, typically cannot do justice—and it will for this very reason beguile and move us” (137). This alone, is reason enough to justify employing the services of an architect in the design of every house.

Although Barry Lopez has found that “certain ideologies [feel] that man is responsible for all that is ugly, that everything nature creates is beautiful” (129), with proper respect for the natural landscape and proper design considerations, a house can be built without the impact we typically associate with a development. This is, of course, because as Wallace Kaufman points out, “development is an assault on our sensibilities. It’s noisy and it’s dirty, and it changes our surroundings right before our eyes [and...] development destroys things we care about deeply—streams, trees, hills, animals” (50). And at the end of the day, as Robert Finch recalls, “that patch of woodland has fulfilled, not itself, but some developer’s ambition, [and] has been ‘improved’ now into final unrecognizability with paved roads, houses, cars, lawns, dogs, [and] cable TV” (22). It is the very fact that, as David Ehrenfeld points out, “places can be destroyed, [and...] can

have their nature and meaning irrecoverably changed” (37) that an architect should be involved not only in the design of the house, but also be part of the site selection, preparation, and integration. Alain de Botton sums up this concept well when he states “we owe it to the fields that our houses will not be the inferiors of the virgin land they have replaced. We owe it to the worms and the trees that the buildings we cover them with will stand as promises of the highest and most intelligent kinds of happiness” (267).

Only with this respect for the landscape, can a house blend in with its surroundings. The house should not dominate a hill, or get lost in a field, but all too often it does. Jeremiah Eck identifies “one of the big problems with a lot of houses built these days is that they are unceremoniously plopped down on the land with no apparent consideration of the site’s natural features or how the house will be affected by the sun and prevailing weather” (184). He suggests that to evaluate this relationship, “you need to take a step back and observe its overall shape and scale and how it relates to its site” (15). It should become part of the scenery blending in amongst land and the trees. A house, when properly designed should look as though it “sprang up from the soil (and was created from) the by-products of clearing the fields included fieldstone,[...] for foundations and walls, as well as trees, [...] locally hewn and milled into beams, clapboards, shingles, and flooring” (Larson 12). Further elements can help a house become one with its surroundings; the use of native plants in its landscaping, local stones creating a path to the front door, and according to Booker, Gonnella, and Butler, “no dwelling was complete without a porch or veranda, which served as a harmonious link between the house and the “picturesque” landscape in which it was situated” (113).

By blending a home in with its surroundings, an architect then creates a “sense of place”. Like many elements of a well-designed house, this term is difficult to define. One way to look at it may be best surmised by Tracy Kidder’s comment that “the edge of a woods is a definite place in the sense that an open field or the middle of woods is not” (54). In order for a house to be incorporated into that sense of place, this is where it belongs. But as with “beauty” one’s sense of place is unique to each of us based on what Toby Israel considers “one’s own environmental story” (89). In its highest form, as Ronald Engel puts it, “sacred spaces are perceived to be centers of extraordinary power and reality. Such a space is not a mere space, but fully a place, imbued with a ‘sense of place’” (86). Contrast this with the disorienting feeling experienced when entering many suburban developments today; where one house looks exactly like the next, completely lacking a sense of place. Rudolf Arnheim confirms this when he states that “architecture approaches this lowest level of order in the identical housing units of so-called subdivision, where all homes are interchangeable and the visitor finds himself in the same place wherever he goes” (164). Another case study of houses that are missing a sense of place can be found in Toby Israel’s discussion on how “in the 1960s [...] high rises [...] led cities down the road to housing hell [...] urban renewal appeared to provide secure and safe housing. These houses, however, were never considered homes by those who lived there [...] and who] felt cast adrift from the past associations that had been embodied in their more traditional homes” (57). Later, she continues to explain that “those searching for the meaning of place and home must look beyond architecture as sculpture or even architecture as social/cultural communication. Meaning in architecture must also encompass [...] a wider existential sense of our place in the world” (119).

Finally, probably the most important contribution an architect can bestow on a new house is the art of creating custom spaces with personalized finishes that truly make a house a home. It is through this process of meticulous design customization that a house acquires the incomparable and immeasurable benefit of increased homeowner comfort. This isn't simply the comfort of a soft chair, but is beyond what Rybczynski calls "a sense of domesticity (...or) an atmosphere of coziness" (221) and even beyond his "domestic comfort [which] involves a range of attributes—convenience, efficiency, leisure, ease, pleasure, domesticity, intimacy, and privacy" (231). The homeowner's comfort I refer to is all encompassing and as Alain de Botton suggests, "we need a home in the psychological sense as much as we need one in the physical: to compensate for a vulnerability. We need a refuge to shore up our states of mind." (107). In other words, "architecture must speak to all our human needs" (Israel 161). Working together with the homeowner, the architect willingly engages the immense task of what de Botton calls "re-creating the environments we intuitively love" (174). Because, as he later states, "the places we call beautiful are [...] the work of those rare architects with the humility [...] and the tenacity to [...] create environments that satisfy needs we never consciously knew we ever had" (249).

In conclusion, although there is some up front cost associated with hiring an architect, it is difficult to deny the value of his/her participation in the design of a new house. For with his/her encouragement, the house will be built in a way that respects nature, blends in with its surroundings, and gives it a sense of place. It will be filled with features tailored to its family and, with the architect's help this house will be given the opportunity to transcend other typical houses and become instead, a beautiful home.

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