

PROPORTION AT HOME

Does Your House Have a Balanced Fit?

If you've ever taken an art appreciation class, you'll understand the frustration of a beginning Architecture student when the professors started to toss around phrases like "its got rhythm," "the balance is off," and "My gosh! What grotesque proportions!" Here I was, earnestly trying to keep up with all the technical stuff like structures and electrical systems, and WHAP! a whole new set of terms came out of the blue. "And what," I remember asking myself, "were they talking about?" I was looking at the exact same design drawing they were (a neo-brutalistic fantastic expression in concrete and steel), and I struggled with figuring out the rhythm, balance, and proportion. I wanted to say: "You guys are pulling my leg, right? This picture isn't going anywhere, so where's the notion of rhythm and balance? And proportion? What does that mean when applied to a neophyte design student's latest flight of fancy which almost by definition is not supposed to have any counterparts in the real world?"

After a few years of this, I caught on. Rhythm was the rhythm that you'd sense IF the building was musical. Balance was the tipping or toppling that you'd get IF the building was suspended in the air on a knife edge. Proportion was pieces seen in light of the whole. So, how does this all relate to your house? Well, ARCHITECTURE may seem like a lofty and perhaps a bit pretentious title to hang on your abode, but in fact, architecture it is.

You know that architecture at some level is a form of art. Those same seemingly vague terms like rhythm, balance and proportion apply just as well to your home as they do to a painting on a wall. In this article, I would like to focus in on one of these classic ideas - proportion - and talk in a practical sense about what it means for you, especially as it relates to a proposed remodeling project.

Proportion is one of the key elements to consider in remodeling design.

One of the easiest reference points to use in understanding the basic concept of proportion is the human body. Most of us have at least one of those handy. Please get it out now for this exercise. You can easily recognize in a caricature which features have been exaggerated. After years of careful observation, you've no doubt discovered that, as much as all our bodies differ, there are similarities that make them all somewhat the same. You know how big a nose should be on a face, a head on a body, or a hand on an arm based on a set of proportions. Although you might not be able to articulate what the exact proportions are, when you see it you know it's right.

There are rules of thumb about proportions that apply to houses as well. These rules apply to all aspects of a house taken as a whole - both the facade we see when standing in the street, as well as the spaces, make up the home you live in.

Let's talk next about that collection of spaces that you call your home. We need to distinguish these spaces from the physical structure that defines them. Each room or space is a location for activities and furniture. How each of these collections of furniture and activities relates to the other collections of furniture and activities in terms of size and location determine their proportion relative to each other. The contents and uses of the spaces are the measuring elements for the proportions of a house plan. If we were talking about some other kind of building, say a church or a printing plant, there would be a totally different set of contents and uses of the spaces, and thus, there would be a totally different set of proportions. This may sound pretty theoretical, so let's translate it into

some real world examples.

Close your eyes and picture a two bedroom, one bath house. You are now opening the front door, walking into the house, and moving from space to space. Walk from the entry into the living room, and then into the dining room and kitchen. You have a sense of what you expect to see. The sizes of the rooms, even if you don't know their actual dimensions, are expected. Without a tape measure, the contents of the rooms give you the first impression of their size.

For any overall sized house which is within the realm of those you're familiar with, there is a set of expectations you would have about each of the spaces. If what you see in a real house varies dramatically from this expectation, that space or room will seem out of proportion.

copyright 1994 Michael F. Malinowski

