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DEFINING CONTEXTUAL MODERNISM

“Buildings should be good neighbors.”

Paul Thiry





Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Building, located several blocks from the Racine home site

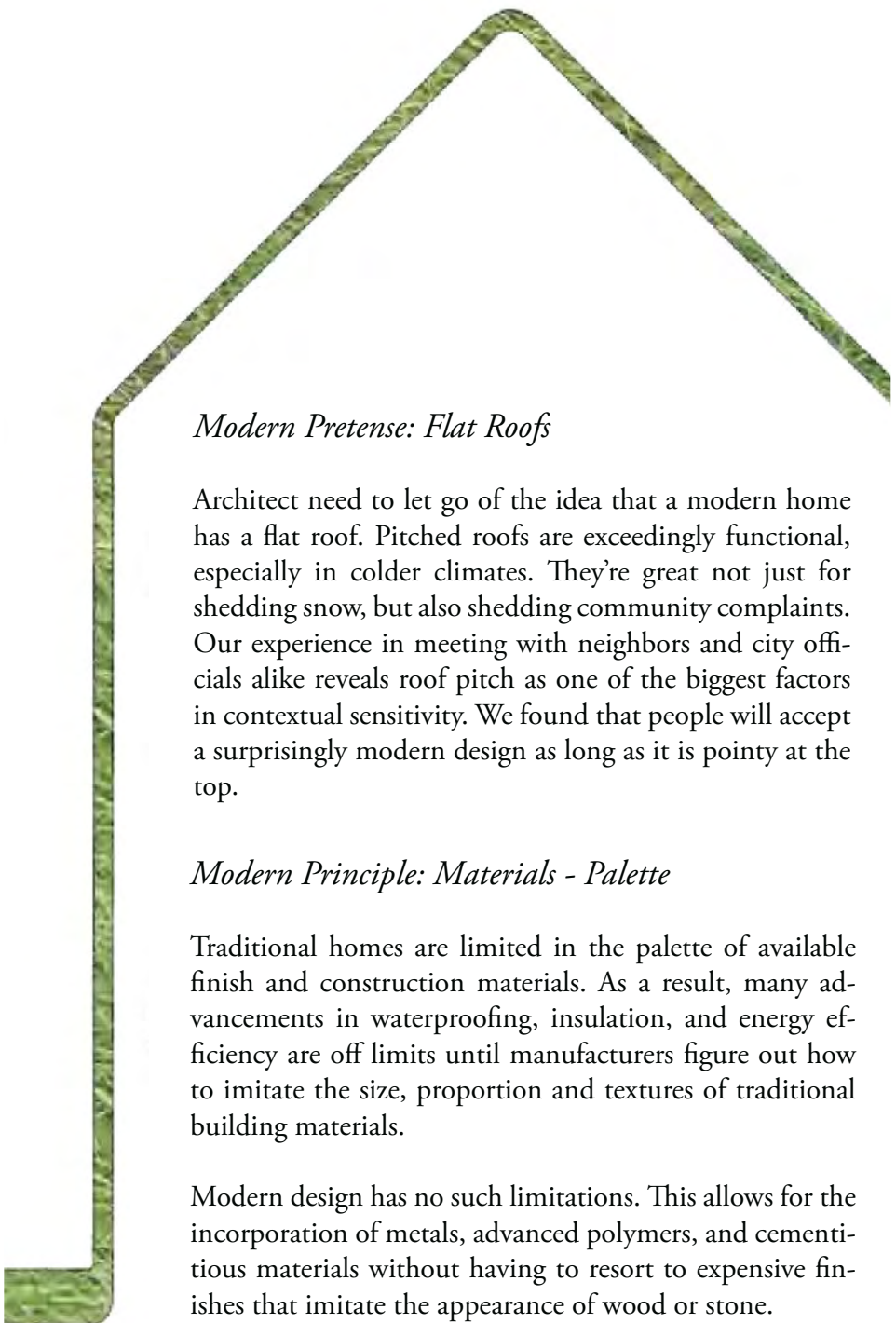


Erik Hancock, MArch '08

Is there such a thing as “Contextual Modernism”? Proponents and detractors alike would argue that such a term is at best misleading. For those who reject its basic tenets, modernism implies a fundamental disregard for context. In fairness, the original idea of an “International Style” requires a certain lack of site-specificity in order to be universally applicable. Apologists claim that modernism is simply the logical elevation of function and structural clarity and not necessarily a visual style. In this line of reasoning, modern buildings are no more or less contextual than buildings in any other style- it depends on the skill and intention of the designer. Still others hold to the principle of *zeitgeist*, a belief that design should always be of its time, expressing the style of the present moment. In other words, an architect should never take into account pre-existing conditions and only respond to the current trends. In practice, however, we know that reality lies somewhere between these extremes.

We know there are certainly many modern buildings that stand violently opposed to their context; pure, minimalist boxes of glass and steel can be difficult to reconcile with blocks of nineteenth-century brick buildings. Nonetheless, there are also exemplary buildings that retain their modern identity while carefully integrating themselves into the surrounding fabric. Issues of integration become magnified when one considers the residential sector, where architects infrequently tread. The majority of homes (exceeding 75% according to the AIA [footnote]) are designed with little or no input from architects. Developers tend to drive design; profit and reproducible formulas are their most important criteria. As a result, the residential market remains stylistically conservative, favoring designs that offend the least number of potential buyers and, of equal or greater importance, their neighbors.

As designers this leaves us with a significant challenge; create a home that is neither a historical pastiche nor an insensitive thorn. We must identify some basic rules for playing nicely with Colonial, Victorian and Bungalow style homes without abandoning our modern principles. Bear in mind that almost no one (except architects) will be sold on modernism in his neighborhood for the sake of progress. Instead, architects should advocate for modern design based on the very real benefits it provides. This also means mercilessly examining modern design and separating that which is functionally progressive from that which is merely visual pretense. With that in mind, what follows is a list of modern principles, pretenses, and contextual rules. This list is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to serve as a good starting point for contextually modern designs that offer tangible improvements over traditionally styled houses.



Modern Pretense: Flat Roofs

Architect need to let go of the idea that a modern home has a flat roof. Pitched roofs are exceedingly functional, especially in colder climates. They're great not just for shedding snow, but also shedding community complaints. Our experience in meeting with neighbors and city officials alike reveals roof pitch as one of the biggest factors in contextual sensitivity. We found that people will accept a surprisingly modern design as long as it is pointy at the top.

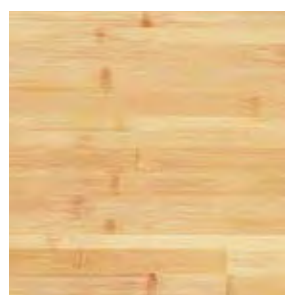
Modern Principle: Materials - Palette

Traditional homes are limited in the palette of available finish and construction materials. As a result, many advancements in waterproofing, insulation, and energy efficiency are off limits until manufacturers figure out how to imitate the size, proportion and textures of traditional building materials.

Modern design has no such limitations. This allows for the incorporation of metals, advanced polymers, and cementitious materials without having to resort to expensive finishes that imitate the appearance of wood or stone.

Contextual Rule: Old and New

Temper the expression of modern detailing and finishes with the visual evidence of existing context. In short, if you are going to use a panelized rainscreen cladding, balance it with some use of clapboard siding. The visual variety of the design will benefit and non-architects will be more likely to accept the end result.





Contextual Rule: Proportioning

Identify the predominant proportioning of surrounding buildings. If the homes in the area display a tripartite base-middle-top scheme, a designer would do well to adhere to a similar rule. There is great flexibility within this rule as long as some nod to the basic elevation of other homes is made.

Modern Principle: Layout - Served vs. Service

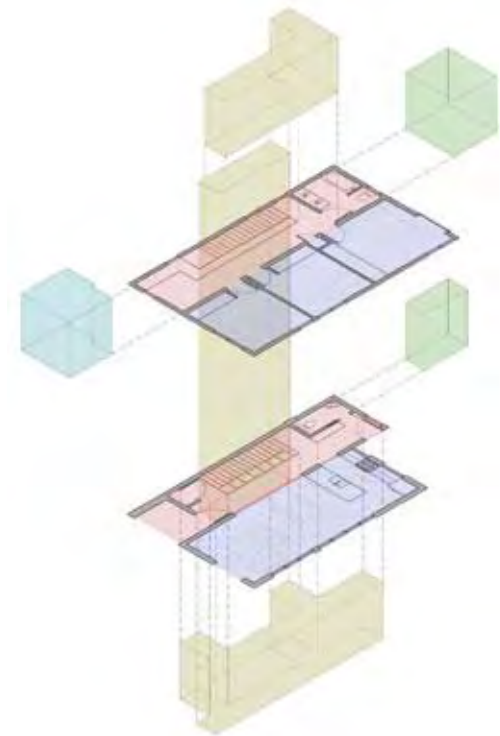
The number of service functions of even the simplest contemporary home is staggering. The size and complexity of bathrooms and laundry facilities, heating and cooling, electrical, plumbing, cable, and telephone services continues to increase. As a result, the modern principle of separating service areas from living areas is useful, especially when dealing with limited space.

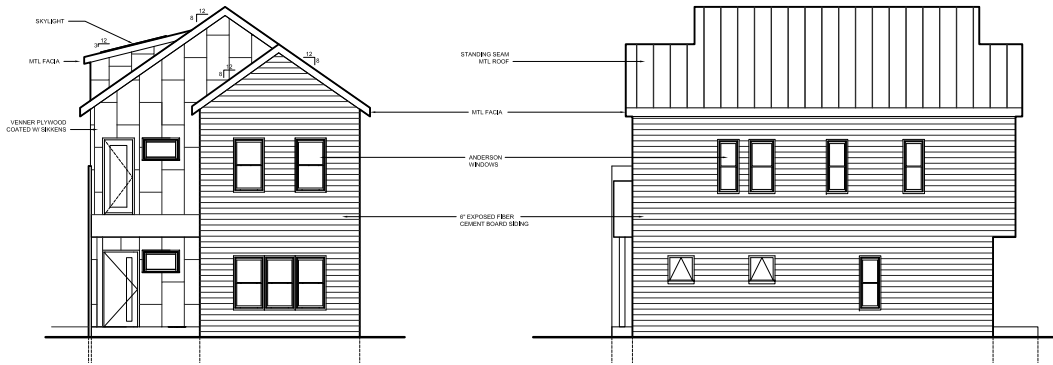
“Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context - a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan.”

Eero Saarinen

Contextual Rule: Reinterpretation

Find ways of taking traditional elements and reinterpreting them in a modern vein. This does not mean resorting to post-modern parody. It means accepting the necessity of certain conventions of traditional home design and creatively transforming them. For example, an attic vent is not only a functional element but it also visually breaks up the large triangular area of the gable end. This functional element can potentially become a modern detail integrated with a panel cladding while providing a visual link to surrounding homes by its size and positioning.





Modern Principle: Materials - Panelized Cladding

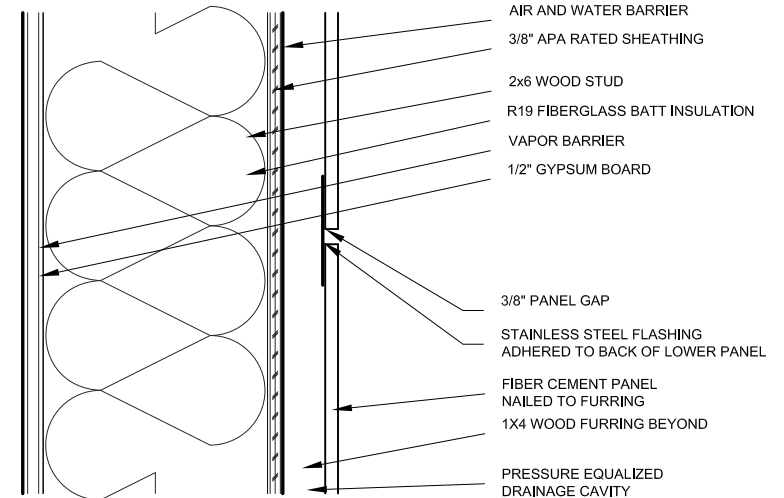
Modern materials are available in larger dimensions, covering more area than traditional clapboard siding. This reduces the number of fasteners required, increases the speed of construction, and minimizes the number of joints for moisture repellency.

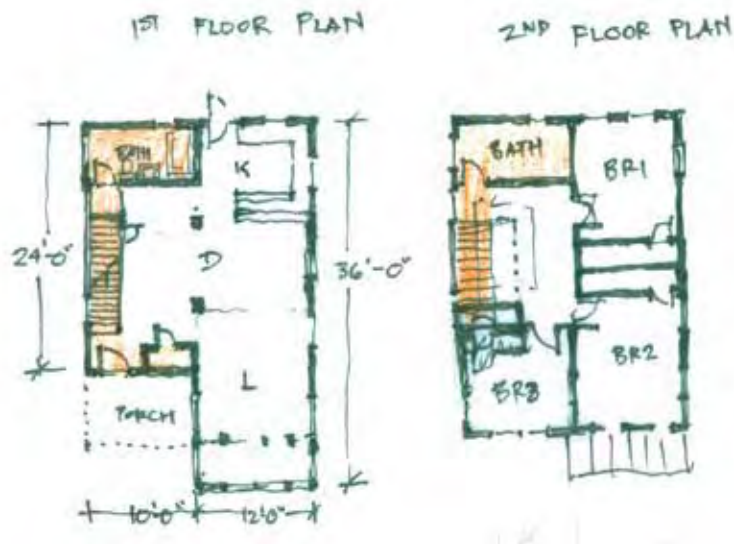
Modern Pretense: Horizontal Glass

As heartbreaking as this may be to many modernists, a ribbon window is no more functional or rational than a vertical one, especially in an urban neighborhood where expansive views of the horizon are nonexistent. Vertically oriented windows work just as well as horizontal ones and they look like windows in the rest of the neighborhood.

Contextual Rule: Heights and Pitches

Study the rooflines and building heights of everything in the surrounding area. If you can be sensitive to these two elements, neighbors will be receptive to many other consciously modern design elements.





Modern Principle: Layout - Open Plan

By adopting an open plan layout, designers recognize the realities of our modern lives. The traditional living rooms, dining rooms, and dens of previous eras are largely irrelevant forms. On a day-to-day basis, there is very little formal separation between the acts of food preparation, consumption, entertainment, and relaxation. These activities tend to flow together and as such a contemporary open plan arrangement is the most suitable option. It offers the flexibility to change patterns of use for reasons of family size, cultural or personal preference.

Modern Principle: Detailing - Simple and Clean

Intricate and extensive trim details incur additional costs. Traditional colonial style homes, however, tend to look unfinished or cheap when such details are omitted. A home in the modern style, by contrast, is meant to be simply detailed. When treated as an aesthetic rather than a purely cost saving measure, the appearance of a home does not suffer.

Modern Principle: Structural Expression

By celebrating the nature of construction methods, we can avoid costly finishing details that are necessary to hide those methods and take advantage of their unique characteristics. In the case of modular construction, this might mean expressing the seams between modules, eliminating the need to delay cladding the exterior until the house is completely assembled.

