



A Study in Contrasts

The Good House by Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein and Barbara Winslow (Taunton Press, 63 S. Main St., Newtown, CT 06470: 1990). 147 pages. Hardcover. \$21.95.

What, ask architects Max Jacobson, Murray Silverstein, and Barbara Winslow, makes a good house — one that is “supportive, vibrant, and appealing to both the intellect and the senses”? The answer, they say, can be found in what they call the theory of contrast. *The Good House* is the authors’ attempt to set forth their ideas on contrast as a contribution to design theory, and to illustrate its application by practical examples drawn from their own work and that of other architects.

In general the authors believe that good houses are satisfying because they contain contrasts at all levels of scale, linked together by transitional elements. A horizontal lintel supported by a round column and linked by an ornate capital serves as a simple illustration of this basic idea.

The “dimensions” of contrast are many, ranging from the obvious opposite pairs such as inside/outside and up/down to the more esoteric order/mystery. A chapter is devoted to each of six such mutually defining complements. Through vignettes in the text and related drawings and photos, the authors show how each dimension can be articulated and elaborated in actual practice.

Inside/outside contrasts can be expressed through use of convex/concave building shapes, opaque or transparent surfaces, transitional barriers, and so forth. Covered porches, outdoor fireplaces, sleeping porches, window seats, and similar devices help define the exposed/tempered dichotomy. Stairs, landings, and changes in ceiling and floor heights help differentiate up/down contrasts. Mass and solidity contrast with openness and airiness — whether in the form of thick adobe walls or illusions created by walk-throughs or projecting bays. Filtered light and colors help define light vs. dark in buildings. Order is made apparent through

many structural, functional, and formal devices such as symmetry, axes, and repetition, while pleasures can also be introduced through the use of unexpected or arhythmic elements.

And, of course, the above contrasts must be integrated into a unified work, wherein they “reinforce” each other to produce a “poetic, resonating whole with many overtones of harmony.” How this may be accomplished is illustrated by four houses selected by the authors to represent varying degrees of complexity, from a “spare, elegant” modernist house (a.k.a. a white box) in the Connecticut woods to a semitransitional house in Cairo, Egypt, to one of Bernard Maybeck’s Bay Area masterpieces, which is nothing if not poetic. In presenting their own work the authors show clearly how the design of a house proceeds, which will be instructive to those unfamiliar with the process by which architects produce those “pretty pictures.”

All in all I found *The Good House* to be a fine introduction to both the many elements that contribute to good design, and to the methodology used by designers to get from the knowns of the client’s original program to the unknown of the final product. The illustrations are generally attractive and stimulating, and serve well to illustrate the main points of the text (one picture being worth the proverbial thousand words).

Having said that, I must also note a couple of shortcomings. First, because of its brevity, *The Good House* is really a primer on its subject. A bibliography would have been desirable for those who wish to explore further. More importantly, I take issue with the authors’ focus on contrast as the driving force of good design. Houses that delight us surely must have contrast, or variety, in their elements, if for no other reason than

to avoid becoming boring. However, a unifying or harmonizing factor is equally important, as houses can suffer just as much from too much contrast as from its lack. To be sure, the authors point out the need for “transitional” elements and the importance of bringing the design into a unified whole, but they don’t educate the reader on how to bring the contrasting elements together. Perhaps the authors will provide us with a companion volume on “harmony” in the future. If not, *The Good House* remains valuable by itself.

Building Systems Save Time, Increase Profits

Using Building Systems: Modular, Panelized, Log, Dome by James Carper with the Building Systems Council of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB, 15th & M Sts. NW, Washington, DC 20005; 800/223-2665: 1990). 118 pages. Paperback. \$22.

In recent years building systems using various forms and amounts of factory-produced components have captured an increasing amount of attention. If you’re considering entry into this field, the NAHB has produced a slim volume that will introduce you to the basic elements of modular, panelized, log, and dome buildings.

Why use building systems? Well, as the authors say, you can probably “build more houses in shorter time with fewer problems and more profit” than the conventional stick builder, to say nothing of all the minor advantages the authors list.

Thereafter follows a chapter on each of the four main systems, describing the characteristic features and advantages of each, factors to consider in choosing a manufacturer, whether to become a “builder” or a “dealer,” assembly procedures, energy factors, and

other general information. Chapters on financing, codes, and warranties as well as public relations and marketing (much of it relevant to any builder) close the book. A glossary and directory of manufacturers complete the picture.

This book definitely won’t make you an expert on building systems, but it will serve to guide your thinking as you consider the options.

— Paul Hanke

Free & Cheap

Hardboard Siding: Recommended Basic Application Instructions for Hardboard Siding is a free four-page brochure full of guidelines and drawings, published by The American Hardboard Association. Its general information section includes storage, moisture control, cutting, nailing, caulking, and sheathing. The brochure also discusses conventional-style lap siding, specialty siding, square edge panel siding, and shiplap panel siding. Contact The American Hardboard Association, 520 North Hicks Rd., Palatine, IL 60067; 708/934-8800.

Stucco Repair: The Preservation and Repair of Historic Stucco provides detailed background information about the components of traditional stucco and guidance on proper maintenance and repair. It also contains sections on repairing deteriorated stucco, identifying stucco types and textures, repair planning and mixes, and colors and tints. The publication is published by the U.S. National Park Service’s Preservation Assistance Division. Send \$1 to Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402-9325. Order Preservation Brief 22; GPO stock number 024-005-01066-1.

Vinyl Siding: The Vinyl Siding Institute has published a free 32-page manual providing the basic guidelines for installing vinyl siding. *Rigid Vinyl Siding Application Instructions* includes sections on material selection, and tool and equipment requirements. Also discussed are application procedures for soffit and fascia systems. Write to Vinyl Siding Institute, 355 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

— Susan Saunders