

## Take the Time to Enjoy the Creative Process of Design



by Fu-Tung Cheng

Whenever I travel to Europe and Asia, I see art and architecture crafted and merged into so many of the buildings and homes. There exists a sensibility in art, craftsmanship and design that we associate with works of the past. There is so much detail – and expression – to appreciate everywhere.

These details – whether they're in the exterior architecture or in the design of a kitchen or bath – emotionally grab us. That expression, especially when it's done with a rigorous understanding of form and cultural content, makes us feel connected to the design. Perhaps, this is the reason we look to and admire the work of the past. But, rather than mimic the details of the past, I suggest we inspire ourselves to find the appropriate expression of the present. And by doing so, we can create new, original details in our kitchen and bath designs that are true to our own times.

*When picking your medium, be sure to survey your surroundings, your project, your context and your emotions.*

### NATURAL INSPIRATIONS

In nature, details evolve from form and function. Nature creates effortlessly, and appropriately expresses the details. In an ideal, man-made world, contemporary design could and should emulate a style based on the present, one in which all of the seasons are expressed, from the stark, bare, forms of winter to the bouquet of flowers in spring; the fruits of summer, followed by the colors of fall leaves. Perhaps, this is what Frank Lloyd Wright meant by "organic architecture," a design for all seasons.

That said, there are as many paths to creative, timeless expression as there are people who have successfully taken those paths. To that end, I offer two simple approaches for creating timeless design in our homes:

1. Gain an understanding of the whole picture, the context and the architecture before sweating the details of design – especially a kitchen or bath design.

2. Work with your hands, directly playing with the raw materials you're using in the design – the wood, metal, stone or concrete – allowing form, function and expression to flow naturally. The process becomes living culture.

Indigenous craftspeople and native artists those whose work we admire in museums and the masons who built

cathedrals shared this approach. Most importantly, they also took their time while they worked with their hands.

### FORMS OF EXPRESSION

Carpenters have looked to New England timber framing, Shaker furniture and Japanese joinery for inspiration. In the same vein, I have tried to look at my concrete countertops the same way.

The last few decades have marked an appreciation for working with our hands – a tactile experience that links us to art, architecture and craft. Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* and *A Timeless Way of Building* are eloquent treatises on how we had lost our inheritance, the "pattern language of designing and building instinctively," and how sadly we are now "adrift in superficial trends and styles, without a cultural guiding hand."

In my case, concrete became my material of choice precisely because with it in my hands, I could be expressive in detail and simultaneously remain true to structure and form. I could work with my hands and produce original work in a forgiving medium.

However, inspiration can be found in many other types of materials, natural and not-so-natural. Choose something that you feel comfortable using, that way you can create a unique expression filled with details that relates to your kitchen or bath design. I believe it is possible to design and build at any scale, from simple countertops to entire buildings, and invest this notion of appropriate expression in the details.

Remember, the details are not gratuitous throwbacks to another era, but the genuine product of the present, of our current times. When we call a design a "classic," it means that it was created with an expression that captured the essence of the times. Ironically, by capturing the essence of the present, "classic" design transcends trends and becomes timeless.

In our work at Cheng Design, I always strive to balance between the innovative and the emotional, between the spare contemporary and the warm traditional. But the ultimate success of these projects rests in how well they fit in composition, form, color and proportion to the spaces where they reside. Concrete – like many other raw materials – is best when used in the context of design and craftsmanship as a whole – not just plunked down in the form of floors, countertops or walls simply because it's fashionable. Thus, we must consider the whole picture, the intended expression and how

this expression will be translated in the details of a kitchen or bath design, or the interior design of an entire home.

### TELLING A STORY

Whether our work becomes yesterday's news or tomorrow's classics is for you, and future designers and clients, to decide. In my case, concrete has considerable mass and is not easy to budge so by default it may become permanent or timeless by default! But, nonetheless, by working with this medium, the commitment to expression, aesthetics and the art of building will grow and permeate our culture.

So, when picking your medium, your form of expression and your material of choice, be sure to survey your surroundings, your project, your context and your emotions. Then create compelling ways to express them – to tell a story – all the way down to the details.

And, don't forget to take your time to enjoy the process of expression. It will make for a better kitchen or bath design for your client and creative experience for yourself.

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