

Better Remodeling: Design Leads, Materials Follow

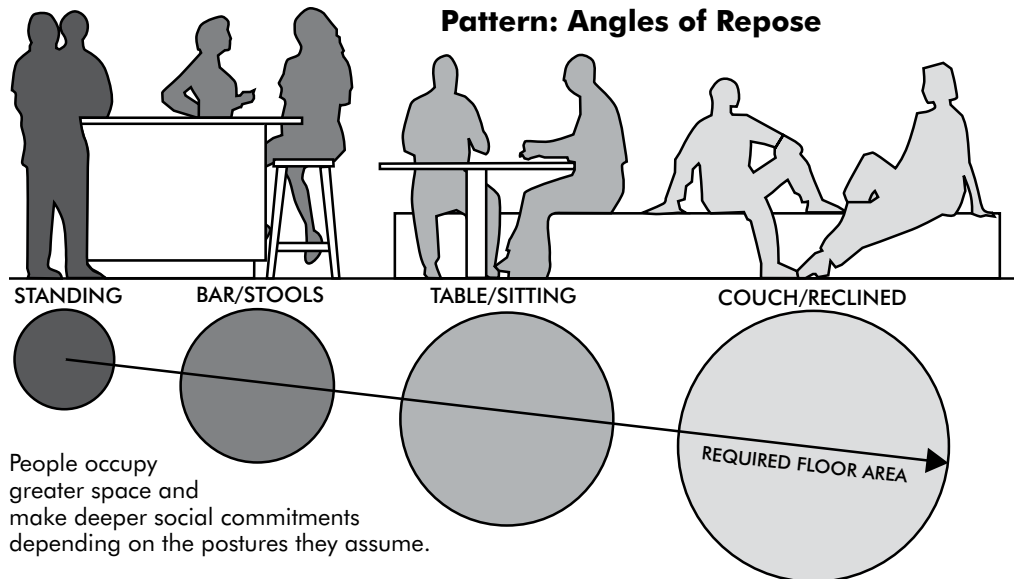
BY JAMIE WOLF

These days, information about green materials and technologies is abundant, at times even overwhelming. Bamboo, LEDs, strawbale, photovoltaics, earth plaster, and pellet stoves—we stand before an overflowing pantry of choices contemplating the good we might do while remodeling our homes. But those choices should follow, not lead. Determining how best to make a good home better is a design process. Planning, then doing; becoming certain that you are pursuing the right project by assuring that you have thought clearly about what you plan to do. Green projects require an appropriate purpose, or “program.” Our hope is to discover a home’s enduring delights by thinking clearly about that program before we act.

As a designer and remodeler, I find that attention to the following design concepts is likely to reveal robust and lasting, often even surprising, design opportunities. The right plan then integrates the green materials, techniques, and technologies that are being abundantly described everywhere you look. Good designers are alert to these principles. Develop the program for your project with these ideas in mind.

Don't start with a solution

The single biggest mistake people make in making changes to their homes is to begin with a solution. Statements like “I need an addition” are often the best expression we can make that we are not satisfied with how things are. But try to back up and attempt to understand the conditions that imply that answer. Then go further. Ask about everything that needs attention. Look for overlap. Look for patterns. Look for opportunities in the space that already exists. Identify



Therefore, provide a progression of spaces in an extended social setting to accommodate these levels of comfort and engagement

green goals. You may, in fact, need an addition. Or you may just need to accept that you never use your dining room and find all you need right there!

Work through each layer of change

Stuff, Space, Systems, Shell, Site. Each layer represents a degree of greater permanence. Be most deliberate about the things that last the longest and change the least. Investments there last longest, and may offer the greatest returns. A location to which you are committed and is situated appropriately. A tight, super-insulated, properly ventilated, and durable shell. Efficient, simple, and maintainable systems. Space that delights and serves the life of the household. Stuff that is beautiful, useful, and durable.

Seek to understand and apply patterns

Observe spaces working well in other homes and buildings and seek to understand underlying patterns: traffic flow, gathering space, ceiling height, alcoves,

angles of repose, etc. Observe their presence or absence in your home and seek them as you plan. The book *A Pattern Language* is the respected guide to this ability, while the more recent *Patterns of Home* provides a succinct and well-illustrated residential focus.

Work with the grain

The woodworker studies the grain and works with it; the material volunteers to be used best by honoring the way in which it grew. We do best to look to the form and flow of a home’s structure to discover what it wants to give us: spaces and traffic flow, views and light, areas of openness and privacy that are in place and available, either for new uses or to enhance and improve on existing ones. The house offers us these without a fight—no need for new foundations or arduous demolition.

Do enough

It’s tempting to anticipate and create space and function for every perceived

eventuality. Be wary of temporary or overly specific needs. Assign spaces multiple functions. Give priority to enduring purposes. Do what present resources allow. Satisfying and dramatic results can flow from simple change.

Change uses

Question the value of spaces you rarely use and consider alternatives. Informal lifestyles call into question the value of formal living rooms or two tables to gather at. We have converted formal living rooms into master suites and dining rooms into cozy TV spaces and home offices. Before adding space, make full use of what you have.

Break bad habits

Over time, we adapt to our home's bad habits. Shoes pile up in a back hall. Clutter accumulates on a kitchen counter, all the result of design deficiencies we come to accept and adapt to. Our homes break us in. Recognize these routines and seek solutions that change them.

After using all you have, add a little

Every design effort should begin by assuring that existing space is being used effectively and imaginatively. Often, that effort alone will reveal that the space you have is all you need. Sometimes the addition of only a few feet to the breadth of the home is enough to make magic happen. Don't assume you need a whole new room.

Connect with the site

No matter how small the opportunity, let the outside in. Create desirable outdoor "rooms" that are transparently accessible from within your home. Carefully frame desirable views rather than blast the facade with glass. Ration your budget to assure that the site is attended to.

Know when to leave

When the effort and resources required to make suitable changes to your existing home become unreasonable or require a configuration too idiosyncratic, it's probably time to find a more fitting alternative

elsewhere. Leave what you have for someone it fits. A new structure may allow you to include more of the latest green features, but that is a deceptive virtue. Don't be lured by just that. Existing structures rooted in established neighborhoods long for the care, attention, and improvement that sustain communities. Your green sensibilities are just what they are waiting for.

Above all, make it beautiful

We pay attention to and care for the things we love. They nourish us. They inspire devotion. Everything we create and every choice we make is an opportunity to generate beauty. Seek those opportunities in each decision. Take time, take care, and invest appropriately.

Jamie Wolf leads a collaborative approach to residential building at Wolfworks: Designers/Builders in Avon, CT.



home . community . planet

Named one of 2005's
TOP TEN GREEN ARCHITECTS
by *Natural Home & Garden Magazine*

*Collaborative, listening-based
approach for families, institutions
and businesses*

**Kraus-Fitch
Architects**

110 Pulpit Hill Rd. Amherst, MA
413 - 549 - 5799
Mary Kraus & Laura Fitch

www.krausfitch.com