

# Building Character

© Murray Arnott

Throughout my life I have met people with exceptional abilities and qualifications who are one-dimensional and uninteresting personally. I have also met simple folk with little education and limited skills who have a depth that can be intoxicating. We call this special quality character.

A great home has character like this. Without it, you can spend all your savings on expensive features and fixtures and end up with a structure that is lifeless. Yet through intuition and creativity you can design a home that exudes charm. The character you build into your home is the truest indicator of whether it is simply a house in which you live or a home that serves as an extension of yourself.

Whatever we call it— character, charm, style—there is no simple formula. It might come from little things, a well-placed window with a special view of a small rose garden, or a unique log post. When it is present we react viscerally. We are moved to stop in our tracks and appreciate. We can't make a list of materials, features, fixtures or design techniques that will guarantee character, as we can't simply send our children off to school and expect them to home with character. But we can develop our intuition and seize opportunities for building character into our home as we might use an unexpected real life situation as an opportunity to build character in our children.

That does not mean character in a home is random, that we can't plan ways to build character. With our children, we stress values; we make a commitment to honesty and respect. When planning our home, we do the same. Instead of simply doing what others do, we start examining what moves us. Be truly honest about what things you appreciate. It may be little things. It may not be what is fashionable. As your plans develop, be completely honest with yourself about what is working in your plan and what doesn't feel right. Learn to trust your intuition.

When we look at this thing called character qualities start to surface: honesty, balance, respect, clear judgment, integrity. The character of your home will make an honest statement about you. It should reflect a consistency. For example, if you wish to embody a simple lifestyle, you may choose to design a smaller home with cozy nooks and natural materials, textures and colors. An expansive Great Room with plush carpeting would be both a contradiction and a 'dishonest' statement. Like a person, a home with character has a sense of balance. This extends from size of your rooms to the height of your ceilings, your choice of flooring, the color of your walls, the treatment of your windows, and so on.

A home with character respects the nature and quality of the materials within it. Log homes have character 'just because they are logs'. Would you consider painting your log home blue? Logs are a natural material. They have variations in texture, grain, color and appearance. Building character means respecting and highlighting these qualities. I was in a multi-million dollar home in Colorado last year that was having great difficulty being sold. I am convinced the glossy polished marble floor was a

primary reason. Combining other materials inappropriately compromises the character of logs. The quality of wood being relatively soft and workable has led to the fine art of wood joinery. So why would you bring pieces of this wonderful material together and connect them with large ugly metal brackets? We see countless examples of wonderful log beam work compromised in this way. Would you wear a perfectly tailored \$1000 suit with a \$1 plastic belt? Again, I remind you to dispel formula. As there are times when an oddly worn garment bespeaks character, there are times when metal connectors may add character in a log home. But they must be making an honest statement, crafted with balance and used judiciously. In most cases, logs can be joined in ways that have structural integrity, yet highlight the character of the natural wood.

While logs invoke character in many ways, it is important to remember that what is character for some is ugly for others. For example, while you may love the irregular hand-hewn look of a tapered handcrafted log, others make like the simplicity of a uniform milled log. Be attuned to what moves you and state it honestly in a respectful and balanced manner.

Handcrafted logs, being unprocessed, lend themselves to a wide range of possibilities. They have a natural taper. With some species, you can use the root flare from the base of the tree, so that a post looks like is growing out of the floor. The size of the logs can contribute character; a two-foot round log post can be quite moving. Handcrafted logs are more likely to have unique features that vary from one log to another. In walls, openings can be shaped in many ways and projecting logs carved into various forms. Log stairs and railings can be designed in unique ways. Irregular

branches can be woven in railings and trusses in what is sometimes called 'twigometry'.

The roundness of logs can be complimented in many ways; with simple arches, round fireplaces or circular rooms. A single circular, eyebrow, or arched window can be a wonderful touch. Trim should be proportional to your windows and logs. Choose other materials complementary to the natural characteristics of log such as stone, textured ceramics, stained glass and rough textures and fabrics. But remember--no formula. A smooth, contrasting material or accent can sometimes give character. For example, a simple inlaid strip of a contrasting wood around the perimeter or at special locations in a wood floor can be stunning. Whether it is a splash of contrasting color in a uniform tile wall, or contrasting material, subtle accents can bring a monotonous background to life. Like a scientist who plays violin sonatas or a businessman who quotes Blake, subtle contradictions can be a statement of character.

Your décor, of course, can state your home's character in the same way your clothes reflect your character. Simple is generally better. Area rugs, complementary furniture, fabric, art and flowers all contribute. Because logs have such character in themselves, they often require little additional decorating. I have seen many skilled interior designers 'butcher' a log home because they over-decorated it without respecting the logs' own natural character.

On a larger scale, architectural features are a source of character in any home. Nooks and alcoves speak to our need for privacy and security. Lofts address a desire to be at once separate yet connected. Log beams, whether structural or decorative, reinforce the rustic nature of a log home and give visual form and relief. Plate and chair rails, dropped soffits, wainscoting and built in cabinets can all add character.

The same principles of balance, honesty and respect for materials apply to the exterior. Being balanced and sensitive to the landscape and using materials wisely helps build your home's character. Express yourself in the detailing of log posts and corners. Will your columns be paired, tapered, flared at the base? Will your log corners have staggered ends, a dramatic curl or a gentle sweep? The massiveness of logs generally demands that they be close to the earth on a solid base. A stone base that is at least as wide as the logs can help anchor your home to your building site.

Your roof massing and shape is important. Dormers should be balanced. Overhangs should be generous and should extend further at the ridge line than at the eaves. Built-up fascias add visual interest. Be aware of how bump-outs and recesses create visual interest and enhance the play of light and shadow on your exterior walls.

Dwight Eisenhower stated that the qualities of a great man are "vision, integrity, courage, understanding, the power of articulation, and profundity of character." It can be said that a great home echoes the same qualities. Your vision for your home can be an extension of who you are. Have the courage to honestly articulate that vision to your designer and builders. Take the time to understand the materials and how they work

together. You will be well on the way to building a wonderful home. Character becomes the by-product of your values, your awareness and your self-expression.

[www.designma.com](http://www.designma.com)

[murray@designma.com](mailto:murray@designma.com)