Sense of Place

What is Sense of Place?

Sense of place in architecture is about context as well as the identity or unique characteristics of a building or space. A sense of place can be derived from incorporating vernacular design elements, local materials and craftsmanship and connecting to the natural and cultural resources of a community. Sense of place describes the characteristics that make a place special or unique and are related to the sense of authentic human attachment and belonging. It is a social phenomenon that exists independently of any one individual’s perceptions or experiences, yet is dependent on human engagement. The experience maybe be derived from the natural environment, but is more often made up of a mix of natural or cultural features in landscapes, and includes the people who occupy the place. Creating a sense of place involves understanding how people develop place attachment and feel part of their physical and social environment. This attachment is often based on a community’s cultural response to the environment’s features, the role that a place plays in satisfying human needs, historical meanings and symbolism embedded in the location, and the possibilities for individuals and groups to identify with the space. This latter phenomenon is sometimes called place identity. In green homes, homeowners should strive to design a home that will achieve a sense of place. Whatever the individual aesthetic, the home should be unique and become part of a process that is meaningful to the homeowner and to the home’s visitors.

How to Create Sense of Place

The use of scale, materials and vernacular design elements contribute to creating a sense of place. Genius loci, the recognition and expression of the spirit of a place, can help guide the development of a unique and memorable place. The US EPA also offers a guide to help developers think about how to create spaces that encourage a sense of place.

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2 Jellicoe, Geoffrey and Susan. The Landscape of Man. Thames & Hudson, 1987
One can help implement a sense of place through landscaping. Landscaping design can promote psychological health by maximizing meaning, increasing sensory pleasure and reducing environmental stress. Specific design guidelines and standards can help the homeowner develop a sense of place for the exterior and interior of the home by explaining importance of proportions, scale, shapes, materials, colors and vegetation.

Besides the landscaping, a new green home should have building characteristics that help it fit in with the identity and character of the neighborhood and community. Design and material choices and sequence entry, porches, garage and parking locations all impact the overall character of the home and help to create a sense of place for the home and the neighborhood. New urbanist community design is one approach to creating a sense of place that is intended to balance needs for individual privacy, community, and green design.  

For the interior of the home, consider including elements such as local materials, operable windows or sliding glass panel doors to combine natural lighting and natural ventilation, and cultivating a connection between the interior and exterior. Demographic and other information about prospective occupants can help the designer create spaces that support the inhabitants’ activities (see Flexible Spaces Strategy). Occupants who can realize their objectives through their environment often develop an identity associated with the space in a transactional relationship that reaffirms who they are. Flexibility allows for changes in occupants’ personality and development, as well as physical needs, to be supported by the space.

Example

Living Inside the Great Outdoors – Princeton, NJ

This is a house of modern design that incorporates the slope of the treed property as well as sunlight and natural and man-made materials to blur the line between indoors and out. The architect for this home used components of wood, glass, stone, steel, sunlight, and views of the trees to create a home within a garden, not a home with a garden, as the owners requested. Along with the architect and homeowner, the landscape designer integrated stone retaining walls

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and planters with stepping-stones and paving around the front of the house. Dry-laid native stone on the exterior and interior walls unites the house and counterbalances the delicate glass. Nature surrounds the home with illuminated xeriscape in the front, forest and stream behind.  

http://www.designnewjersey.com/features/index.cfm?id=53

EcoVillage, Ithaca, NY

EcoVillage in Ithaca, NY is an intentional community developed as a sustainable suburban village of three cohousing neighborhoods.

http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/

Benefits

Designing a green home with a sense of place has many psychological and health benefits. It can maximize meaning and memory of place, increase sensory pleasure by heightening the five human senses, and reduce environmental stress. Other benefits of designing with sense of place in mind include preserving natural and cultural resources, connecting to the community, celebrating culture and spirit, and promoting health and well-being. Research suggests that having a positive sense of place about home environments motivates inhabitants toward territoriality and protection of that place.  

Costs

Each homeowner has his or her opinion of what creates a sense of place. The costs associated with creating a sense of place and incorporating regional and vernacular materials into a project varies widely according to the project’s context, scope and goals.

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Resources

Design New Jersey
www.designnewjersey.com

New Urban Network
http://newurbannetwork.com/article/good-developments-come-small-packages-14506

http://www.epa.gov/care/library/community_culture.pdf

What Makes a Community Livable? Livability 101
American Institute of Architects

Whole Building Design Guide – Psychosocial Value of Space
http://www.wbdg.org/resources/psychspace_value.php?r=promote_health