



(Design proposal for the new U.S. Steel headquarters in the Lower Hill District of Pittsburgh, by Forum Studio.)

What is ‘Good’ Architecture?

As an architect, I am tasked to create good architecture in the houses I design. Yet, architecture is not a simple thing. It involves many disciplines - mathematics, physics, history, psychology, economics... not to mention the arts. Needless to say, good architecture depends on many variables.

In regard to the arts, visual arts, this is where most of the debate occurs. Architecture is a visual medium and despite the fact architects spend most of their time on other aspects of building design, the visual nature of a building monopolizes most of the discourse. Pick up a book on the history of architecture and you will find it organized by visual styles.

However, this is as it should be, because the visual is not to be understated. We are visual beings and whether we want to admit it or not, the vast majority of decisions we make are influenced by visual factors. The clothes we wear, the cars we drive, even the food we eat.

We respond to visual form with our eyes, but we respond to physical space with our body. Doors and windows are sized for the height of a human, counters and tables dimensioned for standing and sitting. The layout of rooms account for this as well, such as the ideal travel distance between cooktop, sink and refrigerator in a kitchen.

The perception, proportion and arrangement of form and space are classic aspects that define good architecture, but they are only part of what is at the heart of good architecture. An illustration of this point is the proposed design for the new U.S. Steel headquarters to be built on the former Civic Arena site.

In March, Chairwoman Christine Mondor of the Pittsburgh Planning Commission, charged with guiding and approval of proposed developments, criticized the design of the new headquarters saying, “it looks like it could be anywhere.” Good architecture must fit what is built to its surrounding context. And in this case, the context is the Lower Hill District, an area emotionally charged from a history of community upheaval by big development for over a half century.

She continued, “As a city, we need to ask of our legacy projects design excellence. We only got to build the U.S. Steel Tower once, and we did it well.” 'Design excellence' or 'good architecture' is at the center of the discussion. The project architect responded, “I do think that the building has a very strong presence and it does reinforce the U.S. Steel brand and I think it has a timeless quality to it.”

But, in this case, for a corporation with a long Pittsburgh history and a community with equally long roots, presence, branding, timelessness doesn't seem to be enough for 'good architecture'. In Mondor's eyes, something else was missing, “I'm not asking for a huge swooping gesture or anything like that, just a little bit more thoughtful consideration.”

This gets to the source of good architecture - thoughtful consideration. As architects, we must give as much thought to as many layers of the design as possible, because buildings have so much emotional and psychological impact on the individuals and community they serve. For an architect not to is negligence.

Yet, far too often time and budget limit how much thoughtful consideration happens. Although increasingly, architects themselves are to blame. The profession is in a transition, from one of thinkers thoughtfully shaping the environment in which we live to one of project managers overseeing the construction of built structures.

This shift from 'thoughtful consideration' to 'project management' leaves 'good architecture' without an advocate. Consequently, we are creating a society living in buildings answering to our desires of the moment, rather than an introspection of who we are, what we have become, where we want to be.

These are not just questions for the redevelopment of a politically charged site in an urban community, they warrant consideration within our homes as well. When the design of a house is limited to the latest trend in material finishes and smart appliances something else is missing - the elements that account for more meaningful space, good architecture.

Matthew Schlueb is a registered architect and owner of SCHLUEBarchitecture. For questions or comments, contact Matthew at nhm@finalmove.com. This article is part of an ongoing series addressing architectural issues for homeowners.

April 30, 2015 02:46PM, Published by North Hills Monthly Magazine, Categories: [Home+Garden](#)
<http://www.northhillsmoonthly.com/2015/04/30/70076/what-is-good-architecture>