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ARCHITECTURE BY

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LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

# THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 14

## Chapter 14: What Makes a Home Beautiful

I am my own worst critic.

When I stand in front of a finished house, one that has taken months of design work, years in some cases from first conversation to final walkthrough, I see it with a particular kind of double vision. I see what it is, and I see what it might have been. The missed opportunity in a roofline. The detail that could have been resolved with more elegance. The proportion that is good but not quite inevitable. These observations are not self-pity. They are the engine of improvement, the thing that has kept me reaching back through years of practice rather than settling into what I already know how to do.

But underneath that critical eye, something else is present. Pride. Satisfaction. The quiet happiness of a client who is genuinely delighted. And occasionally, not always, but often enough to sustain a career, something closer to awe at what the art of building can produce. That is what this chapter is about. Not the mechanics of beauty, though those matter and I will return to them. But the meaning of it, why it matters, what it costs to pursue, and what it gives back to the world when it is achieved.

### What I See

When a house feels truly beautiful to me, I am not responding to any single element. Beauty in architecture is not a feature you can point to on a plan or circle in a catalog. It is the result of a handful of ordinary things done well together: proportions that are right with the eye, materials chosen for the place they are going, details executed by people who cared about the work, and a building that belongs to its setting rather than imposing on it. When those four are in agreement, a house looks settled, as though it could not have been built any other way.

The bracket that holds a roof overhang at a garage, a heavy timber element, scaled precisely to the mass it appears to carry, is a small thing. When it is right, you do not notice it. You simply feel that the house is composed and resolved, that every part of it has been considered, that someone was paying attention all the way to the edge. When it is wrong, too slight for the overhang it supports, too heavy for the scale of the facade, it announces itself as a mistake in a way that undermines the whole composition.

That sensitivity to scale and proportion is not decorative instinct. It is a discipline rooted in the same principles I described in the chapter on Vitruvius and Palladio, proportional systems developed across centuries of careful observation, encoded in the great buildings of Europe and carried forward into the residential tradition I practice. When a window is sized correctly relative to the wall that holds it, the wall feels right. When a room is proportioned with attention to the relationship between its width, length, and ceiling height, the room feels right. These are not subjective impressions. They are the predictable responses of human perception to relationships that have been understood and documented since antiquity.

I also look at how the house sits on its land. A house that belongs to its site, that reads as if it grew from the ground rather than was placed on it, has a quality of rootedness that no amount of architectural elaboration can substitute for. The locally sourced stone at the base. The roofline that responds to the topography rather than ignoring it. The eaves that reach out generously to shade the walls from the southern sun, saving energy and giving the house its characteristic shadow line. These are decisions made early in the design, often invisible in the finished

product, that determine whether a house feels like it deserves to be there or like it arrived recently from somewhere else.

### The Responsibility of Building

Robert Venturi, one of the most provocative architectural thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote compellingly about the built environment we too often accept without question, the strip shopping centers, the gas stations, the buildings assembled from cost and convenience rather than from any consideration of what they add to the world around them. His observation was not merely aesthetic. It was moral. We build things that last. What we build becomes the context that everyone who comes after us must inhabit. That is not a neutral act.

I think about this often, and I think about it particularly in the Southern Appalachian Mountains where most of my work is created. This landscape has a character, a particular relationship between stone and wood and weather and topography, that has shaped the building traditions of the region for generations. The materials that were historically used here were used here because they came from here: the stone pulled from local quarries, the timber harvested from local forests, the details evolved from the particular conditions of the climate and the site. Houses built from local materials by local craftsmen belong to their place in a way that imported materials, however beautiful in another context, rarely achieve.

I specify locally sourced stone and wood whenever the project allows it. Not as a gesture toward sustainability, though that matters too, but because these materials carry the context of their origin into the houses I design. A house built of stone quarried from the mountains it sits in is in harmony with its landscape in a way that connects it to something larger than any individual project.

The energy discussion matters as well. Generously designed eaves and overhangs are not decorative gestures in the South. They are functional responses to a climate that delivers significant solar heat gain for much of the year. A roof that extends far enough over the walls to shade them during the steep summer sun angle, while allowing the lower winter sun to reach the glass and contribute warmth, is a house that works with its climate rather than against it. Quality glazing that reduces glare and heat gain without sacrificing light or view is an investment in the daily comfort of the people inside and in the reduced energy demand of the building over its lifetime.

These are not separate concerns from beauty. They are expressions of it. A house that responds intelligently to its climate, its materials, and its site is a house that belongs where it is. That belonging is one of the deepest qualities of architectural beauty, and it cannot be applied from the outside. It must be designed in from the beginning.

### What Outlasts Us

I carry with me, on every project, the awareness that most of what I design will outlast me. This is not a morbid observation. It is a clarifying one. A house built well, of quality materials, with honest craft and genuine design intelligence, will stand for a hundred years or more. The family that builds it will age and pass it on. Their children will inherit it. Strangers will eventually live in it. All of them will be shaped, in small ways and large, by the spaces they inhabit, by the quality of the light, the generosity of the rooms, the relationship between interior

and exterior that either draws people outward toward the landscape or turns them inward away from it.

That is the legacy of a well-designed house. It is not a monument to its architect. It is a quiet, daily, ongoing gift to the people who live in it, some of whom will never know the name of the person who designed it, and do not need to.

This is why I believe in timeless design over fashionable design. Trends are temporary by definition. A house designed to express the aesthetic preoccupations of a particular moment will look dated within a decade and antiquated within two. A house designed from enduring principles, proportion, material, craft, context, will age with the same grace as the natural materials it is built from. It will look not like something built in a specific year but like something that has always belonged to its place.

I want the houses I design to say something about the care with which they were made. About the dignity of the labor that shaped them, the stone masons and timber framers and finish carpenters who brought them into being with their hands. About the families who trusted me with one of the most intimate and significant undertakings of their lives. About the place where they stand, and the materials of that place, and the traditions of building that have accumulated in that landscape over generations.

I hope, when someone encounters one of my houses decades from now, that they feel something. Not necessarily the name of the person who designed it. Not the particular moment in which it was built. But something more essential, the sense that this house was made with love and intelligence and genuine respect for the people who would live in it and the world that would hold it.

#### What Architecture Can Be

I have been to Europe a few times and I always come back changed. Not by the fashionable architecture, but by the ancient. By the buildings that have stood for centuries and still stop you in your tracks. By Palladio's villas in the Veneto, where proportion and light and the relationship between building and landscape achieve something so precisely right that it feels less like design and more like discovery, as though the building had always existed and he simply found it. By the Pantheon in Rome, that impossible dome, that perfect relationship between the pattern of the marble in the floor and the circle of the oculus through which the stream of sunlight enters, that building that has been standing for nearly two thousand years and still produces awe from the people who experience it.

What those buildings teach me is not what to design. They teach me what architecture can aspire to. They remind me that a building, at its best, is not merely a shelter or a service or an expression of its owner's status. It is an artistic act, a creative intelligence applied to the physical world in service of human life, capable at its heights of uplifting the spirit and touching something in the people who encounter it that they cannot quite name.

I do not build Pantheons. I build homes for families in the South. The scale is different. The program is different. The resources are different. But the aspiration is the same.

Every house I design is my attempt to add something beautiful and enduring to the world. Something that honors the materials it is made from and the hands that made it. Something that serves the family inside it not just today but across the full arc of their lives. Something that belongs to its place and its time without being imprisoned by either. Something that, when the light falls across it at the right angle on a winter afternoon, makes someone stop and feel, if only for a moment, that the world is better for having this particular house in it.

That is what makes a home beautiful. That is why, after all the years I've practiced, I still cannot imagine doing anything else.