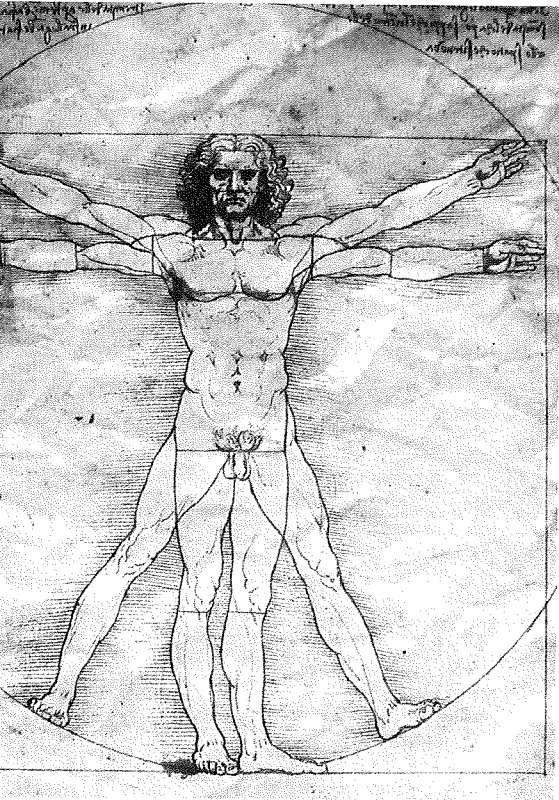


## BASIC VALUE

Instead of house as economic product, two architects suggest a return to the Vitruvian standard of building

Written by **DUO DICKINSON** and **JEREMIAH ECK**



From an architect's perspective, true value is derived from a building's usefulness and beauty. We believe such value transcends boom-and-bust cycles, and we maintain it can be reclaimed by a return to responsible and thoughtful design.

More than 2,000 years ago, the Roman architect Vitruvius said every piece of architecture must have firmness, commodity, and delight. Houses will have firmness if they are built well, commodity, that is usefulness, if they fit the way we live, and delight if they bring aesthetic pleasure. Many of the houses built recently lack those attributes. By following four simple design principles, however, we can build houses that meet the Vitruvian standard, and perhaps give our houses true value once more.

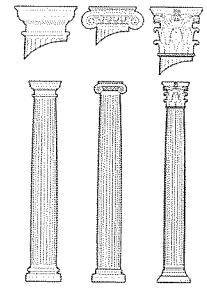
**SITE LINES** • Proper siting is the first step toward a well-designed house. Sites have to be experienced, walked at different times of the day and even different seasons, if possible, to observe how, for example, the sun travels in the sky. Good siting defines whether the house you buy or build will feel as if it belongs. Get it wrong, and it can never be made right with the niceties of style and surface.

**LAYOUT** • There was a time when people actually used their living rooms and wouldn't dream of sitting in the kitchen, much less consider it the center of the house, but that way of thinking has changed dramatically over the last 30 years. Today, we often discover new ways to use our spaces. Real value comes when a home's floor plan addresses how we live now.

**ELEVATIONS** • Exterior walls, windows, doors, roof-lines, and porches make up what architects refer to as elevations. Many houses built today send confusing messages with oversize entries, out-of-place windows, and awkward shapes. Buyers often identify with known forms such as Victorian or Shingle style that they consider bankable entities, but buying or building a house should not start with a style — it should end with one.

**DETAILS** • Inside and out, the details we live with every day, elements such as staircases, fireplaces, and window casings, reflect the care that went into the making of a house.

Adherence to these principles will create a house that fits Vitruvius's requirements, yielding a home that is well built and visually gratifying, fits the way we live, and, not inconsequently, has real value. ■



Romans adopted the Greek orders of Doric (LEFT) and Ionic (MIDDLE) but it was 1st-century BC architect Vitruvius who elevated the Corinthian capital (RIGHT) to the rank of order. His theories on proportion and balance led him to create the Vitruvian Man; Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the man (FAR LEFT) today is recognized worldwide.



Architects Duo Dickinson, AIA, and Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, are cofounders of the Congress of Residential Architecture, a national organization dedicated to improving residential architecture through dialogue among homeowners, builders, and designers.

**D**URING THE RECENT HOUSING BOOM, architects watched with amazement as poorly designed and poorly built houses proliferated. Easy money in the form of questionable mortgage loans fueled a market that came to a catastrophic end as house values were leveraged beyond any rational standard. Homeowners — and their bankers — bought into the notion that as long as prices went up, they could borrow against the assumed value of their homes and expect them to yield a high return when it came time to cash in. As long as prices held or, better yet, increased, all was good in the American house. Then real estate prices fell, the excruciatingly complicated securities market underpinning the mortgage industry crashed, and the overvalued house became part of the stew known as “toxic assets.”

So how did the value of our houses diminish, and how can we get it back?