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GOOD HOUSES AND THE THEORY OF CONTRAST

Most of the houses we see every day are certainly adequate. They're built with con tence according to the building code, they keep out the weather, they're perfe nice—but no more. Other houses, far fewer in number, have a more powerful imp They go beyond competence and are satisfying in deeper ways—aesthetically, emotionally, ir lectually, perhaps even spiritually. Such houses not only offer protection from the extreme winter and summer, but also facilitate the enjoyment of nature's elements. While containing required number and size of spaces, they are also organized to improve the quality of social life gether and private hours apart. These "good houses" have the capacity to awaken the sen memories and minds of their occupants, and inspire productive energies.

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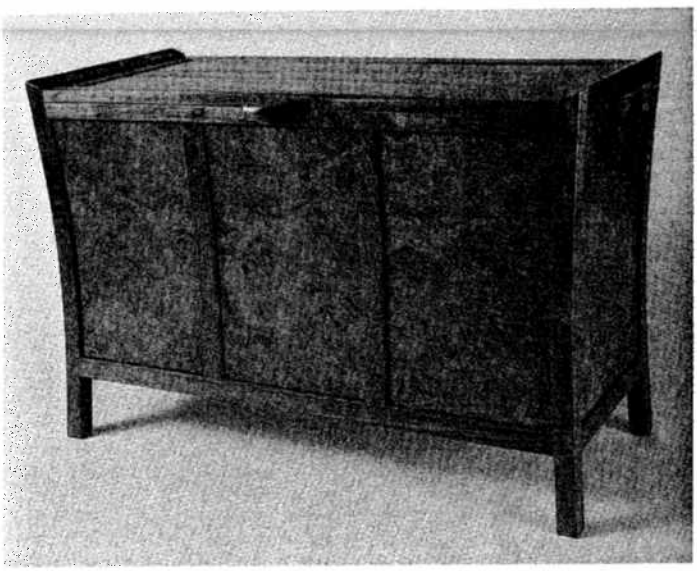


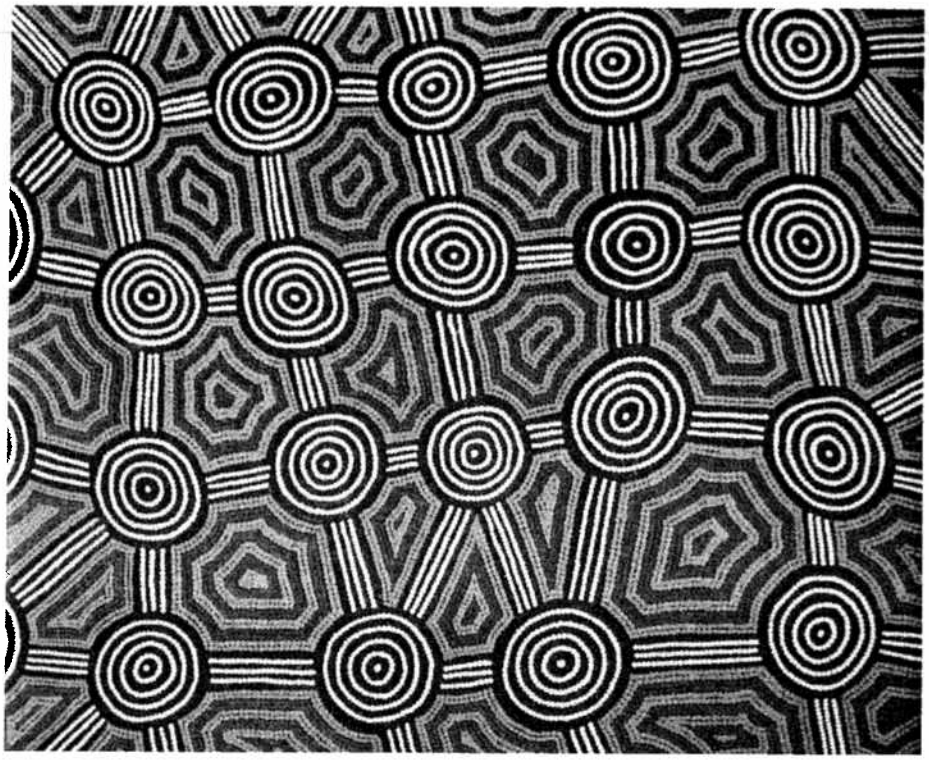
The good house that we will talk about in this book is more wonderful than any specific example. It is an ideal. But you can catch isolated glimpses of it in the ordinary world: an aged brick wall in one house; a sunny bay-window seat in another; a cool, fragrant entry court in a third. The memory of these instances of unusual beauty and power comprises an elusive ideal image of the good house—architects, builders and clients draw upon their sense of this ideal as they create a new design. This focus upon the power of certain places, however, is not meant to minimize the importance and difficulty of creating competent buildings. Indeed, competence is developed only very gradually over a lifetime of real-world study and practice. But few are satisfied unless their designs have at least a promise of a more powerful quality. So how can each person, starting at his or her own level of experience, move toward the creation of a good house? This chapter will try to describe the properties of good houses—properties that everyone can recognize, discuss and manipulate.

The Characteristics of the Good House

Thinking back over all the wonderful buildings we have encountered, our first observation is this: Good houses are full of contrasts—contrasts in color, height, openness, temperature, solidity, enclosure, privacy and amount of detail—contrasts along every dimension of perception and measurement. You need not understand the design of a particular building, or even the basics of architectural design in general, to be able to observe and experience these contrasts. You can walk through a building and simply notice that, as you descend two steps into the living area, you go from a small, low-ceilinged space to a larger, higher space; that you move from a dark interior to a lighter window bay. As you continue out to a more open and cooler yard, you'll notice the changing, contrasting qualities. The good house provides both warm and cool, high and low, dark and light, large and small.

Second, these opposing contrasts are linked to each other by a transition element or joint. It's not just that there is a large room as well as a small one, but that they are linked by special doors in a way that enables both to be experienced together. An interior is linked to its exterior by a covered porch that allows you to experience in and out simultaneously. Or the private upstairs rooms are linked to the public downstairs rooms by a balcony that enables the children upstairs to spy on the evening conversation of the adults below. Notice that in all these cases the connecting link between the contrasting pairs is itself an architectural element—the doors, the porch, the balcony—and that it serves not to dull the contrast but to enliven it.

Third, these linked contrasts occur at every scale of the building, from the site plan down to the details and trim. There are large and small outdoor spaces surrounding the house, large and small rooms in the floor plan, large and small areas within the living room, as well as large and small pieces of glazing in the window facing the garden. At every level of scale within the building, there are observable contrasts. And at each of these levels, the contrasts are linked by various transitions —paths and gates, halls and circulation space or mullions and trim.

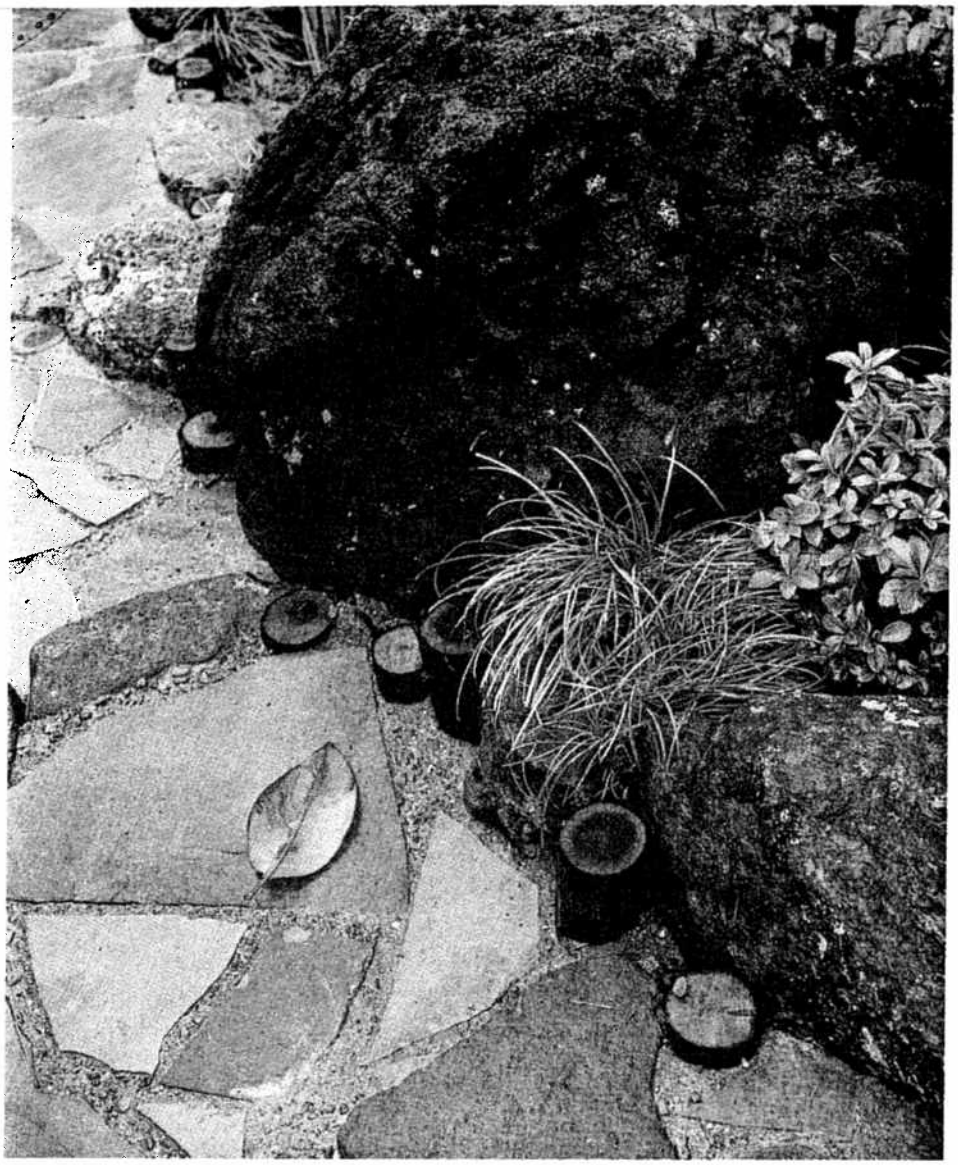


The circular targets in this Tingari painting stand away from each other for contrast, but are then linked to their neighbors with bands. The targets and bands are connected with the background by color, then linked with concentric wavelets. (Original painting © Simon Tjakamarra.)

The Significance of Contrast

Why are these three characteristics of linked contrast so crucial to our sense of the good house?

First of all, the contrasts themselves are the very basis of architectural experience, for the experience of a quality is sharpened and made tangible by connection with its bipolar opposite. Coolness is experienced in



A famous story is told of the Zen novitiate whose task was to sweep the monastery path clean. He couldn't understand why his teacher wasn't satisfied with his immaculate product until the teacher sprinkled a few leaves on the path. Then he understood the experience of 'clean.' This garden path contrasts flat and hilly, massive and delicate, dark and light, organic and inorganic. (Photo © 1989 Robert Stolk.)

relation to a sense of warmth, cozy containment is experienced with reference to soaring openness, and the awareness of light is anchored by darkness.

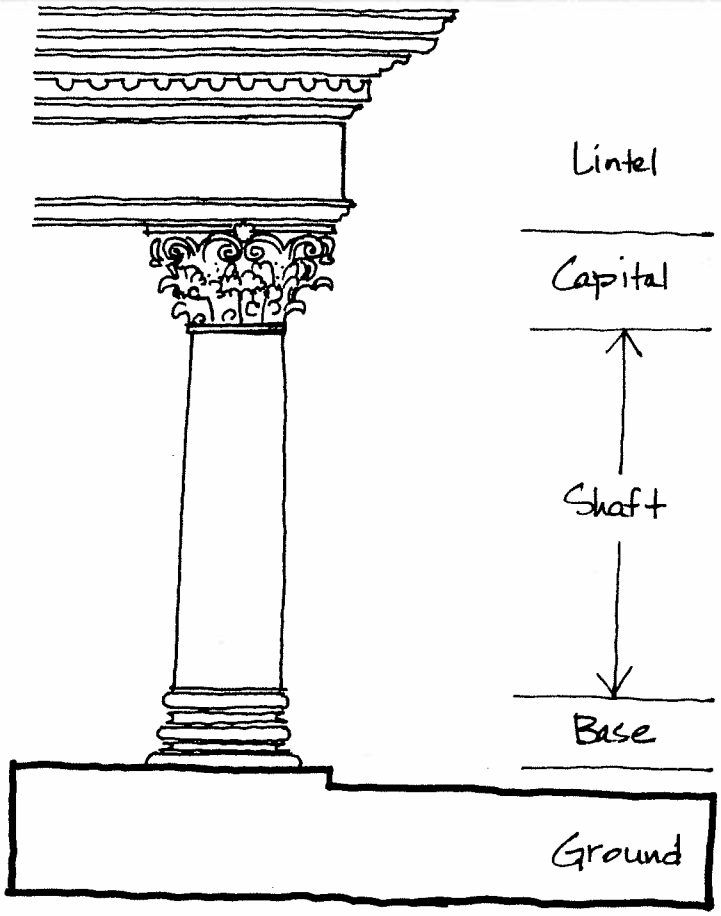
In life it is the mixture of male/female, dark/light, hard/soft, in/out and so on that creates all the excitement. In fact, these contrasts create a new experience or existence—a child, a sensation, a texture, a feeling. An examination of even simple objects demonstrates this clearly. It is the blend of warp and weft threads that make up a fabric—without opposites there are only two balls of thread. In creating a bowl, the potter begins with a lump of clay; only by creating an in/out contrast can the clay become a useful vessel. The builders of the first huts shaped an inside space with solid materials and discovered that they had simultaneously created a new exterior space, a world that could be measured in distances to and from this new center.

In addition, the links between contrasts allow a building to be responsive to the ever-changing needs of its occupants. For example, when they are active, they are warm, but when they rest, they begin to feel chilled. If a basically cool room can be linked to the warmth of the sun by a south-facing window bay, each person then has the opportunity to

find a position at the precise point of real equilibrium and comfort. In this sense, the building is better able to support its inhabitants.

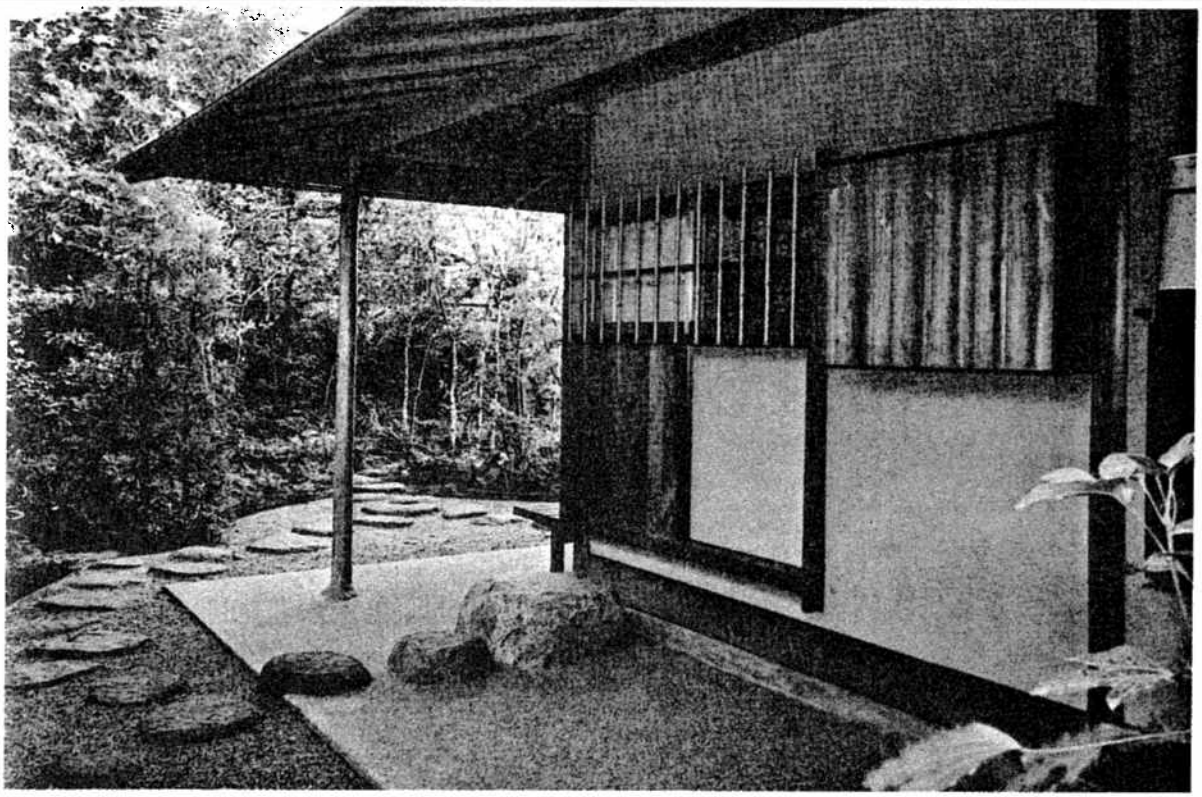
By the same token, linked contrasts offer the opportunity for change and growth. The child on the front porch (the link between home and the outside world) can either retreat into the house for safety or venture out into the world beyond for adventure and learning. The good house, then, by providing simultaneous security and opportunity, encourages the full experience of life. You are willing to deepen your experience by enjoying a chilly breath of outdoor air if you can anticipate the waiting warmth of the fire. Likewise, you can relish private contemplation alone in a small room, knowing that the family can be rejoined nearby. You can delight in the idiosyncratic aspects of a building if they exist in relation to a logical order.

We have said that the linkages are themselves architectural elements or parts of the building. As a corollary, the parts of a building should also be thought of as links between other contrasting elements. For example, the front yard is the link between public and private realms; the lampshade is the link between light and dark; the column's capital is the link between the lintel and the shaft, while the base is the link between the shaft and the ground. Awareness of this concept of linkages will enrich and inform the design of each part of a building.



The lintel above and the ground below are linked by the supporting column. At a smaller scale of detail, the contrast between the horizontal lintel and vertical shaft is linked by the capital. Similarly, the base is the link between the vertical shaft and the horizontal ground.

Finally, the presence of contrast at all levels of scale answers the human need for continuity of orientation, ensuring a sense of connection to the surrounding environment. As we sit in a room, it is important to be able to feel its connection to the



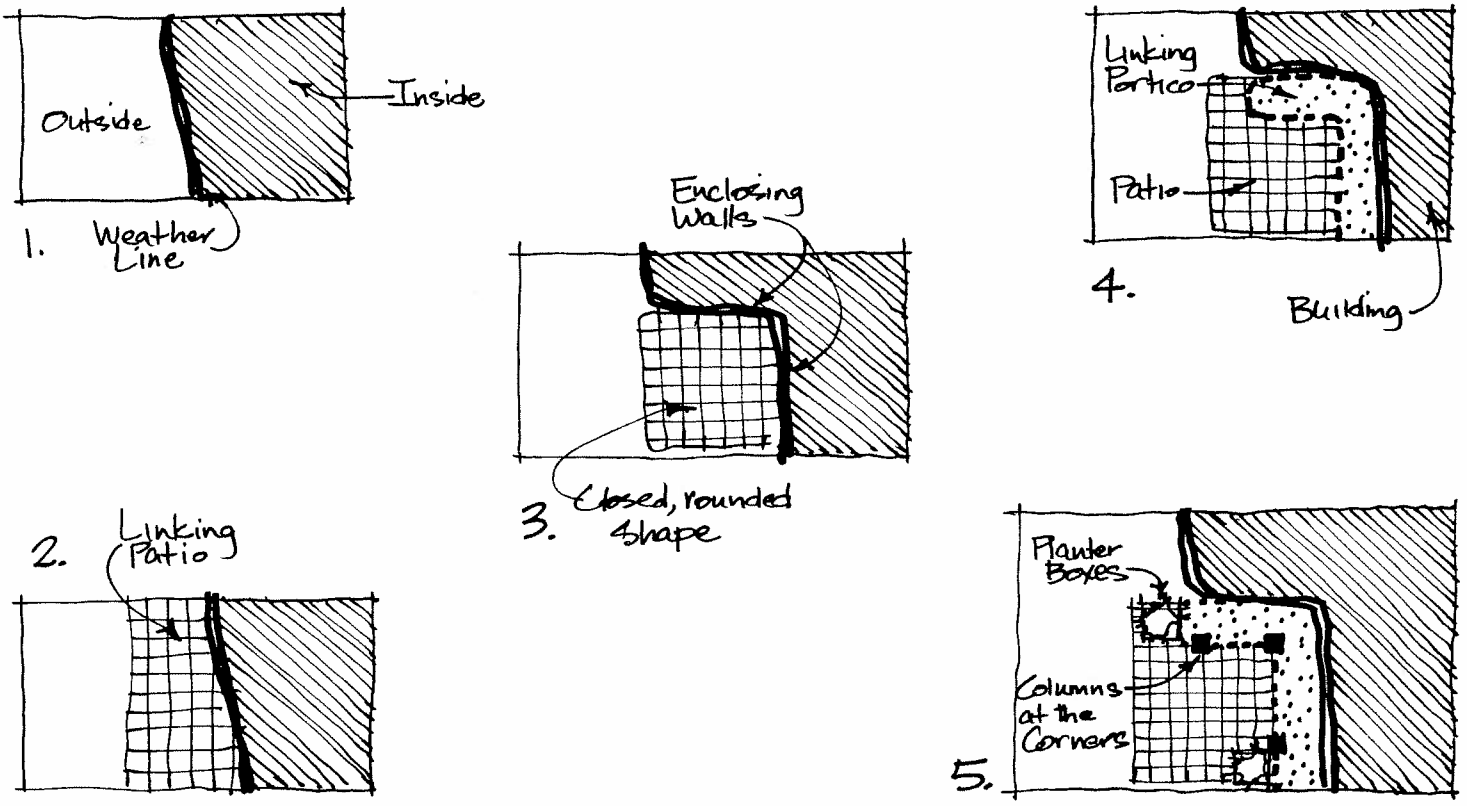
The broad roof overhang and stone steps link this Japanese house to its surrounding garden.

larger house and yard. Otherwise, there can be disorientation (like the momentary confusion when awakening in a strange house). Similarly, we need to be able to see a room's textural components (the texture of the walls, for example), so that we can orient ourselves in a material world. When we feel oriented and part of the world, we are encouraged to explore, to open ourselves to different ranges of experience.

Contrast and Design Development

Even with just this brief introduction, it should now be possible to set this book aside momentarily and use the theory of contrast to begin designing the elements of the world around you. For example, try to:

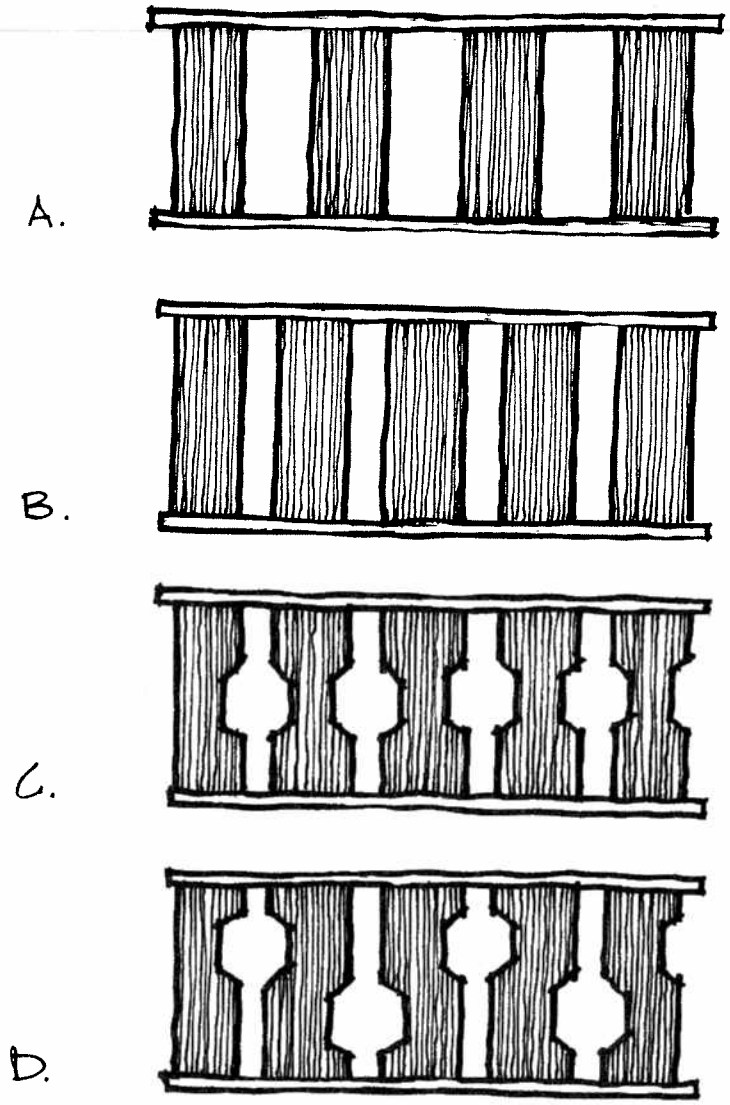
1. recognize where more contrast is needed between any two parts of your surroundings, and try to create that contrast;
2. create a link between the contrasted parts; and
3. extend this work to both larger and smaller scales.



This sequence of sketches shows how the theory of contrast can be used to help generate an outdoor patio.

As you think about a site plan, for example, start by sharply contrasting the inside with the outside spaces using a complete, closed weather line. Then link inside and outside with a new element, say a patio. Create more contrast between this patio and everything else in the design by giving it a closed, rounded shape and by partially enclosing it with solid walls. Later on in the design, when you are working on the next smallest scale, return to the patio and link it more strongly to the house by creating a new linking part, say a covered portico along the patio/building edge. Later, contrast the portico with the larger patio by placing columns and planter boxes at the portico/patio edge. Continue to contrast and differentiate as you proceed to link and integrate.

To bring contrast to the design of a deck railing: (A) Create contrast between the boards and the spaces between them. (B) Eliminate strict balance to enliven contrast. Here, the gaps are a little narrower than the boards. (C) Bind the contrasts together with a new part, here, a hexagon shape in the gap. (D) Contrast adjacent hexagons by alternately raising and lowering their positions.



For another example, assume that you are trying to come up with a deck-railing design using wide boards. By introducing the contrast between solid and void and then linking them with shape, it is possible to create an interesting pattern, as shown in the drawing above.

Looking at things with the theory of contrast foremost in mind almost automatically enhances design development. If you simply pay attention to the need for contrasting parts and then mediate and link them together, you will start to create vital new elements of a building.

The Six Dimensions of Contrast

In the next six chapters, we will present the most important dimensions of contrast in the design and experience of the good house. They include, for example, the dimensions of in/out, light/dark and order/mystery. For each one, we will try to identify design strategies that will enable you successfully to incorporate that dimension of contrast into an architectural design.

Chapter 8, which concludes the theoretical section of the book, shows that the dimensions of contrast are not independent variables, but are related and interconnected to one another. The use of any one of the dimensions in design will invite corresponding uses of other dimensions. In the good house, these contrasts are orchestrated to be in harmony with one another, to form a contrasting whole.