

Maine Home

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+ DESIGN



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AIA DESIGN THEORY

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Maine

IN *MH+D*'S CONTINUING COLLABORATION
WITH AIA MAINE, WE PRESENT TO YOU A DESIGN
CONCEPT FROM AN ARCHITECT'S POINT OF VIEW.

PATRICK COSTIN

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPORTION IN DESIGN



Proportion as a guiding principle in the design of buildings has been written about for centuries.” says principal Patrick Costin of Canal 5 Studio.

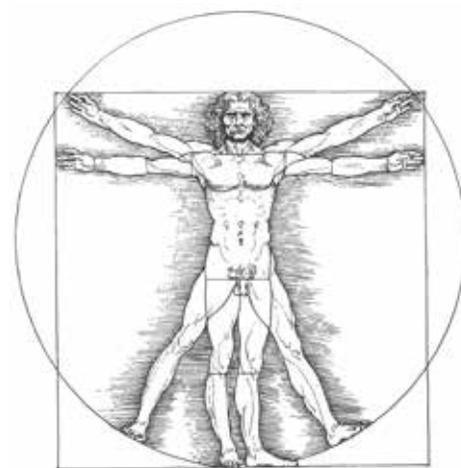
MH+D ASKS COSTIN TO TELL US MORE.

Q. Have you recently seen any designs that reveal a well-proportioned form?

A. There are moments when a building or place evokes powerful emotions that can linger for a lifetime, when experience imprints meaning in us. I recently visited the River Building at Grace Farms in New Canaan, Connecticut. It was designed by SANAA, a Tokyo-based architecture firm that won the Pritzker [Architecture Prize] in 2010. I spent two hours wandering through the structure. It was extraordinary. It was beautiful, I believe, because the design balanced context and materials in perfect proportion to one another.

Q. Can you tell us a little about the power of proportion in design?

A. Good proportions can make even humble structures beautiful. It is unfortunate that many people believe only special buildings, like museums and concert halls, warrant the effort to make them beautiful. Many believe you must spend a lot of money to get a beautiful building. Good proportions cost nothing except that you care enough to expect them. Our automobile-centric lifestyle has stripped our culture of appreciation for human scale, which is what buildings are based on. We have become accustomed to buildings as signboards for messaging in a landscape designed for cars and scaled for high-speed viewing. In recent years I have been using a proportion commonly referred to as the Golden Section as a tool to analyze the relationship among elements during design.



Q. What is the Golden Section?

A. It is a mathematical ratio of parts to a whole. Some contend that human proportions contain Golden Section ratios, so buildings that incorporate them “look right,” largely because humans see themselves in the building. I have found it helpful in integrating proportional relationships throughout a design.

Q. Can you give us an example of how proportions are applied in architecture?

A. Another technique is basing proportion on a commonly repeated building element such as a door. Frank Lloyd Wright used doors to establish a horizontal datum of trim throughout his buildings. All openings in interior and exterior walls were proportioned in accordance with this system of scale. Wright likened it to the way everything in nature is interconnected and labeled it “organic” architecture. We have used a similar technique by specifying eight-foot-high doors and aligning window heads with door openings. It makes eight-foot-high ceilings feel taller and allows space to flow from room to room when the doors are open.

Q. How has this translated in your recent projects?

A. We recently designed a small house in North Yarmouth in a subdivision that prescribed a traditional exterior appearance. One challenge with achieving good proportion in residential architecture is that parking garages are scaled to cars, and homes are scaled to people. Combining both functions into one form makes the volume of the house inflate, often creating awkward proportions that defy elegant resolution. This leads to a proliferation of gables, dormers, trim, and materials to mask the ungainly volume of the building. We address this issue in North Yarmouth by creating two volumes, one for the garage and the other for the house. The two volumes are linked by a mudroom entry with a flat roof. The garage is pushed back from the house, so it is less important visually. The scale and proportion make human space predominant while unifying the composition.



Q. Finally, what makes a “beautiful” building?

A. Good proportion is the foundation for beauty in buildings. It is easier to use expensive finishes, texture, color, and other surface treatments to create visual interest, but they won't make a building beautiful. Designing buildings that rely on good proportion for the strength of their character is hard. It requires rigor to make simplicity compelling. I see old buildings that have not been maintained or have been remodeled in unfortunate ways, but their beauty shines through. Their proportion makes their character endure despite their condition. For this reason, I try to design beauty into the bones of buildings through good proportion. **MH+D**

(Previous page) Leonardo da Vinci's pen and ink drawing, *Vitruvian Man*, believed to illustrate the Golden Section ratios.

(This page) The two-volume design and door alignment of a Yarmouth project.



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