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S.A. "Sam" Jernigan: Tackling one of trickiest home design challenges: scale



As illustrated in this Roman dwelling dated 40 - 30 B.C., from antiquity it was determined scale was a key attribute in the design of buildings of all types, especially homes.

Have you been to Europe? Or perhaps watched TV shows featuring European real estate?

If so, you've probably been as astonished as I have by the oh-so-small spaces our neighbors across the pond often dwell in.

Some of those London flats are so wee, it appears you'd have to step outside to change your mind.

In contrast, we Yanks have super-sized our homes into McMansions in recent decades.

However, with this advent of ever-larger, I continually observe homeowners stumbling over a key design component— namely, scale.

I recall it was back in the '80s that we began seeing newly constructed homes with soaring cathedral ceilings.

Previously, the middle classes tended to grow up with more traditional 8-foot ceiling heights throughout our neighborhoods, especially in suburbia.

However, as soon as those conventional dimensions began to shift, the overall relationship between visual space and the elements we placed inside these newly enlarged rooms began to shift as well, often dramatically.

Tried and true design principles

Proportion in design hails back to the ancients — including the advent of the all-important guiding principle of the “golden mean” or “golden ratio.”

The latter refers to a mathematical equation basically underscoring the fact we humans prefer room dimensions with a specific rectangular ratio, with this principle's origins dating back to approximately 400 B.C.

However, I'm reminded that many of these small European spaces which are far narrower than we have here in the States as a rule have often resulted from subdividing expansive residences dating back centuries into blocks of townhomes, etc. (Even as I wince at the outcome and wonder how the heck some of these rooms even function!).

Perhaps you've found yourself feeling awkward in a given space at some point, precisely because it was too square or too long and narrow a characteristic?

I frequently observe this in these European domiciles I “tour” regularly via the magic of Dish TV.

In addition to ensuring a given room is of pleasing “golden mean” dimensions, another key design principle to employ in spaces used for entertaining is called the “arc of conversation.”

For example, have you ever been in a generously sized room where the distance between the seating areas left you feeling uncomfortable as you had to raise your voice in an effort to chat with someone seated too far away?

That's because the arc of conversation defines the fact we humans feel most comfortable when seated 8 feet or less from one another.

Anything more "spread out" creates an unsettling sort of strain and resulting hurdle for guests attempting to socialize with one another.

Part two of this article, which will appear later this month will address "right-sizing your furnishings."

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