PERSPECTIVES

Key Points:

• A closely held belief of mine is that it's easier to change things than it is to change people.

• Nowhere is aspiration greater than in the ideas and designs of our youngest architects and emerging professionals who are taking on social, environmental and physical barrier issues in fresh ways.

Tom Mathison, FAIA, is a co-founding principal of MATHISON | MATHISON ARCHITECTS and has been practicing architecture for over 35 years. Tom's primary focus is early phase planning, programming, master planning, concept design, project management and firm management. His expertise ranges from complex renovation projects to challenging new construction for educational, housing, civic, commercial and institutional clients.

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Thinking About Design Thinking

Tom Mathison, FAIA, MATHISON | MATHISON ARCHITECTS

Design not only matters - it is essential in raising the quality of our lives and creating a sense of place. Design is necessary for forming livable communities, in inspiring settings for learning,in encouraging health, in making smart and sustainable choices, and in being stewards of our historic resources. For me, it is the aspirational aspect of architecture and design that is so powerful. Designer Ingrid Fetell captured it well when she said:

•A closely held belief of mine is that it's easier to change things than it is to change people. People may want to exercise more, be more creative, or share more with others, but we have ingrained habits that makethese things difficult. Design can help by making it easier to live up to our aspirations:by making stairs a more accessible and enticing option than escalators, for example, or creating open spaces where people want to gather instead of being trapped in their cubicles. By shaping the objects, interactions, and environments we live around and within, design literally changes the world."

Nowhere is aspiration greater than in the ideas and designs of ouryoungest architects and emerging professionals who are taking on social, environmental and physical barrier issues infresh ways. As one who hasactively engaged architecture students and young professionals throughout my career, I have listened to the passion and optimism they share.

I consistently see the commitment of students and faculty as they drill down into the issues of architectural design. In addition to learning the technical science of design and construction principles, they are also thinking critically about innovative ways to solve thorny issues: How can sustainable design principles be appliedto the urbancore to energize and revitalize localneighborhoods and economies? How can we better collaborate in multi-disciplinary teams to fully understand problemsand conceive solutions holistically? How can technology help us evaluate materials and systems for best performance at the least cost? How do effective leadership skills, communication skills, and ethical practice affect outcomes? How does design create a better environment for everybody?

These young professionals are living out one of the principles famously voiced by Steve Jobs: "Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works." Young designers realize that the best design goes beyond aesthetics. In an increasingly computerized and complex culture, economy,and environment, youngdesigners and architects are seeking out opportunities to take on the dynamic and relevant challenges of the future through rigorous education, collaborative approach, and innovative practice that is entrepreneurial in spirit. They are learning the power of listening, of inquiry,of potential.
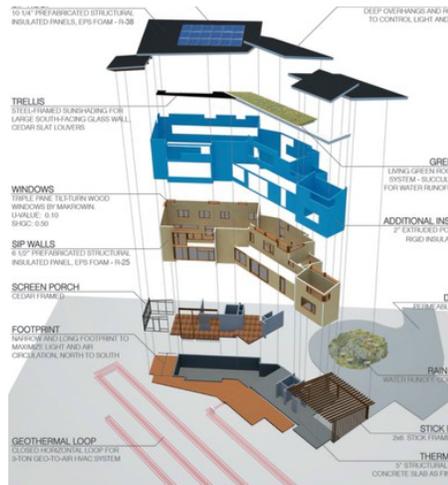
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They understand that design combines analysis of what has happened in the past with openness about what could be in the future. It is the essence of innovation, and it is why the framework for design thinking follows an iterative pattern of ideation, refinement, and assessment rather than a purely linear path of historical analysis. It transforms insights and data into real ideas that can be expressed in designs that serve people, make the complex simple, improve experiential quality, and create both beauty and functionality.

Harold Nelson, architect and educator once said, "Design is the action of bringing something new and desired into existence – a proactive stance that resolves or dissolves problematic situations by design. It is a compound of routine, adaptive and design expertise brought to bear on complex dynamic situations."

Sometimes the "complex·and "dynamic" can come in the form of a structure as basic and personal asa home. Even there,design thinking isessential in order to integrate allthe relevant elements into a single design: lifestyle, space, materiality, site orientation and context, comfort, systems, components, structure, sustainability, economy, and more – developed over multiple iterations and explorations.

Sometimes I find myself thinking back to the early days of my career. when an engineer friend once told me that his definition of architecture was "the stuff that blows off a building in a heavy wind." Of course he was kidding– I think. I'm glad to say that future architects have much more in mind than decoration or aesthetic add ons. They are using the best of design thinking, technology, collaboration, and a multi disciplined approach to achieve aspirational change.