

Core Qualities that Make a Great American Home

Excerpted and adapted from *Celebrating the American Home: 50 Great Houses from 50 American Architects*, by Joanne Kellar Bouknight

The AIA collects and disseminates Best Practices as a service to AIA members without endorsement or recommendation. Appropriate use of the information provided is the responsibility of the reader.

SUMMARY

Taunton Press has identified 50 American homes that are pillars of good design. Each home met Taunton's core elements of design: context, scale, livability, craft, and distinctiveness. Detailed explanations of these design elements are offered.

THE FIVE ELEMENTS

Over the past 10 years, Taunton Press has identified 400 houses as worthy examples of good design. In *Celebrating the American Home: 50 Great Houses from 50 American Architects*, Joanne Kellar Bouknight and Taunton Press examine 50 homes across the United States that exemplify the best of the Taunton houses.

Though each of the 50 Taunton houses is unique, they share certain core qualities that distinguish them as great American homes:

- A just-right response to the site and context
- A comfortable scale both inside and out
- Livability that accommodates everyday life and special occasions
- A deep respect for craft
- A distinctiveness that transcends the ordinary

CONTEXT: CONNECTING WITH THE SITE

Connecting with the site is critical to good design. The design must take into account the physical characteristics of the site, the social and physical fabric of the neighborhood or community, and the land-use requirements such as setbacks and area restrictions. The *physical site* consists of topography, climate, and flora and fauna. The *fabric of a neighborhood or community* comprises scale, color, style, and rhythm—all elements that give a place character. For example, are all the houses set back the same distance from the street? Are roof slopes the same? Historical precedents add another layer of context, with vernacular materials and details providing a palette of options. Finally, *land-use*

regulations determine where a house may sit and how big it may be. All these site elements inform the design, and it's up to the architect, owner, and builder to interpret the information.

SCALE: PROPORTION, INSIDE AND OUT

Having a handle on scale means understanding how a house fits into a neighborhood or landscape, how people fit into the house, and how details fit into the overall design. Scale considerations apply to every level of a house's design, whether viewed from the curb or from the couch.

Proportion is a critical aspect of scale. For example, a too-big addition can ruin the scale of a house. Additions should be made with a sympathetic eye to the scale and proportion of the house.

Today's houses tend to be larger in scale than their ancestors, not only outside the house but inside. Great rooms, or open plans that connect several spaces, make sense with busy families and more stuff to accommodate and share. This open space makes a skillful use of scale critical to how comfortable a house feels. A large house can be done on a comfortable scale if rooms are scaled to match the function and if large rooms have differentiated spaces within them, such as niches and areas with lowered ceilings.

LIVABILITY: HOW A HOUSE WORKS AND PLAYS

Though livability is a subjective notion, most will agree that comfort is high on the list of requirements for a livable home. Comfort does not require luxury, but it does require attention to spaces and adjacencies that make it easy for inhabitants to work, socialize, and rest.

One key to making a livable house is to provide sheltered outdoor space where owners can take in the view in relative comfort. Indoors, livability depends in part on a comfortable mix of private and public spaces, with a natural progression from one to another.

CRAFT: A RESPECT FOR MATERIALS AND WORKMANSHIP

Honest materials and fine craftsmanship may seem at first like mere icing on the cake compared to how well a house works and what it looks like from the curb. Yet skimpy details, shoddy materials, and lackluster workmanship can result in aesthetic and functional annoyances. Although the guts and bones of a house may not grab immediate attention, those are the areas where craft is the most vital.

An understanding of and respect for the particular qualities of materials is fundamental to good craftsmanship. Building materials that are traditional to a region, such as adobe to the Southwest, are good choices because they respond directly to availability and climate.

Keep in mind that good craftsmanship does not necessarily mean always using materials in a traditional way. Sometimes thinking outside the box can create a joint, a component, or a finish that is just the right touch. Nor is a big budget always necessary. Salvaged items, used creatively, can be the brainchild behind a design.

DISTINCTIVENESS: THE “WOW” FACTOR

The final quality that will elevate a house to a home is the ability to distinguish itself with a personality—not a particular style but a sense of style. That distinctiveness, or “wow” factor, can relate to any of the other core qualities.

Certainly a spectacular view of water, woods, horizon, or city skyline does make it easier to build in “wow” factor. In fact, the insightful use of light and view are hallmarks of every great house. But there is more to making a distinctive house than going for a home run. Details, finishes, and the configuration of space can add whimsy, elegance, mystery, serenity—whatever quality is right for the space and place.

MAKING A PLACE

These five core qualities of residential design can help turn any house into a well-crafted home. In an essay appearing in *Celebrating the American Home*, John Connell, AIA, writes, “Residential architecture will always be much more than just striking patterns of color, material, and shape. Residential architecture, at its best, becomes a three-dimensional language that can express the personal values and dreams of those who embrace it.”

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 11.10.01 Understanding Human Behavior Leads to Safer Environments
- 11.06.02 Ten Key Factors that Affect Any Design
- 16.02.04 Green Practice Tips

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Building Design,” by Richard McElhiney, AIA, and Joseph A. Demkin, AIA, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 18, page 563.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



Feedback

The AIA welcomes member feedback on Best Practice articles. To provide feedback on this article, please contact bestpractices@aia.org.