

# BUILDING EDGE MAGAZINE

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT!

By James M. Williams

You only get one chance to make a first impression. The same is true in architecture. “Curb appeal” is often lacking and homes either have no personality or are lost in their settings, one looking like the other or worse, looking out of place.

Appeal is defined as being attractive or interesting. Personality is defined as having distinctive individual qualities. So what is it that makes a home or building have personality, be interesting, be distinctive and have individual qualities? It’s a composition of several factors.

Contractors, designers, and even some architects have been guilty of designing or building homes or buildings with total disregard to the site or location on which they are to be built. Careful consideration should be given to the site before starting the design. If a standard plan is to be used, it must be modified and adapted in order to take full advantage of the site.

According to Sympathy with the Environment – site and architecture should be in harmony. Buildings should seem to “grow” from their environment. The colors should also be in sympathy with their surroundings. Building colors should be natural and local materials used to ensure that colors blend.

Buildings should also have a feeling of anchorage or attachment to the ground. There should be a sense of belonging. This can be accomplished with the proper use of patios, porches, decks, stone or masonry at wainscot or lower levels and the use of similar materials in the landscaping as well as the landscaping itself.

Consideration should be given for the topography or slope of the land and the existing vegetation. The slope of the land and existing vegetation will dictate the configuration of the home, whether it is a box, has separate wings or zones, is stepped, or has a walkout basement, etc. It also has an impact on accessibility. The surrounding topography and often times vegetation should be left undisturbed as much as possible in order to maintain a natural effect.

Another important consideration is the view. Natural as well as man-made views should be taken into consideration. Views will help dictate room location as well as orientation. They will also help establish window types and sizes as well as roof eaves and gables. All of these items define the shape of the building.

Natural elements and conditions such as wind direction, solar exposure, shade, rain or

snow runoff, etc., must also be taken into account and addressed.

Since all buildings are seen at night as well as day, lighting can greatly enhance the personality of the building and add interest.

In some instances where some thought is given to the site, none is given to the broader picture, that of the surrounding neighborhood or surrounding setting. Side yards and back yards sometimes have more exposure than a front yard and will require the same level of detail as the front of the building. A commercial building was recently constructed at the corner of one of the busiest intersections in my area. All of the windows and exposure for the building are directed into the shopping plaza, opposite the busy street. The back of the building has no windows and is exposed to thousands of cars a day. Had windows been installed on the street side and the rear of the building given the same detailing as the front, it would have been inviting and business revenue would greatly increase.

There should be a celebration of entry. The entry must be easy to identify, be inviting and provide shelter as well as human scale and interest. The entry includes everything between the point of arrival at the site and the entry way (or the area directly inside of the entry door).

As for the building, all of the exterior elevations or sides should be fully detailed and finished. In old western towns the front of the buildings had decorative facades while the other sides remained almost unfinished. Early American cities were constructed the same way with buildings being sandwiched together. This technique is not acceptable for homes and buildings that are separated and seen from all sides. When only the front elevation of the house is finished and detailed, it has the same effect as putting lipstick on a pig.

The exterior of the building as well as the site and landscaping should be treated as a composition with as much thought and care as a sculptor or artist would render. Interior spaces are the shared responsibility of the architect and interior designer, but the exterior is typically the architects' domain, and thought to be the essence of architecture.