

Architecture Overview

The drama of a building is played out in solid forms that share our space. **BECAUSE WE ARE LINKED PHYSICALLY TO BUILDINGS, OUR REACTIONS ARE PARTICIPATORY.**



In the course of a single day, we enter and leave many buildings. How many of us ever stop to look at these buildings — to examine or study them? We go down familiar streets each day without noticing the buildings surrounding us. Buildings deserve careful attention since they are an important part of the world of art.

Or perhaps you do look at the buildings in your life each day. If so, have you ever looked at a familiar building and decided whether it was a pleasant or unpleasant sight . . . a truly beautiful creation or nothing short of an eyesore?



Certain buildings seem to possess a power that transcends their form and materials. The Lincoln Memorial (with its statue of Lincoln) . . . the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. . . . St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome . . . and the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris are more than just works of art we admire aesthetically: they are shared histories, themes, and ideas.

Buildings like these act as magnets —serving as gathering places where the history of a people continues to unfold. People become identified with a place and symbolize it. **GREAT BUILDINGS SHAPE AND ENLARGE HUMAN EXPERIENCE.**

Believe it or not, plain old buildings have that power, too. The local football or baseball stadium, a favorite hangout, or the place you call home are also places that shape and enlarge experience.



As we glimpse the subject of architecture, once again **IT IS IMPORTANT TO LOOK AROUND YOU AND NOTICE WHAT YOU SEE.**

Unfortunately, most of the buildings around you each day are not examples of great architecture. Regardless, they do illustrate something that architecture is supposed to do — and that is to make us feel good.

A building can have an **INTRINSIC QUALITY** that makes it appealing. That quality has to do with its overall appearance and presence — which is something we feel or “sense”, as well as take in with our eyes.

Buildings have **PERSONALITY OR CHARACTER**, much as do people. It's easy to sense the idea of "character" when we look at an old barn, a Gothic cathedral, or the White House in Washington, D.C. As you focus on images of these various buildings, can you feel your emotions shifting a bit?

Less distinctive buildings are more difficult for us to respond to . . . because we may feel they lack something, that they have no "greatness". They may be worth thinking about anyway, particularly because we think so much of what surrounds us and what we live in seems dull and non-descript. Dull they may be — but just how "non-descript" common buildings are may depend on how carefully we look at them.

Buildings are made for people and they can take on "people-like" characteristics. How so?



Think about an imaginary neighborhood. A "friendly" house reaches out to you with a porch or path. Continuing down the street, a house with small windows and a heavy door — set back from the street — remains aloof. Residential properties can appear "formal" (especially if they are symmetrical), or suggest informality and fun (with parts and pieces stuck here and there). Think of the kind of house in which you live (or would like to one day own) . . . **ITS CHARACTER WILL REFLECT YOUR CHARACTER.**

Buildings inevitably express some **IDEA OR CONCEPT**. Let's return to the same building examples: An old barn is protective, earthy, mothering. A Gothic cathedral lifts our thoughts. The White House evokes dignity with the tradition of democracy and the origins of our nation.

Consider the public buildings where you live: libraries, restaurants, houses of worship, schools, museums, stores, and banks. How do they show you their purpose — aside from the displayed signage? What impression do they make on you? What associations do you make when you look at them?



What is the "feel" of your neighborhood? What does it reflect about the values of the community? What does it reflect about your values?

Buildings and architectural environments reflect more than technical necessity and practical considerations. Historically, architectural forms have been rooted in the human need to belong and feel connected.



Societies design and erect structures which end up actually forming their own communities with their own individual features. What is the character of the modern city? Cities have always been “arenas of competing aims” — and present-day metropolitan makes visible the stresses of social change and conflict. Alienation is reflected in modern urban environments.

When you take away all the philosophy, quite simply, **ARCHITECTURE IS THE ART OF BUILDING**. Keep in mind, though, that we cannot consider all of the buildings that provide shelter or fulfill other needs as works of art. Architecture requires more than walls and a roof to be considered a structure having some sort of lasting beauty. **A BUILDING MAY BE CONSIDERED A WORK OF ART ONLY WHEN IT IS THE PRODUCT OF THE BEST THINKING, PLANNING, AND CREATIVE POWERS OF ALL WHO CONTRIBUTED TO ITS CONSTRUCTION.**

In addition to excellent design, buildings worthy of being considered architecture should **SHOW THE BEST OF THE MATERIALS OF WHICH THEY ARE CONSTRUCTED.**

Every building should also be planned to harmonize with its surroundings. The structure should belong to its terrain — or the ground on which it stands — almost as though it had grown out of it and had become a permanent part of the surface of the earth. Too often we see buildings that stand out like “sore thumbs”, as the expression goes, because they are not in harmony with the buildings that surround them — or related in character to the ground on which they rest.



Architecture helps tell the story of any race, its thoughts, and its ideals. **ARCHITECTURE RECORDS THE CULTURE OF ITS TIME** because it is the direct product of man’s way of thinking. When the finished product stands before the world — no matter how false, showy, imitative, or shoddy — **THE BUILDING REFLECTS THE CHARACTER OF THE PEOPLE WHO BUILT IT.**

If you know something of the life and character of a nation, you will be able to see the relation between its architecture, and the aims and ideals of its builders. Men have built — and will continue to build in different ways. Their interests, their abilities, and their patience varies greatly.

In the past, it took generations to complete a cathedral; endless skill and devotion made every part of the structures a work of art. Today we expect very few of our buildings to outlive a generation and its needs. This understanding makes way for progress, but it also produces careless building.

To get an idea how individual buildings “work” on us — affect how we feel — we need to look at them closely. To do this, we can separate a building into its essential characteristics or components. Investigating these components is the best way to strengthen our grasp of what the building is saying to us.

The elements of visual communication, as pertaining to architecture, are as follows:

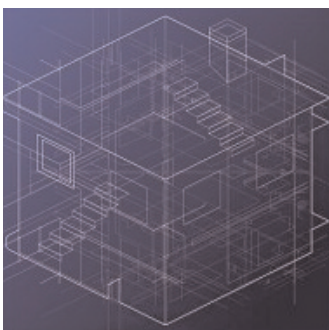
SITE:

Notice the building’s site — where and how a building is placed and what’s around it. Does the building blend in within its surroundings or does it want to stand apart? Is the building close to the street or set back? Does it have much space around it? How is the site landscaped? Does the building seem to integrate with nature or contrast with it? How important is the site? What does it contribute to your sense of the structure?



SPACE:

A building is fundamentally a space to be in — so it makes sense to be aware of those spaces and how they affect us. Space has a “push” and a “pull” to it, more felt than seen. A large indoor space can make us feel small at first, but when we adjust, it gives us a sense of grandeur and importance. By contrast, the nooks and crannies of a house can be just the place to withdraw for a quiet talk, a good time with a book, or personal reflection.



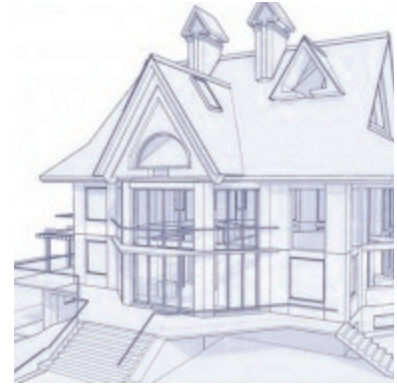
Space is defined by wall and ceiling. Walls give us the idea of the massiveness of the building — depending on how thick, solid, and heavy they feel. When observing a wall, is it smooth, a closed pane, or is it perforated by windows/arches/other openings? How much of the wall is open? How much is closed? How does the wall join the ceiling?

LIGHT:

Almost inseparable from our experience of space in architecture is our experience of light. Think of the places you know where light promotes certain feelings. Is that light bright? What goes on at that particular place? How about soft? Warm? Is the lighting even throughout, or is it varied?

DECORATION:

How is a building's exterior decorated? Is it ornate? Sparingly decorated? Or is there no ornament at all? Is the decoration integrated into the design of the building, or does it seem to be "stuck on"? Does it make you more aware of the structure of the building, or does it disguise it? Why was the decoration chosen? Exterior ornamentation is important because it gives the building identity and personality.



MATERIALS:

The character of materials — the warmth of wood, the roughness of poured concrete, the elegance of marble, the earthiness of mud or adobe — also affect our response when viewing architecture. A good building puts good materials to work, then lets you feel and enjoy them.

COLOR:

Have you ever changed the color of a room and noticed how different it felt? Color also affects the "feel" of a place. Think of the houses in your neighborhood. Are they painted alike? Is color used to differentiate between them? Is color used to make a building stand out or blend in with the surroundings? What accounts for the popularity of certain colors? What messages can colors carry?

RHYTHM:

Think about a street in your neighborhood or in the nearest town and see if you can sense a rhythm to the buildings. A rhythm can be created by the repetition of windows, driveways, fences, porches or stoops, streetlights, or even garbage cans. Where the rhythms are monotonous — where all the houses are basically identical — you may find yourself wishing there was some variety.



These are some of the usual components of architecture. Along with them, innumerable distinctive and individual details may also contribute to a building's character.

BUILDINGS ACT ON US THE FIRST TIME WE EXPERIENCE THEM. As we move into and through them, they can change us . . . change how we feel . . . change how we behave. Of course, we affect architecture, as well.

BUILDINGS REFLECT WHO AND WHAT WE ARE. Architecture is an art form that is necessary to human survival. It is the place where human dreams and physical realities come to terms.