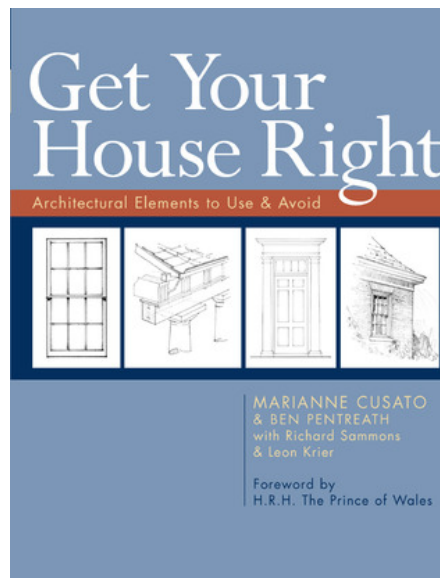




Get Your House Right: Architectural Elements to Use & Avoid

Marianne Cusato , Ben Pentreath , Richard Sammons , Leon Krier , Charles, Prince of Wales

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Sick of McMansions? Marianne Cusato, creator of the award-winning Katrina Cottages, is a champion of traditional architectural principles: structural common sense, aesthetics of form, appropriateness to a neighborhood, and sustainability. She presents the definitive guide to what makes houses look and feel right, revealing the dos and don'ts of livable home design. Hundreds of elegant line drawings--rendering the varieties of architectural features and displaying "avoid" and "use" versions of the same elements side by side--make this an indispensable resource for designing and building a timelessly beautiful home.

Get Your House Right: Architectural Elements to Use & Avoid Details

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Fullfaun says

This is great! I never understand why some places didn't look correct, but looked "off". Now I can see the examples of what NOT to Do in this book and the author also shows What TO DO.

I highly recommend it to everyone. Even if you do have anything career in building homes.

Anne says

Must read for anyone thinking of building or remodeling a traditionally-styled home. Explains why so many new homes don't look "right" and what to do instead. Very detailed -- too much so for the casual reader -- but that's all to the good for readers who are serious about building a home in a pre-modern style. Even folks updating a 50s ranch can benefit from this one.

Meglajanna says

This is an excellent text describing the basic classical architectural elements. I found modern architecture to be left out but, the overall principals were very useful. This is written like a university textbook which made reading less fluent but, the overall information provided was very good and detailed. I found that there were plenty of well presented diagrams which made understanding these topics easier for the layperson.

Koen Crolla says

There is one unambiguously good piece of advice in this book: architectural elements that used to serve a structural purpose should at least *look* as if they could still fulfil that purpose, even if they're now purely decorative. Everything else is at best a mixed bag, and the authors' misguided obsession with the "Classical" Orders, even when it comes to supposedly vernacular buildings, inevitably takes much of the blame—the faux scientificisation of beauty of the Italian Renaissance has done so much damage to architecture. It also doesn't help that the authors are mostly bad people (which I honestly should have seen coming, as it is a book in defence of snobbery, after all); Leon Krier, in particular, who wrote a foreword and drew a bunch of shockingly self-righteous and mean-spirited cartoons to go in between chapters, seems like the worst kind of person, and it genuinely detracts from the points they're trying to make.

In the end, very little of the advice is useful to anyone except the very rich, and then only the very rich living in either the US (outside of earthquake zones) or the actual past—a lot of it, especially everything related to roofs and windows, isn't compatible with the energy requirements of modern buildings. But then, I guess that's just some of the "pettifogging rules and regulations" Prince Charles whines about in his foreword.

(I do wish I'd noticed that there was a foreword by Prince Charles before I bought the book. It might have saved me some time and money.)

Charles says

How can you go wrong with an architecture book where the forward is written by Prince Charles? Yes, the Prince is a political imbecile. But he is an excellent architectural expert and critic, and one of the first to push back against the fetid tide of architectural Modernism. (You can tell that he's good on architecture from the vicious attacks on him conducted by the priests of Modernism.) He famously compared part of the new British Library to an academy for secret policemen. And the Prince enthusiastically recommends this book, which should mean something.

I also recommend it, though I am not in any way comparable to Prince Charles. But we have spent the past three years working with classical architects to design what is, presumably, the final house we will live in. Before we began the design process, in 2012, I read and absorbed this book. It informed a lot of our thinking and it guided our selection of architects. And as we move toward actually starting to build our new house, I have read and re-absorbed this book, confirming that we have, indeed, "gotten our house right." No small part of my confidence in that design success is due to Cusato's work.

Cusato is a "classical architect." In context, that means an architect who appreciates and is guided by traditional architecture generally (roughly prior to 1920), and who is particularly focused on Greek and Roman exemplars, especially the classical "orders," as the guideposts for much of that design. Usually, it means an architect who thinks there are objectively aesthetically superior ways to design houses, that it is possible to know and practice what makes those ways superior, but that those methods and abilities of creating superior designs have been mostly lost in a sea of ugliness. Such architects are more common than they used to be, but are still a tiny minority in an era when most residential design is heinous McMansions or pseudo-"French Eclectic" mishmashes, and most commercial design is modernist (though trending today away from its worst forms of High Modernism and Brutalism). Such classical architects are represented heavily in New Urbanism, found especially in the Florida Panhandle towns of Seaside and Alys Beach. They largely hew to the philosophical underpinnings of Christopher Alexander's "A Pattern Language." Modern working architects in this vein include Cusato herself, Steve Semes, Thomas Gordon Smith, Duncan Stroik, Matthew and Elizabeth McNicholas, Steven Mouzon, Richard Economakis, and Michael Lykoudis—many of whom are tied to the School of Architecture at Notre Dame.

Cusato's book is laid out extremely well (as you'd expect). She explains why you need this book: in short, simply to understand the language of architecture, without which incoherence results. She then lays out nine rules around which all traditional design revolves, such as "Make the whole greater than the sum of its parts," "design with texture," "design with common sense" (could it work without hidden support? is it necessary?) "design for place," and "learn the vocabulary." These could be mistaken for clichés, except that the rest of the book is a detailed application of all those rules to every area of residential architecture, completed with precise explanations and exquisite drawings showing the topic under discussion.

Cusato devotes a chapter to each important part of a house, beginning with Schematic Design (massing, symmetry, unity and duality, proportions, inflections). She discusses in great detail the classical Orders (Doric, Tuscan, Corinthian, etc.), explaining their origins and characteristics. These two chapters form the backbone of the book. Subsequent chapters go into more detail on specific parts of the house: Arches and Pediments; Windows; Exterior Doors; Entrances; Porches, Balconies and Railings; Roofs; Cornices and Eaves; Chimneys; Interiors; Materials and Methods.

In each chapter, Cusato explains the basics of construction (and history) of the element. She then shows clear versions of each element to avoid and versions to use, annotated in detail. I cannot emphasize enough how

clearly Cusato manages to make each discussion, without dumbing it down or giving short shrift to any aspect.

The only bad thing about reading a book like this is that afterwards you cringe every time you look at most modern houses. Each element of the house I live in now, for example, is ripped directly from the “avoid” section of each chapter of Cusato’s book. That can’t be helped. What can be helped are the elements of any future house I live in, and to the extent those end up better, Cusato’s book has played a big role. Sure, our architects played the biggest role. But without reading this book I wouldn’t have known where to start, I wouldn’t have known what type of architect we wanted, and I would not have been able to assure myself we were going in the right direction. With reading this book, my life is complete—or at least my house will be.

Finally, while by itself this book is both fascinating and useful, it’s probably best to read it alongside some other books, if you are actually building a house. Cusato does not claim to cover everything; in particular, she focuses little on later traditional styles, like Prairie, which do not fit neatly into the traditional Orders. Someone building a house should probably look at Virginia McAlester’s “A Field Guide To American Houses,” as well as Stephen Mouzon’s “Traditional Construction Patterns,” and probably Alexander’s “A Pattern Language.” There are also a variety of books in the same traditionalist vein that are shorter on theory and technical explanations and longer on pictures, like Russell Versaci’s “Creating A New Old House.” But of all these, I’d say Cusato’s is the most essential. If you are planning on building a house, or even buying a house, you should get it.

Nell says

I'm probably not qualified to rate this book because I didn't take enough time to understand all the details, such as formulas for orders of columns and spacing of windows. I do understand, though, that there are classical--innate--proportions that the human eye comprehends as balanced and right. That modern builders disregard these and tart up overlarge homes is why McMansions are so ugly. My question is, if good design is universally recognized, why don't more people insist on it and why are these monstrosities built? These hideous buildings can't be cheaper than well-designed ones if they include so many extraneous materials and features that add cost but detract from their appearance (and function, but that's not the province of this book). In fact, why aren't all objects designed to be more aesthetically satisfying and functional? There is way too much crap in the world.

Alicia says

I am not the target audience for this book - it is very technical, and I can see that it would be invaluable to an architect. It's a little difficult to translate from the orders of columns to how a homeowner should communicate to an architect or builder. So it looks really good for the technicians, but was not as useful for me as I hoped...

Pam says

An absolutely great book for anyone building or remodeling a "traditional" style home. This book addresses the tiny details that make your house look great or horrible. Specific architectural elements like entry ways, front facade, columns, dormers, arched windows, chimneys, and fireplaces are each addressed showing

details to "avoid" and those to "use". Each is notated with comments on what was done correctly and incorrectly. I wish every builder of a "McMansion" would reference this book and then the world would be a prettier place! The only down side I found in this book is that it only addresses traditional style homes and does not include ranches, mid century modern and other similar homes. That said there are still important details that do relate.

Carolyn Page says

I grew up drawing house plans, and Mom and her mother also did-they designed houses that were built by their husbands. So, this book is a great resource when I'm visualizing a design. I'd look over books of house plans, and Mom would with me, and the conversation would go something like this:

"That's cute, but the chimney is placed so it makes a corner where the water runs into--you'll get a leak in no time like that"

"It looks pretty from the outside but look at that interior arrangement!"

"Did they...put a balcony...on the walk-in closet?"

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo?"

"I'm in de closet!!"

lolololol this is just a great book to read.

Alyn says

I studied architecture for 3 years in college. I found myself laughing and chuckling at drawings throughout. Things I'd also seen on houses and found hideous. It's amazing the ugly and nonsensical things people build.

You wouldn't think a "textbook" so entertaining. But apparently this book started as a series of faxes back and forth showing what NOT to do. Maybe these are inside jokes for Architects, but I think anyone building a house should look over this book.

One of the best pieces of advice for all the armchair architects, including myself: Start with the roof plan!

If I ever design/build my own house, I will buy this book for reference to design and discuss architectural elements with my husband and contractor. Speaking of which, I hope some "custom home builders" /developers will read this book. There's nothing quite like a really expensive ugly house.

amanjeet says

A must read before you do any cosmetic touches to your home.

Marcia Morrison says

Wow! Perfect for my situation--living in a 1890's house in New England. And explains why the buildings

that look just *wrong* to my eye are wrong. And maybe, just maybe, will help keep me from any similar errors on my own house. I loved the extensive illustrations. It's got a great Glossary at the back, a well-designed index, and is beautifully laid out. It's easy to read and covers the main topics people will run into when designing or remodeling. This goes on my shelf where I can easily reach it when I need to look up the finer points of porch columns or eave returns.

P.S. I see that a few people have deducted stars because they felt this book was too technical for them. Yes, it does have technical aspects which are unavoidably central to the topic of the book, but I think a reader would enjoy the book even if they skipped over the most technical parts. The illustrations of what NOT to do are worth the price alone, and the writing is light and amusing.

Kyle Marsh says

What a great find! Stumbled upon this book at the local library and found it to be so enjoyable that I kept it for a year. Without renewing. I know. Upon returning I was faced with a hefty \$5 late fee - I paid it and happily donated another \$15. Then I went and bought a copy of my own!

I love the Do / Don't Do sections - this is a dangerous book though. Don't give it to somebody who just bought a home, they'll be bound to find a thing or two that aren't up to snuff. But thanks to the tips in this book, the houses coming out of my office get better and better. Thanks Ms. Cusato for a great contribution to the field of residential architecture.

Camy Do says

Great Reference Book w/ illustrated sketches on on Classical / Traditional Homes.

Micah McCarty says

A deeply nerdy resource to assist in the planning and design of all elements of home construction. I thoroughly enjoyed it.
