

WHAT I'VE LEARNED: INSIGHTS ON LIFE AND ARCHITECTURE

By Frank Harmon, FAIA

In 2009, Triangle Modernist Houses.com asked Frank to contribute to the its special section entitled "What I've Learned - insightful observations on life and design from North Carolina's talented architects and designers." Following are his observations.

The single most important decision an architect makes is how to place a building on its site.

Orientation to the sun, cross-ventilation, hydrology, aspect and prospect are all determined by this single decision. This is why we team with a landscape architect on all of our projects from the beginning. All good buildings begin with the land.

Orientation (for sunlight and cross-ventilation) and the "bones" of a building (shape and structure) account for 80 percent of the "green" elements of a building.

It is a common misconception that relatively exotic systems, such as photovoltaics, geothermal ground-coupled heat pumps, and vegetated roofs, make a building "green." In truth, the fundamentals of orientation and massing contribute far more to a building's sustainability than any high-tech system.

Let the good air in. Whether the project is a 30,000-square-foot visitors center or a garden room, we design our buildings for natural cross-ventilation and as much daylight as we can afford.

Bring natural light into every room from two sides, preferably three. Light from many sides creates an even, dispersed illumination ideal for reading, working and other tasks, but most importantly for good communication. Communication is not only conducted with words and voice but with facial and body expression. Good light makes good relationships.

The buildings I learn the most from now are built by farmers or mechanics who don't know they're designers. Wallace Stevens observed that poetry is language without the unnecessary words. The humble buildings in our landscape that are built from instinct – barns, cabins, sheds, and garden structures -- are like poetry.

Before 1940, all buildings were sustainable. They had to be. There was no such thing as air-conditioning. People sat on porches and talked in the evenings, enjoying the prevailing breezes. Natural building materials, like wood and brick, came from nearby. Few architects can build as sustainably today as a farmer who built his house and barn in 1920. He built them a certain way because he had to – because the health of his family depended upon it.

One of the great challenges for our residential clients is to ask for what they really want. As children we ask for what we want, but later in life we become more shy and circumspect. Thus, clients find it easier to ask for what they think someone else would like – their parents, for example – or for the hypothetical "resale." Then they wind up getting a house for someone else.

One of our favorite questions for a residential client is: What was your favorite space as a child and how did it make you feel? Then we begin to design their answer. One client grew up in a large, boisterous family and his favorite place was under the stairs where he could be by himself yet in touch with others. We designed a house for him with small, cozy rooms that opened into each other and outside to small garden rooms.

We encourage our clients to think “smaller and better” in quality rather than “big” and “good.”

Of the three variables in any project – cost, size and quality – the client gets to choose two. The architect gets to play with the third. For example, if a client determines budget and size, the architect can control quality. We tell our clients that the quality of a building is like food: Food may be good, cheap, and fast, but not all three. You may choose two – good and fast, for example – but it won't be cheap.

Privacy and openness are not mutually exclusive.

Most of the big ideas for our projects arise from small ideas, such as how to give children many corners in which to play in a nursery...how to give every employee in a large office building a view over a wooded creek...how to protect the windows of a house from a hurricane...

Broad roof overhangs protect the windows, walls, and foundations below, provide shade, and create a sense of shelter.

Wherever possible, use materials in their natural state: polished concrete, galvanized iron, brick and stone. Unpainted wood siding, properly detailed, will last 100 years and weather beautifully. I have visited wood-shingled beach cottages at Nags Head that are over 100 years old and are good to go for another century.

In our Southern climate porches, terraces, and outdoor rooms are gifts from nature. In spring and fall, our weather is like that of Southern California -- without the earthquakes! Outdoor spaces convenient to a house or a workplace extend the indoors to outdoors at relatively little cost. And there is hardly a week in the year, including winter, when there isn't at least one good day to sit outside and enjoy the sun.

For the young architect, foreign travel can be transforming. In our native country, preconceptions and the many layers of meanings we take for granted often keep us from seeing clearly. We see what we are accustomed to seeing. When we travel abroad, preconception is scraped away. (Travel abroad also allows us to more fully appreciate where we live.) We look with fresh eyes. Le Corbusier's only school of architecture was his travels in Europe and the Near East. Brian McKay Lyons lived and studied in Italy and Japan before starting his practice in Nova Scotia. Glenn Murcutt spent his early years in London and, since then, has traveled extensively. When I visited Chaco Canyon with him in New Mexico, he, an Australian architect, led the tour!

There is more wisdom in African-American gardens and yards in the rural South than in a million McMansions.