

# Tips for Explaining Design

Contributed by Tim Culvahouse, FAIA

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## SUMMARY

The best time to introduce people to design ideas is when nothing is at stake. Similarly, the worst time to do so is when something big—like the project budget—is at stake. As we ponder explaining design to people, we should be thinking about doing so well in advance of a problem or a negotiation. In fact, explaining design should be a regular part of an architect's casual conversations, not only with clients but with prospective clients, and everyone else.

## EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE

Here are a few tips to effectively explain design from an architect's eye.

**1. First, do no harm.** Be careful not to say “the design” when you mean “the way it looks.” (“I like the design, but it's poorly constructed,” or “It works well, but I don't like the design.”) Design synthesizes construction, function, and the way it looks—and innumerable other things, as we know. This synthesis is an architect's unique contribution. We should be proud of our abilities to synthesize and careful not to trivialize them.

**2. Offer insight into the newsworthy.** Keep an eye on the latest celebrated (or controversial) project, see what's said about it in the media, and collect your thoughts about what's not said. When someone asks your opinion of it—which they will—you can add to or challenge what they've read in the paper. Use the opportunity to throw light on the values and understanding you bring to architecture.

**3. Appreciate the stars—then contextualize them.** As much as some of them may annoy us, stars are good for the profession. They raise its esteem in the public eye. Be prepared not just to say what you think is good about their work and what is not, but also to relate the work to current issues in the field, issues of concern to your local audience, and your own interests and expertise.

**4. Offer both “high” and “low” examples.** That old saw of Nicolas Pevsner's—“Lincoln Cathedral is architecture; a bicycle shed is mere building”—is pernicious, and it's not true, anyway. Many people

will be interested to learn something about Lincoln Cathedral, but if you can suggest to them how a bicycle shed can become a marvelous thing, design enters the world of the possible for them.

**5. Focus on relationships.** Influenced by travel guides, people tend to think of buildings as collections of things: “bracket,” “keystone,” “Mansard roof.” But we know that it is the relationships among things that make good buildings. Describe the relationships. A handy one is that between a path and a view: “See how this stair leads you to a view of the Campanile?”

**6. Use the napkin.** A more complex relationship—say, the one between diminishing column width and increasing window size in Louis Kahn's Exeter Library—gives an opportunity for the thing that so charms the non-architect: the napkin sketch.

**7. Relate everything to experience.** The formal resolution of the columns and windows (and arches and section) at Exeter Library is interesting to architects. But it is the *view* these elements provide that is of interest to non-architects: the way the small windows serve the carrels while the large, upper glazing offers a lookout for students on the mezzanine.

**8. Use analogies.** Through analogies you can relate buildings to things people already understand. Cars are a favorite of mine; they are great for explaining how a style can be something more than the sticking-on of motifs, how it can shape an attitude about how individual parts form a whole.

**9. Think cocktail conversation.** Give people examples they can use at parties—something with a little “hey, I betcha didn't know” in it. What's new and exciting to you? BIM? Green roofs? LEDs? Put something amazing in a nutshell, and you'll be quoted all across town.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Tim Culvahouse, FAIA, is an architect specializing in communication for design advocacy. He directs Culvahouse Consulting Group in Berkeley and is the editor of *arcCA (Architecture California)*, the journal

of the AIA California Council. He may be reached at [tim@culvahouse.net](mailto:tim@culvahouse.net).

## RESOURCES

### More Best Practices

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

- 05.01.01 Client Needs and Design Quality
- 05.02.01 Educating the Client
- 14.03.01 Managing Design Project Costs

### For More Information on This Topic

See “Building Client Relationships” by Kevin W. C. Green, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 5, page 57. The Handbook can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org)



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### Key Terms

- Practice
- Project administration
- Project communications
- Marketing