



Today, staircases are works of art, gracefully proportioned and intricately detailed.



This Louis XIII-style fireplace, carved from antique limestone, establishes an old-world feel for the room. Photo courtesy of Cavendish Grey.

expression through architecture

understanding space planning to create a home that says who you are

by susan fruit draughon, asid

Through the centuries, certain scientific principles and elements of design have evolved through the timeless coexistence of art and the universe. Seafarers were guided by the moon and the stars in their quest to cross the oceans and discover new lands. Explorers on land used the earth's terrain, the forests, plains, rivers and mountains to plot their course and chart new territory. Throughout human history, man's existence has been defined by and dependent upon his ability to conquer and control his physical environment.

When man learned to co-exist in harmony with nature and the environment, towns developed, commerce was created and people survived and prospered. Architecture as an art form emerged as early primitive shelters gave way to dignified, permanent structures blending the best of both art and science. Thus arose distinctive design motifs and

style characteristics that would define major architectural styles and periods and influence all art, architecture and design for more than 2,000 years.

From the early years of our country's founding through its emergence as a world power, the ultimate benchmark by which a person's intellectual acumen, social status and professional success was judged has been by one's choice of personal dwelling and the statement made by its architectural style, the graciousness of its interior proportions and the exquisiteness of its detailing and appointments. This "benchmark of success" is still very much with us today.

In 21st-century design terms, this architectural design statement translates into three categories, or dimensions, of interior space, which interior designers use today to create beautiful living environments. A working knowledge or understanding of these important spatial dimensions enables one to successfully plan and execute

simple design ideas, select paint colors, art work and area rugs, design drapery treatments, custom cabinetry and architectural details and create interesting furniture arrangements and accessory treatments.

The three dimensions of interior space are based on the principles and elements of design that the ancient Greeks discovered more than 2,000 years ago. These principles were used to create their magnificent architectural structures that are universally acknowledged as models of excellence in classic proportion and scale. These rules of correct proportioning and spatial divisions have guided artists, architects and designers through the centuries, and today form the basis for all well planned and well executed room designs. They directly influence all furniture arrangements, drapery treatments, fabric selection, color distribution, accessorizing, plus other design components that professional designers use on a daily basis to create rooms of distinction and beauty.

So, what are these three dimensions of interior space? They are:

- The frame of reference: the architectural envelope.
- Contrived space: the two-thirds/one-third proportional division of space within a room. This is where furniture arrangements are created.
- Integral space: the intimate space within the two-thirds/one-third spatial division. This is where accessory treatments and room details flourish.

ENHANCING THE ARCHITECTURAL ENVELOPE

In this, the first of six articles on professional space planning, we will start with the first category, the frame of reference, and the major elements that it entails.

The frame of reference of interior space refers to the architectural envelope, or the six planes that enclose a room: the four walls, the floor and the ceiling. Each plane, or surface,





Above: Richly detailed crown mouldings give greater presence to the walls of a room. Below: A chandelier hangs from a plaster medallion, creating a dramatic focal point in the room.



contains important visual information that defines the whole. This information can come in the form of a room's major design element, known as a focal point, or in detailed trims and mouldings found throughout the home.

A dining room ceiling, for instance, could become the featured focal point of the room by showcasing a beautifully detailed, classical medallion from which a traditional chandelier could hang. This central plaster medallion thus becomes a *point* of reference, or focal point, within the *frame* of reference of the dining room.

According to professional design standards, each major room should have one main focal point. The larger the room or higher the ceilings, the larger and more dramatic should be the featured focal point, or point of reference. There is a specific mathematical ratio that spatially proportions all architectural elements, interior design compositions and decoration within a room. This spatial ratio is the basis for the models of excellence I mentioned earlier and will be discussed at length when I uncover the second dimension of space.

In a family room, the fireplace is usually designed to be the main focal point. It becomes a force to be reckoned with because its architectural design sets the tone of the room and even determines the style and placement of the furniture,

which usually is arranged around it.

Because it is a major design entity, its design, scale and overall proportion are of the utmost importance, along with its materials selection. A poor choice of fireplace surfacing material can mean disaster for a room. The good news is that fireplace surrounds come in a wide variety of styles and materials and, when chosen wisely, greatly enhance the quality and character of a room. For old-world charm and a sense of history, there are limestone and marble surrounds. Granite, glass, ceramic and porcelain tiles create a contemporary look while aged brick and/or stone are good choices for a country or traditional look.

Walls can be given greater presence with layered, multi-piece crown and base mouldings, detailed cased openings, deeply profiled dado rails and raised block paneling, which is making a strong comeback after years of being banished from the walls. In entrance foyers or living rooms, one might see beautifully carved wood pilasters attached to the walls for added architectural enrichment or as paired columns supporting classical entablatures. Traditional or transitional mouldings and trim details add immensely to the visual enrichment and overall market value of a home.

Staircase design has become a major art form over the last several years. Gone are the days of the visually heavy, dark stained balusters and hand railings. In demand instead are gracefully proportioned, intricately detailed iron railings in faux finishes, or slender, classical, iron balusters with blown glass beading. A staircase is a major focal point no matter where it is located in a house, so careful consideration should be given to its design and materials selection before it is constructed.

Doors play a crucial role in establishing the overall character of a home, on the exterior as well as on the interior. In fact, the front door



is the *main focal point* on a home's façade, so its design, style and finish should be carefully chosen to enhance the architectural style of the house. Homeowners have a large variety of door styles to choose from today. From richly carved, wood panel doors to beautifully detailed, beveled glass designs set into walnut or mahogany frames, front doors and their accompanying sidelights and transoms add a distinctive touch to the architectural envelope.

And what would the envelope be without windows? These important design elements come in an endless variety of sizes, shapes, colors and styles specifically designed to complement and enhance a home's architectural style. Choices range from popular standards such as nine-lite over nine-lite traditional sash types to the narrow, vertical single-pane panels of the Prairie style, to soaring, classical Palladian arches and the newly popular French roundel windows.

Floors are often overlooked and their design potential underestimated as a major player in the architectural envelope. They alone connect and can unify all areas of a house, so it is important that if different flooring materials are used throughout a home that they harmonize well in

tone and in style. Wood is generally the best overall choice as a unifying floor material because it is adaptable to all design styles, from traditional to transitional. Limestone and tumbled marble are wonderful style-setters and add character and warmth to a home, so they should not be overlooked.

These are the major design



Windows and doors are important enhancements to the architectural envelope.

elements that comprise the architectural envelope, the first dimension of space, and if they are chosen wisely and are well coordinated, enrich and enlarge each room of the house.

EMPHASIZING THE FOCAL POINT

When beginning a space plan, first establish the main *focal point* in

each room. Occasionally, one may need to redesign or remodel this *point of reference* to emphasize its importance and to give a room more impact and character. For example, if a family room fireplace has a short, shallow mantel above it, adding a longer, wider mantel with a deeper, overhanging profile and decorative



brackets underneath would provide a more dramatic anchor for artwork and accessories as well as draw more attention to the fireplace, the main focal point. In addition, adding low-voltage recessed lighting in the ceiling above the fireplace would further enhance the focal point by highlighting the mantel's artwork and accessories.

To go one step further, if the fireplace surround has plain, basic ceramic tile, one could replace the tile with a more distinctive material, such as granite, limestone or a combination, to add more interest and personality to the room.

Before one can move on to the second dimension of space, the design elements comprising the architectural envelope must be addressed and designed correctly.

As famed international interior designer Mario Buatta said, "It's important to begin with a well-constructed, beautifully detailed house. You can always add fine furniture to go in it as you go along through life. Doors and windows must be in the right place, and of the right proportion. These, along with correct details such as cornice mouldings and chair rails, are absolutely essential. That's what makes a house feel right."

It is in the diverse architectural styles found across our country that we pay tribute to our history and give impetus to our future. The ancient Greeks gave us the rules of good proportion, scale, balance and focal point. In our cost-cutting, "quick-build" society of today, it is imperative that we not lose sight of these roots and forget what comprises beauty,





photo courtesy of Carrendah Grey

Floors, like this one in an antique terra cotta, offer an opportunity to enhance design.

harmony and gracious living. I consider it the last link remaining connecting us to our unique history and it is the benchmark of a civilized nation. ■

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