

MARYANN THOMPSON ARCHITECTS

MASSACHUSETTS, USA

Maryann Thompson is an architect based in Massachusetts whose work has global resonance, in that it espouses a broad aesthetic philosophy of architecture as an art form, providing a sensorial human experience that involves site, building and environment.

Her projects are underpinned by a thoughtfulness that goes well beyond the conceptual and the academic or the clichéd spirituality of the day. They are contemporary, but not generically so.

Her use of that most quintessentially East Coast American material, natural timber, is quite distinctive, as is her ingenious take on the traditional wooden house, deconstructed and reinvented with a lot of light added in.

Do we have more affinity, at a visceral level, with natural materials than with man-made ones?

MT: Yes. Modern space is interesting to me, because the boundaries are less well defined. It represents our striving for being unrestricted, open and free, mentally as well as physically. Architecture reflects an inner state of mind and yet I feel that modern architecture can feel cold. So I attempt to give warmth to modern space with natural materials. The presence of wood in a project is visceral to me. I can feel the difference in a room that has wood surfaces and structure. Could it be a spiritual quality of warmth that wood

brings to a space? Recently there has been a lot of academic attention given to the concept of “thermally active surfaces”.

The question, “why does a metal object feel cooler than a wooden object even though both are in thermal equilibrium with the atmosphere” is interesting to me. All materials have thermal conductivity. When a metallic body is touched, being a conductor of heat, the warmer human hand’s heat gets absorbed by the metal and we feel cold. In the process, it’s the metal that gains heat.

In the case of wood, as its conductivity is lesser, it doesn’t transfer the heat from the hand to the wood and so we do not feel cold near it. Our bodies do not lose energy to wood surfaces. This is one reason that wood feels good to be around. This is the reason why I use it as much as possible on my interior surfaces.

I also use wood to create ambiguity between inside and outside spaces. By using a natural material inside the visual and psychological, the boundary between outside and inside becomes ambiguous.





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I like to wrap the exterior skin into the inside of the building to further this sense of inside/out. Sometimes this happens with the wood surface of the roof plane entering the building at the ceiling. Sometimes I use the vertical surface of the exterior wall to wrap in.

Bringing light in from above is another strategy to create the sense that one is in an in-between inside/outside space. In the natural world, light comes to our bodies from above. It is only when one goes inside a building that we experience light from the side - through windows in the walls.

In all my projects I bring light in from above, through the use of clerestories or skylights as much as possible to further the sense of an architecture that participates in the exterior world. Light from above also lets the play of the weather, the changing cloud cover, the sun and the rain have a stronger presence in the interior space.

In the schools we do, this is very important to the life of the child that

spends so much of the day indoors. Awareness of the changing weather patterns activates the brain. Many studies have been done that show that students do better at standardized tests when they take them in a room with windows as opposed to in a room without. I feel that the changing patterns of light and shadow in a room with ample light keep an underlying section of the brain alert and activated, limiting the potential for boredom in a school setting.

If, and when architecture is a form of art, how does it address functionality beyond the emotional response? How do you, in your own architectural projects?

MT: I like to use the architectural intervention to heighten a sense of the site, of the place in which the building exists. I use techniques such as framing views, a thickened and layered threshold between inside and outside, and a complex relationship to the ground plane to accentuate the place that one is in.

I am interested in celebrating the “genius loci” of a particular place. Using light as a “medium” in the projects is also a strategy to heighten the presence of the sun and shadow in the building. Hopefully the building becomes a ground against which the phenomenological qualities of the site play.

I am trained as a landscape architect as well as an architect and bring landscape thinking to the work we do.”

What are the key elements underpinning a Maryann Thompson design? Is there an overriding aesthetic that identifies them unmistakably as your projects?

MT: Heightening a sense of the site through the architectural intervention:

- Rooms following the daily path of the sun
- light from above
- Unfolding spatial sequences

I really like to work with unfolding spatial sequences and you will see this in many of my projects. The unfolding sequence starts in the landscape at the approach to the building and continues through the entrance and then the interior of the building.

This way of moving through a building creates moments of stasis along the path that ground the viewer in the experience. It helps to prioritize the subjective experience (vs the objective experience).

Commonsense sustainable solutions are used in all our projects. Deep overhangs to keep the summer sun out but let the winter sun in, cross ventilation using the stack effect (operable windows up high that pull the hot air up and out stimulate cross ventilation). Opening to the south and creating a thermal mass for passive solar strategy.

If you had to pick two projects that you feel are most representative of your philosophy and approach, and have a legacy quality about them, which ones would they be, why and how?

MT: The Childrens School in Connecticut, because of its use of light, boundless space and the unfolding spatial sequence it employs. It is south facing with large overhangs. The radiant floor becomes the thermal mass.

The Walden Pond Visitors Center, because of its use of wood and light from above. The way it nestles in the landscape. Facing south with large overhangs. ■



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