

THIS IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

# Patterns of Home

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## PATTERN TWO

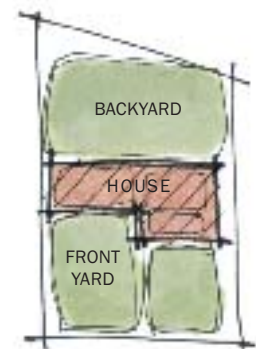
*Well-designed homes with well-proportioned, satisfying interior rooms make well-proportioned exterior rooms of the spaces around them.*

# CREATING ROOMS, OUTSIDE AND IN

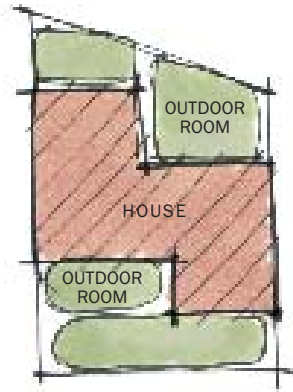
**Just as surely as it shapes** the dining room and the living room beyond, this house also shapes an outdoor room, a courtyard in between.

**A**S YOU WALK AROUND AN EMPTY BUILDING SITE, a natural instinct is to think, “the kitchen should go here... the living room could look out in this direction...” We tend to imagine ourselves in the most important rooms of the house and think how these rooms can be oriented to fit the site. But a house, by its very presence on a site, creates outdoor rooms as well as indoor rooms. And the outdoor rooms should be as well considered and as well proportioned as the indoor rooms. In a well-designed house, there is a lively balance of indoor and outdoor rooms, and the two types of spaces form a kind of interlocking checkerboard on the site.

What makes this pattern so compelling is the fundamental idea that the critical *rooms* of a house, the rooms most used and treasured, are outside as well as in; and that, unless a house is conceived from the beginning as simultaneously shaping *both* kinds of rooms, the outdoor rooms end up as leftover spaces, without the coherence of design required to make them truly work. The indoor rooms can also suffer when a house is located and organized primarily with respect to its interiors. The indoor spaces can feel cut off from the site and can lack the in-out interplay that, regardless of climate, is so characteristic of successful homes.



Every house creates both indoor and outdoor rooms. Even the typical suburban house—shaped without much consideration for its outdoor spaces—creates two major outdoor rooms: “the front yard” and “the backyard.”



Here, the form of the house, while continuing to shape its interior rooms, more boldly shapes its exterior rooms as well.

## THE ROOTS OF THE PATTERN

The roots of this pattern lie in a combination of ecological, psychological, and aesthetic factors. From an ecological point of view, rooms can be thought of as habitats. And outdoor rooms are outdoor habitats more likely to be lived in and used—and more likely, therefore, to be cared for and improved—when they are defined and tempered by the very building that is their users’ primary habitat. A building that helps shape a courtyard, a greenhouse/garden room that helps shape its garden, a balcony that animates the patio below all illustrate cases in which the home, itself the primary “nest,” is used to boldly delineate the outdoors immediately beside it.

In such cases, the presence of the building, if properly oriented to sun, shade, and wind, can create a microclimate and temper the outdoor room, making it all the more appealing. By comparison, outdoor areas that are largely leftover spaces, dissociated from the interiors

**This courtyard** is as carefully detailed as any indoor room. The low edges formed by the trellis, the low sitting wall that defines the outer edge of the court, the step-seats down from the dining room, and the two-story wing stepping down to the one-story pavilion all enhance the courtyard, helping it function as an interior room.



where people gather, tend never to become rooms of everyday use and are thus apt to be neglected.

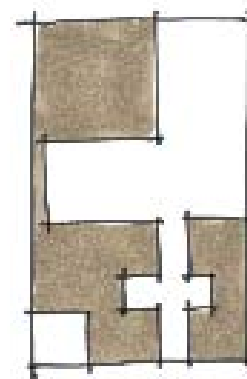
The psychological basis for the pattern stems from the need for defensible outdoor space—space that is both enclosed enough to be securely *ours* and open enough to be part of a greater natural order. Our need for such spaces is elaborated in *Refuge and Outlook*; here, it is used to help explain why an outdoor space, shaped by the home it serves, provides such pleasure. Perhaps the great secret contained by this pattern is that, just as deeply as we long for shelter, we long for sheltered gardens. And the homes that stir our souls are places that in single strokes create both. After all, the primary place of Genesis is the walled garden. Eden, architecturally, is a squarish outdoor room.

Aesthetically, the pattern tends to create rich and interesting quiltlike geometries of indoor/outdoor space. Much of the charm and intrigue of the houses examined for this pattern comes from the way the buildings make a mosaic pattern of their sites. These patterns, inherently more complex, ambiguous, and replete with order than their suburban cousins (see the drawings on p. 51 and on the facing page), are satisfying in and of themselves because they are better integrated. Houses and sites that incorporate this pattern are like paintings in which the so-called negative space is as positively and imaginatively shaped as the foreground itself.

In the photo on p. 50, an outdoor courtyard is glimpsed through a dining room; the edge of the court is defined by a living room wing and its trellis. The interior rooms are the positive captured spaces, the reason the building exists... but they are also background foils that serve to define the courtyard, with the court itself as the primary positive space. In effect, it is the interplay of closed–open–closed that makes the whole place lively, a place where each space in turn becomes a positive force in the entire ensemble.



**In effect, this house** contains two living rooms: the indoor one and its outdoor equivalent. A generous opening between the two helps knit them together.



Under the impact of this pattern, a house and the space around it become an interlocking whole, each shaping the other.

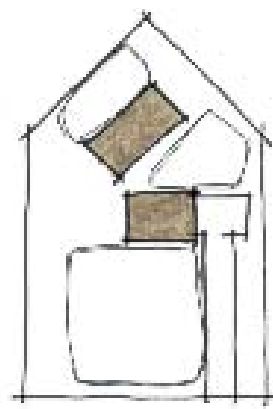


**A gateway becomes like a front door** into an outdoor room. After the building itself, gates, fences, and trees may be used to shape outdoor rooms.

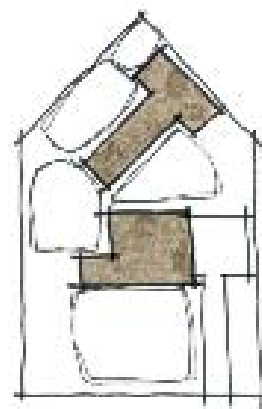
## WORKING WITH THE PATTERN

Homes create rooms, indoors and out. Use this pattern to think of the major rooms your home will contain. Imagine where they will be on the site and how they will be oriented.

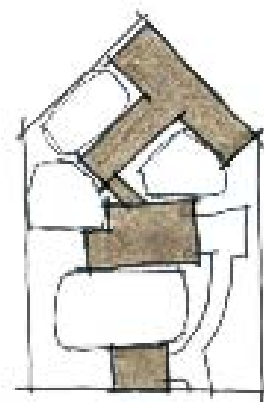
- *Let the location of the indoor rooms shape the outdoor rooms,* both the natural outdoor rooms partially created by the site and the new ones created entirely by the building.
- *Imagine the entire site as a sequence of roomlike places,* a checkered pattern of indoor and outdoor spaces.
- *The sequence of rooms will have a natural hierarchy:* Some will be large, more important, and more central; others will be supportive and transitional. Some will be for cars and people; others will be for people only. Make them all part of the pattern and make sure none is useless, leftover space.
- *Use wings of buildings, exterior walls, outbuildings, and breezeways* to help create the basic pattern; use plantings, low walls, terraces, and furnishings to underscore and strengthen the pattern.



Major indoor and outdoor rooms are formed together, in interaction with the site.



The whole site is a hierarchical sequence of indoor/outdoor rooms.



A variety of elements—walls, plantings, gateways, paths—are used to define and embellish the pattern of rooms.

# A Quilt of Courts and Rooms

**T**HE SITE PLAN FOR THIS SMALL HOME in West Marin, California, by architect Cass Calder Smith, is a perfect example of the pattern in action. Three buildings are located on the site: a carport, an L-shaped main house, and a bedroom wing. These structures are located to orient the major indoor rooms of the house—living, dining, and so on—and to create an interconnected sequence of outdoor spaces. To clarify the way the pattern works, two colors are overlaid on the plan on p. 56: green for the major outdoor rooms and red for the indoor rooms.

**The two-story portion of the house** provides a strong back to the court. The flanking one-story wings give the court a comfortable scale.





*Imagine the entire site as a sequence of roomlike places, a checkered pattern of indoor and outdoor spaces.*

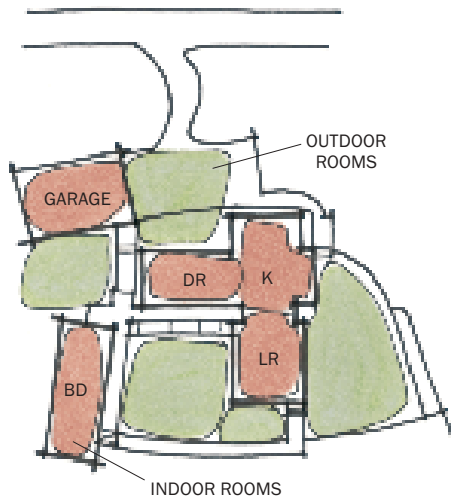
The two-story wall and the carport together define a north-facing court, the first outdoor room, a place to arrive and to leave the car behind. The two-story “back” buffers the court on the southern side of the site from prevailing winds.

It’s interesting to note that all the colored shapes are “positive” shapes, shapes that have an identifiable form and feel whole, not exactly squares or rectangles, but square- and rectangular-ish. The rectangles are never longer than 2:1, so they retain the quality of a comfortable indoor room (see *Parts in Proportion*). Each of the spaces is defined by elements of the building and aspects of the site. There are almost no “negative” spaces, those leftover places—often found between the major rooms—that are hard to define and to make usable. The entire site is like a quilt of interlocking, well-shaped rooms.

In terms of the pattern, the most important rooms on the site plan are the living room, the dining room/study, and the south-facing central courtyard that is in part defined by these spaces. This trio of spaces forms the central common area: the living room and dining room define and anchor the courtyard, which in turn provides an intimate outdoor room into which the living and dining rooms open.

A key reason for organizing the site this way was to use the house as a buffer against the prevailing northerly winds, creating a protected courtyard open to a view. In this climate, where days are often sunny but cool, the building tempers the microclimate of the court, making it a comfortable room.

## A HOUSE THAT CREATES ROOMS, OUTSIDE AND IN



### A HIERARCHY OF ROOMS

All the other rooms on the site are developed to complement the central court arrangement. The carport, for example, is located to allow a smooth transition onto the site by car and turned so that the rear ends of the cars are not left facing the street. But this same carport, in conjunction with the north wall of the main building, also forms an outdoor arrival room for cars and pedestrians, a coherent space, reinforced by landscape, in which the cars are left behind. On its south side, the carport is used to form a small entry court, a garden to pass through as we move toward a pivoting gate that, like the true front door of the house, opens into the main courtyard.





**Like a front door into the house,** the gate pivots into the main court. The carport has been left behind. The two trellises overlap to intensify the point of entry into the main court.

The main courtyard and the indoor room to its north (the dining room/study with its bedroom above) are the center of the plan. But the secondary spaces (the carport, the guest bedroom wing) are located to reinforce the pattern and to create a sequence of well-shaped rooms around the center. Like many of the farms in the area, this house uses the strategy of a building cluster to define its outdoor rooms. The house comprises three separate buildings. The living room, shaped like a one-story pavilion set off from the central two-story structure, is in effect a fourth building in the composition. The farm cluster tradition—in which yards and pens and gardens are shaped by the farmhouse, shed, and barn—is the inspiration for the site plan.



**In checkerboard fashion,** the carport and two-story wall create a second outdoor room: a pedestrian entry court that acts as a transitional place between the car court and the main court. The plantings, gate, and northern wall of the bedroom wing complete the definition of this outdoor room and continue the work of buffering the main court from the wind.

**The main court** is the central outdoor room, protected from the wind and open to the living spaces around it. The concrete path toward the front door is above the court and steps down into it, creating informal seats at the edge of the space. The trellis reinforces the sense of this space as a room, with a low edge for circulation.



*The sequence of rooms will have a natural hierarchy: Some will be large, more important, and more central; others will be supportive and transitional.*

## DETAILS STRENGTHEN THE PATTERN

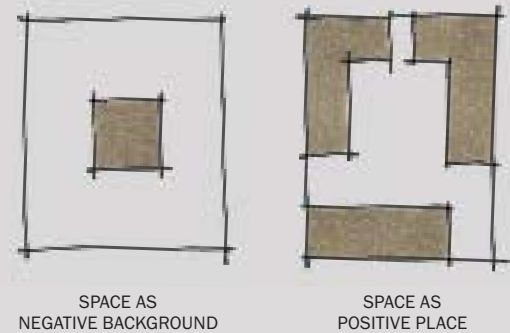
The details of the house reinforce the overall pattern. The common rooms are each given generous openings out toward the courtyard and the views beyond. Trellised awnings create a transition that further links these rooms and the court. (This is the kind of element we will return to in *Places in Between*.) The main paths of circulation are laid out to move along the edges of the spaces, so that the rooms are both enlivened by the comings and goings and yet left essentially intact. Landscape features—plantings and low retaining walls—are used to strengthen the shape of the rooms.

An interesting detail in this house, one that again underscores the overall pattern of spaces, is the gate that leads to the main courtyard

## THE PLEASURE OF POSITIVE OUTDOOR SPACE

Positive spaces in and around buildings can be thought of as areas that have enough definition—from walls, fences, steps, trees, edges of all kinds—to be seen and experienced as coherent, nameable places. Negative spaces are those fragments of space that are often leftover around and between the positive spaces. Negative space is background space, rarely named in ordinary conversation.

Homes are often thought of as positive elements, and the space they occupy merely the negative emptiness into which they are placed. Houses designed with this attitude are like cakes on a platter, with empty space all around them. But outdoor space can be as positive as the building itself.



The thinking behind this pattern is that people feel more comfortable in the outdoors around their homes when that space is positive. Positive spaces tend, therefore, to be used more than negative ones and so are more likely to be developed and improved. Negative outdoor space tends to be unused and avoided.



**Rotating on the pivot point** established by the red gate, the bedroom wing swings out, about 10 degrees beyond the expected 90-degree corner, giving the outdoor room an expansive feeling toward the south. This rotation also serves to give an informal quality to the space, in the tradition of the odd, not-quite-right-angled corners found in vernacular courtyard buildings.

(see the top photo on p. 57). The gate functions almost like a front door, but a door that is properly scaled to the large courtyard. Passing along the west edge of the main building, through the entry garden, you arrive at the gate, which seems almost ceremonial in the way it pivots, opening into the corner of the courtyard. The gate is glazed, but the panes are translucent, not clear, except for one at eye level that provides a glimpse into and through the room beyond. The pivot point of the gate defines the corner off which the bedroom wing itself pivots, a detail that subtly underscores the roomlike shape of the main court.

## A PAVILION WITHIN THE COURT

A close look at the design of the living room reveals a subtle variation in the way the architect is working with the pattern. With its low, gently curving roof, the room is like a pavilion set apart from the rest of the building. This effect is amplified by the entry foyer, the steps down into the room, and the way the fireplace is situated with its back to the rest of the house. The broad sliding-glass doors, which open on three sides, allow the room itself to become an “outdoor room.” Looking back at the site plan on p. 56, we note that the main courtyard can be seen as part of a larger swath of outdoor space with the living room pavilion at its center. The living room is *both* a background shape that helps define the foreground of the court *and* a “positive” foreground all its own, set in the middle of a field of open “negative” space.

With its subtle design and ingenious site plan, this home provides a powerful introduction to *Creating Rooms, Outside and In* and illustrates how even a small home can embody the pattern in rich and complex ways. Next we’ll look at a house on a larger site by the same architect, which presents a slightly more intricate example.



**The living room is a pavilion,** slightly detached from the main building.



**Open on three sides,** the room gives definition to the courtyard but is also like an outdoor room itself, a variation on an old-fashioned screened porch.



**With its doors open,** the living room becomes a shady outdoor room between the main courtyard and the terrace to the east.