

The Necessity for Courtyards

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Courtyards are often part of a building program cut from the plans or are, in some cases, filled in later in the scramble for covered floor area. This is unfortunate because these kinds of decisions are made without an appreciation for the necessity for courtyards.

I asked an architect friend why courtyards are meaningful. She began with the typical reasons; courtyards bring natural light into the interior of a building, create private outdoor rooms and provide the opportunity to see sunlight again - to not feel lost within a dark interior. She said something else that was very interesting -- about courtyards connecting to the sky. It is one of the few architectural devices that permits a vertical connection to the infinite expanse of the heavens. Regardless of spiritual persuasion there is something in all people that craves that connection. There are other good reasons for courtyards. Since the enclosing surfaces are in close proximity the sense of the slow passage of time can be felt with the movement of shadows (shadows are cast not only by the sun but by the moon as well). The idea of letting the weather back into the center of a building where it can be observed without threatening the well-being of the building occupants is a special kind of conceit. All of these aspects of courtyards combine to create a sense of intimacy that atriums, patios, porches and yards (though these have their place as well) cannot provide.

To properly plan a courtyard requires careful consideration of the placement of the space within the building that is being designed. The best possible scenario is if the courtyard, by virtue of a terrace, can also open out on one side to a view - the vista becomes the fourth wall. Even if a view is not possible the character of a courtyard must be formed with an understanding of what makes a good space.

A good courtyard is predictable in shape and can be seen in its entirety from any position within it. The space should be continuously surrounded by an enclosure that is about the same height as its width. If the courtyard is much broader than the height of the surrounding structure then the sense of intimate enclosure is lost. Large versions of this, such as the Place des Vosges in Paris, can be spectacular but they are not courtyards. If the walls surrounding a courtyard are much higher than the width then there is the sense of being in a well. Courtyards benefit from enclosure by porches, colonnades or loggias - these give relief to what can become claustrophobic space. It is good if the upper limit of the courtyard creates a definite edge against the sky - to look up past the building at roofing material is not the ideal. If windows, French doors or entire rooms can open into the courtyard this creates a new room that is half inside and half outside - both the courtyard and the adjoining room are transformed. A courtyard must be able to be inhabited; if not it is merely a

light well. Inhabiting a courtyard means that there is a place or places to sit. The appropriate sculpture in a courtyard creates a wonderful resonance between space and object that the functional demands of the building proper usually do not permit. It is advisable that landscaping, even if only a series of potted plants, be included - why not excite the sense of smell in that special space? And modest fountains are never a bad idea. Careful lighting is important so the courtyard can be enjoyed in the evenings. The courtyard should not be viewed simply as incidental space. It should be planned like a room with due attention given to wall finishes, floor finishes and furnishing.

Despite these guidelines there are many imperfect courtyards that still exhibit a wonderful sense of place. Some are even fictive like the court in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. If the opportunity presents itself to travel then experiencing courtyards is as good an agenda as seeing monuments (better really - monuments feed our minds but courtyards feed our senses). Europe has many wonderful examples but a trip to Mexico City will reveal as many as any European capital. If circumstances conspire to prevent travel then the luxury of courtyards can be felt closer to home. Some local examples of courtyards that can be accessed by the public free of charge include:

- The Kimbell Art Museum contains three accessible courtyards depending upon the schedule of traveling exhibits. The one courtyard near the cafe is almost always open. If you happen to know somebody at the Kimbell then you may get a glimpse of some wonderful light wells. (The Kimbell also has great porches, terraces and yards.)
- Sundance Square contains what was once a service alley that has been transformed into a retail venue. The modification of this circumstantial space creates a wonderful sense of place.

Why are courtyards necessary? They are the indispensable pause needed in buildings. Just as any good work of art needs pauses to allow the mind to connect and hold apart events architecture needs pauses to connect and hold apart covered spaces.

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