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Design is courtesy made visible

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“The details are not the details. They make the design.” — *Charles Eames*

As Le Corbusier said, design is intelligence made visible. But good design is courtesy made visible.

Good design and courtesy are both about anticipating someone's needs. The most thoughtful design adapts buildings to how people live, rather than asking people to adapt to the buildings.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed for his own proportions rather than those of the residents of his buildings. Wright stood five foot eight, and many of the doorways for his houses are only six foot two. Someone once told him, “Whenever I walk into one of your buildings, the doorways are so low my hat gets knocked off.” Wright's reply? “Take off your hat when you come into a house.”

Small details make a big difference in how space is perceived and the ease with which it is used. The cumulative effect of these details can be significant. These details aren't strictly necessary to the goal of the projects, but they improve the human experience of being in the space, and make it somewhere where people want to spend time.

These details often don't bring attention to themselves. They typically reveal themselves gradually, as the space is used over time. In thoughtfully designed buildings, the use of the space is surprisingly intuitive and effortless. There is an absence of moments where things feel awkward. These same details become conspicuous by their absence in a comparable space. Waiting areas without seats. Wireless cafes without electrical outlets for laptops. Parks with benches oriented towards street traffic instead of the gardens. Or bathroom doors that don't extend all the way to the ceiling or the floor.

There are countless best practices that need to be catalogued and shared, and which should become standard practices. Many of the best examples of this kind of thinking come from outside the real estate sector. One of the simplest and most powerful examples of courtesy in design is adding the fuel door arrows on car dashboards. Barbour hunting jackets are one of the most intuitively designed articles of clothing — they seem to have pockets exactly where you need them, and the oversized zipper pulls are

perfectly suited to when you are wearing gloves. Barbour jackets are inherently 'green' — they are also designed to be repaired rather than replaced. Macintosh laptops have power cords that attach magnetically, to prevent the laptop from being pulled off of a desk in event someone stumbles over the cord.

Courteous design details improve the way people interact with a space. For example, conventional refrigerators have the freezer on top, despite the fact that most people use the freezer much less than the fridge. That design forces people to bend over to get foods from below. This design issue has been solved by refrigerators where the freezer is on the bottom, or by French-door style units where the freezer and fridge are side by side.

In bars and restaurants, a detail as seemingly minor as coat hooks beneath bar countertops makes a tremendous difference by allowing patrons to hang their jackets, purses, and shopping bags. It eliminates an entire step of having to check coats. This small touch also increases safety by keeping these items off the floor, reducing the risk of falls and lawsuits. These bar hooks represent a good example of the small details that anticipate people's needs and makes spaces more comfortable.

Similarly, many of the most comfortable bars have either a brass railing or a boxed step as a footrest — located at exactly the place where your foot would rest. At other bars, you find yourself on a stool and your foot seems to be searching for a place to rest, either because this detail is missing, or it is in the wrong place. It is a small discomfort that distracts from the experience of being in the space.

Many older homes have staircases with wider treads and shallower risers. These provide a more pleasant ascent. Today's conventional stairs have narrower treads and wider risers, and force users to adopt a slightly different, less elegant gait.

Handrails, handles, and banisters should feel right in your hand. There is an apocryphal story about Antonio Gaudi and the door pulls of a church he designed in Barcelona. When his staff couldn't find a door pull that felt comfortable, he grabbed the clay, squeezed it in his hands, and told them to cast in bronze

that organic shape that resulted. The resulting door pull fit naturally and comfortably into people's hands.

Consider door sizes. The difference between a 32" door and a 36" door can make life far easier for residents: it is easier to move furniture in and out of the residence, and it also complies with universal design standards for wheelchair access.

Much of universal design is inherently courteous design. Originally intended as unobtrusive design features to preserve the independence and dignity of senior citizens or disabled individuals, these features have become valuable for audiences that were not originally intended. For example, ramps originally intended for people in wheelchairs also make life easier for young mothers with baby carriages.

Courteous design is often pragmatic design. For example, standard kitchen countertops are 36" high, but this height is often uncomfortable for children, adults who are shorter or taller than average, or for those who prefer to work while seated. Universally designed kitchens include countertops from 28-32" tall, or adjustable height countertops. This is not a new idea — the 1873 Mark Twain House in Hartford, CT featured lower countertops and cooking surfaces, which made it easier for the cooks to move full pots and pans. Elements of what we refer to as universal design today simply have their roots in traditional design.

This sort of courteous design also enables residents to remain in their homes as they get older. This is especially critical in times of economic uncertainty or during a depressed housing market when they may not be able to easily sell their current residence. Putting certain details in from the planning stage could prevent more expensive renovations later. These would not necessarily cost more, but would just require more planning.

Quiet places have become scarce

In multifamily residences, soundproofing between units is inherently courteous. Staggered stud and split-rail construction for party walls, Quietrock, or metal-lined gypsum board or plywood, are all effective methods for reducing noise. Where possible, align living spaces to noisier streets and urban views, and have bedrooms face quiet courtyards — and make sure that the property manager does not put the building's recycling bins in those courtyards. Many older houses have a vestibule flanked with

closets leading to the bedroom. This increases costs slightly, but it reduces noise significantly. Where bedrooms adjoin a shared bathroom, putting a closet on the wall closest to the bathroom can act as a sound buffer.

Open loft concepts with three-quarters height walls are inherently not courteous if the residence is occupied by a family. A friend who lives in one of these units has a teenage son whose girlfriend is a frequent overnight visitor. They'd all like to have words with the architect who thought that partial walls were a practical idea.

Also, noisy elevator doors and gears can disrupt the sleep of nearby residents. The new gearless elevators by Otis are not only quieter, but also use less energy.

One of the biggest problems with the present transit-oriented development incentives is that they make places developable without necessarily making them desirable. In order to make downtown, transit-oriented development more attractive, developers should work with cities to enact "no honking except for emergency" regulations on busier streets, and ensure that trains are not using their whistles at every grade crossing throughout the day and night.

Hospitals are supposed to be healing places, but they are often aesthetically bland or unwelcoming. Oscar Wilde's final last words were, "Either the wallpaper goes, or I do." Good design can promote recovery — but thin walls or curtains don't protect patients from constant light, noise, and activity. This makes good sleep and recovery even more difficult.

Bring back telephone booths. Cell phones have become ubiquitous, but there are few places to have a quiet or private conversation. Bringing back telephone booths is the simplest way to provide a quiet place for private cell phone conversations, and to prevent these cell phone calls from disturbing others.

Energy-efficient design is inherently courteous. It's discourteous to design inefficient buildings that ask residents to bear the higher operating costs. Many apartments heated with electric heat, where the electric bills in the winter can exceed the rent. High operating costs because of inefficient systems are often invisible to the resident when they purchase or lease a building.

Courteous design offers end users more control over their environment and enables building owners or managers to reduce utility expenses. Intelligent building features such as light management systems (or at the very least, dimmer switches and window shades) reduce energy use. Graywater systems, rainwater collection systems, and permeable surfaces help reduce water usage by not diverting or depriving water from other elements of an ecosystem. In addition, more buildings are using escalators with variable-speed motors that are slow or still when no one is riding them, and speed up when they sense weight on the treads.

Author Spider Robinson asked, “Why do we have a heat-producer (oven) and a heat-sink (refrigerator) in the kitchen side by side *unconnected* to each other?” Along these lines, the Mark Twain house also featured a vent from the cast-iron stove to the copper water tank, harnessing the excess heat produced from the stove to provide hot water. Remember, this kitchen dated from 1871.

Courteous design uses the materials and resources at hand. This includes historic structures, view corridors, and old growth trees. Shigeru Ban’s innovative Hanegi Forest project in Tokyo designed an apartment complex around the 27 old-growth trees on the site. Similarly, the ecofriendly treehouse resort of Finca Bellavista in the rainforest of Costa Rica builds its residences around the trees, leading to its description as an “Ewok village.” Both are excellent examples of using the resources that are at hand in clever ways that enhance the experience of being in the space and create value for the developers.

Similarly, recycled materials are courteous. Carcinogenic materials are fundamentally not courteous.

Adaptive reuse of older structures may cost more than new construction, but the resulting product can command a premium because it is distinct and the space is more visually interesting than most new construction. Conversely, demolishing historic buildings erodes the character of historic neighborhoods, particularly when what replaces them is inferior in terms of materials and design. It is fundamentally discourteous to externalize these costs — inferior views, limiting the ability of a neighborhood to revive — to other building owners in the neighborhood.

Courteous design adds dignity to affordable housing

From the outside, affordable housing should look like any other housing. Affordable housing is about more than just providing shelter, it is also about dignity. No one should have to go home to a place which announces to everyone that “we’re poor.” Courteous design would drive development of buildings that residents would *choose* to live in even if they had the economic choice to live elsewhere. Affordable housing should be attractive, understated, and designed in context with the neighborhood.

This conventional approach to affordable housing incorporates somewhat patronizing design elements such as bright, institutional colors and oversized, simplified details. This approach is an affront to the neighborhood, and a powerful visual disincentive to developing successful market rate housing nearby. In many neighborhoods, the most feasible real estate development is through tax-credit financing that initially creates rentals which become market-rate housing after five or seven years. If the building exteriors and common areas are not designed to be bland or patronizing, then the interiors can be easily updated for a higher return on investment.

Poor neighborhoods or affordable housing complexes can often be identified from a distance by the institutional, harsh, fluorescent lighting. By contrast, wealthier neighborhoods and private homes often have warmer, amber or yellow-toned lights. Given that the exterior lighting represents only a small portion of overall lighting, substituting fluorescent for incandescent lights generates a negligible savings but a disproportionately negative first impression. Driving down a street, it should not be apparent which buildings are affordable housing.

Economic benefits of thoughtful design

Good design is not just courtesy — it is a way of rethinking real estate to make spaces more charming, pleasant, and transforming them into places where people want to spend time. People pay a premium to be in spaces where they enjoy, where they feel comfortable. These qualities are also a disincentive to moving elsewhere.

Making the experience of the space better for the end user can provide significant economic benefits for owners. For hotels, these details may be the difference between three and four stars. For residential developments, these details can differentiate a project and command a price premium. For commercial spaces, they can create a disincentive to relocating, thereby reducing associated turnover costs such as vacancy loss, broker fees, and tenant improvement allowances.

Some of the most dramatic spaces may have been designed by architects with a particular audience – usually their peers or posterity – in mind. But few people enjoy living in an architect’s statement. The most beloved spaces tend to be those designed with the thoughtfulness, practicality, and courtesy of keeping the end-user in mind.

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