



(The Pittsburgh, a mail-order house from the Sears Catalog, 1926)

## Affordance for Living

In the early 1900s, the Sears catalog included mail-order houses. The 1912 offering advertised a complete package for \$892, including plans. Of course, labor was needed to assemble, but many handy people would build the house themselves to save money, the original do-it-yourself.

In the 1920s, these kit houses were so popular around here, Sears developed a design called The Pittsburgh. Advertised as "Six Rooms, Bath and Big Porch", "Already Cut and Fitted" for just \$1,789. This home offered "the pleasing exterior lines of a modern bungalow and the interior efficiency of a high grade apartment." It was a modest sized house at 1,200 square feet, a living room, dining room and kitchen on the first floor, three bedrooms and the only bathroom in the house on the second floor. Hence another local tradition, the "Pittsburgh toilet", a second makeshift bathroom in the basement, for cleaning up after a day working in the steel mill.

Last night, I was invited into a Squirrel Hill house built in 1910. Much larger in size than a Sears house, but built with much of the same charm and integrity, from an era when life was filled with hard work and reputation meant everything. Consequently, their house reflected this. Wood moldings and stair railings were of the type builders today consider labor intensive, costly upgrades. Yet, in a time when many people built their own homes, extra work was put in to make all the finishes just right, proper.

When I was leaving their home, I commented on how well the floor plan was designed, how the rooms were arranged thoughtfully and flowed effortlessly from one into another. Quite often I am asked by clients to help give their house a good flow. It is a characteristic not easily described, but is understood and felt immediately when in a house built during the turn of the century. Back then, home designers took great care of such things, making the interior space not only suitable and appropriate, but also meaningful to the way a house is lived in.

Today's suburban homes found in the North Hills are often designed for other reasons, things like resale. Homeowners consider the way a fictitious buyer would live in their house. Decisions about wall placement, floor material, countertop finish are made for this person who may live in their home someday. And in reality, years pass by quickly, people live in their homes longer than planned. All the while making due with a house that doesn't suit them.

This morning I met with a Wexford homeowner, in a home they had built three years ago. There were some additions to be made, that were put off at the time. They wanted an architect to help avoid making mistakes they felt were made the first time through, spatially, proportionally, functionally.

This is not uncommon. Many people know what they like when they see it, rooms they want in their home and how they plan to use them. But, when scouring the internet for a floor plan they would like to build, all they find are plans circulated by production home builders. Plans intended for homebuilders turning out mass quantities of houses, using a one-size-fits-all plan for a whole variety of buyers. It is no surprise these plans are tweaked over the years, by market forces through trial and error.

But a home is not a house designed for the many, it is a place lived in by a particular family. Each with their own personality, interests, ways of doing things. For a house to feel like home, it must respond to these forces, not a market force. Yes, Sears considered the buying market when they designed The Pittsburgh model house. However, it was also designed with another thing in mind, which designers today often overlook - something we in the visual design industry call affordance.

For example, when a tree grows, branches sprout out in all directions. However, there is always a certain arrangement of branches that fork in a particular way, which make the perfect condition for nest building. Year after year, a different bird each Spring will find that same spot, attracted to its inherent qualities to build a nest. The physical design of that tree's branches 'afford' the making of a nest. It is not that the other branches couldn't support a nest, rather these branches naturally work better.

These houses of an era gone do the same thing. A certain configuration of rooms, windows, furnishings, that naturally afford our way of living. Entering the home a hall receives, not to impress your guest, rather to greet them, a place to converse while taking their jacket and hat. The dining room is not solely a repository for a dining set, credenza, and china cabinet. It is a place arranged in such a way it affords dining, laughing, reminiscing with friends. Every detail of the room is considered from this perspective. In the way natural light casting across the floor at sunset enriches the experience or an arched opening frames a view of the living room fireplace.

These things are subtle, not visible to the untrained eye on a set of plans. But, consideration of these things, human size proportioning, sight line vistas, tactile materials and detailing, make a house feel like a home. So, if you are in the market for a new home this Spring, maybe pick up a turn of the century Sears catalog, rather than surf the internet for a house plan.

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