

Crusade against rectangle

(image captions, top right)

Monument to the 3rd International.
Vladimir Tatlin

Like a stone shell
Antonio Gaudi stair detail.

Doing archeological excavations in the internet,
Anneliis Aunapuu found a treasure, which in his
unique way illustrates the unity of the world.

**"It seems that round space suits the human body and soul better,
nearly the same way a drawing expresses an idea more effectively than words."
Matthew Schlieb**

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7 IMPORTANT FACTS

1. There are almost no right angles in the house.
2. The floor plan of all the rooms are round.
3. The vivid color scheme was already explored in previous home.
4. The house has wooden framework, insulated with spray foam and plastered both sides.
5. Instead using green recycled materials, the whole principle of the house is green.
6. The positioning of the house on the site utilizes shadows to help from overheating in the summertime.
7. There is water-based radiant heating in the poured concrete floors of the house.

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While surfing in the internet, I visited a page of a strange unfamiliar insulation material. There I found a link to a house named Villa Vuoto. I got curious – a Finnish architect in America? What is he doing, is he continuing his own style or has he made a compromise with the local demands? The pictures left me in total paralysis, I just had to examine it. The architect Matthew Schlueb was kindly ready to comment on his work.

So – this THING with complex geometry, which recalls a mixture of powerful Russian radicalism of the 1920s and Art Nouveau, or a model of the flying machine by Leonardo da Vinci, is, of course, the home of the architect himself. Matthew Schlueb has designed this alternative building for himself, built it and for two years has been living in it. The house, which has a little less than 250 square meters of space, is located in a quiet suburb of Pennsylvania. On his home page the architect has drawn dynamic power-lines throughout history, to determine his sources of inspiration. Using his family's heritage and interests as an example, he points out cultural connections between the continents, "by the Native Americans migrating from Asia and later Marco Polo traveling from Italy to the orient."

Recently a Home & Garden journal in Pittsburgh gave this house a Superior Interior Award. "It was refreshing to see, that somebody dares to come up with a bold project and execute it in a bold way," the jury commented. Before that the house was awarded by the National One Coat Stucco Association, considering this work as high pilotage in that field. Also the insulation company Icynene praises this work on their homepage. I started to investigate, how this strange object could be erected on a rather conservative architecture landscape.

Where does the name come from?

The name is Italian, since my wife is Italian. The word means void or more loosely, space. So it was selected for multiple references. In designing the house, we began with our minds empty (vuoto), open to any possibility.

“Living in circular spaces, I have found, I am more aware of my sensual perception. I use much less effort to clear my mind of external distractions when thinking and designing.”

Was this your first non-rectangular house?

Yes, it was built as a prototype, to show clients what can be done as an alternative to the traditional box house.

Did you have as much color in your former home?

Yes, our previous home was a rental and we painted the interiors in similar colors, to experiment with which colors work good together and to find out how each color affects you living with it every day.

“I have always been interested in how the surroundings influence your senses. In graduate school, my architectural thesis examined how the shape of a room can make you feel. I used much of what I found in that research in the design of this house.”

Did you use computers in the designing process?

Yes, but not initially. First, I spent several years working over various aspects of the house in my head. Then, I began rough sketches by hand. Later, after we found a piece of property to build on, I began to design floor plans related to the site on the computer. After the floor plans were solidified, I built a scaled stick framed model, to study the construction details. Finally, more detailed construction drawings were created on the computer to obtain a building permit and to build from.

Did the location determine the design or did you have other influences?

The location influenced the design with respect to the surrounding views: affected window placement and the orientation of the exterior decks. The slope of the site also affected the ceiling heights, in order to make the house step up the hillside. Finally, the site influenced the exterior door locations, some of the interior room placements and configuration, in order to develop good Feng Shui.

Do you like Art Nouveau / Jugend or are you more inspired by Frank Gehry's or Peter Cook's crazy forms?

I do like Art Nouveau. As a student, I loved the work of Victor Horta, J.M. Olbrich, Henry van de Velde and Antoni Gaudi. Many of their projects can be seen within my house. However, I used to live in Los Angeles, and have a great admiration for Frank Gehry, so much of his style influenced the design as well. The work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier is also a great influence on me. In addition to architects, much of the house's initial designs are based on the works of several artists as well - Richard Serra, Clyford Still, Franz Kline, Ruth Bernhard.

Did your design in bright colors and non-right-angled walls evoke a lot of discussions from neighbors and colleagues?

Yes, to varying degrees. Most of the neighbors have enjoyed watching the house go up, stopping by periodically to check on the development. Colleagues were more critical, addressing more practical issues of construction and finance. On balance, the comments have been positive and complimentary.

Is ecological thinking popular in America?

Yes, ecological thinking is popular in America and is gaining momentum every year. My house uses a few green materials, however, the larger influence of ecological construction is found in the more abstract ideas of the house. I believe the best strategy for environmental conservatism is by first changing society's views, which will influence what types of houses are built. Rather than trying to use recycled and renewable materials, without addressing the public's demands.

Is the fireplace just for appearance or is it connected to the heating system as well?

The fireplace is a functioning wood burning fireplace and is used to supplement the radiant floor heating in the concrete floors. Forced air conditioning is used to cool the house in the summer months. However, passive solar design also helps to keep the house cool.

Has the construction proved to be stable?

Yes. After two years of living in the house, I have not noticed any cracks.

Functionally, does the planning work as you expected?

Yes, the layout of the space was largely influenced by practical function and has proven to be quite livable and helpful in our daily routines.

(inset caption, bottom right)

INSPIRATION

Looking at the front door of this house, you first remember the Spaniard, Antonio Gaudi. Or do these lines, cutting the round form, recall Vladimir Tatlin of the heroic era of Russia and his Monument to the 3rd International... or a schoolwork from Bauhaus, a composition study?

Matthew Schlueb admits, that he has been influenced by several Art Nouveau architects and also the Fathers of Modernism, whose ideas changed the world of architecture. Schlueb is aware of these influences and seems even proud, that it can be seen in his house.

At the same time he accepts the influence of a "concrete poet", the American Chinese Cheng (about whom we wrote a year ago), who similarly does not care much of the right corner. The idea of using "bare" concrete floors and concrete countertops are his quotes too. As Cheng himself considers concrete countertops and sinks as his trade mark.

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Do you believe in the influence of the environment on human nature? Feng shui?

Yes, I believe the environment and human nature are one. So, the natural environment had many subtle and subconscious influences on the design of the house. Exploring these ideas (such as the tradition of Feng Shui) is very close to my heart, so this house was an opportunity to develop many of those ideas.

Any practical observations?

Living in circular space is vastly different from living in rectilinear space. All of your senses are affected, changing daily life on a fundamental level.

Where will be Villa Vuoto 2?

I haven't received any requests to build this house again, however, I have had several clients ask for various elements in their own homes, in addition to the general style of the house. Although, I have been considering building an entire community of a dozen homes designed in this type of style. It would be interesting to see how perception would change with a group of them side by side as compared to a single house in contrast to a neighborhood of box houses.

(image captions, middle right)

"In the family room, I wanted to create a cozy space where you could curl up with a good book next to a warm fire. So the circular room with inward leaning walls enhances the sense of enclosure and intimacy."

"By contrast, the bedroom was intended to be a place to relax and rejuvenate. So the circular room with outward leaning walls opens the space up, making the sensation of the room's shape almost unperceivable. Enabling your senses and mind to clear, turn off, rest."

"In general, the absence of flat rectilinear walls softens your body's relationship to the room's envelope, with the circular nature focusing one's attention to the center of the space, almost as a meditative effect on your mind and senses."