Carl Safe

Photography
My interest in photography is informed by my sensibilities as an architect. A line, a surface, an elevation, a texture are all components that I use as background or frame. Most of my images include some reference to the human condition in relationship to the built environment. Architecture is the set on which our lines are performed. I am drawn by the ability of photographs to tell stories about the human condition.

I am also drawn to the relationships between “the ideal” as communicated in popular culture and the reality of who, in fact, we are. These can be the result of coincidence, they can document an isolated incident, a moment in time that captures a unique interaction or the banality of the most routine. They are all stories.

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Process
The component common to all of these design efforts is a respect for the process that produced them and the materials of which they are made. Design projects are not born whole. They are given birth by a desire, a need, a circumstance, a memory, or some combination of those and other unconscious musings, including luck.

They are shaped by resources (abundant or limited), time, patience, skills, errant efforts and importantly, by the materials of which they are made along with the technologies and skills required to make them. For those reasons I have included in the exhibit, remnants of those origins (models and sketches) so that you may better understand how some of these projects came to be what they are.


The non-profit Sheldon Art Galleries exhibits works by local, national and international artists in all media. Over 6,000 square feet of the galleries’ spaces on the 2nd floor are permanently devoted to rotating exhibits of photography, architecture, music and children’s art. A sculpture garden, seen from both the atrium lobby and the connecting glass bridge, features periodic rotations and installations, and the Nancy Spiras Kranzberg Gallery on the lower level features art of all media.

Education programs of the Sheldon Art Galleries introduce young people to the visual arts and provide workshops for talented young artists.
Carl Safe: The Architecture of Buildings, Furniture and Photographs

Architect, educator, photographer and furniture maker Carl Safe is a multi-talented artist who works in a variety of artistic mediums, designing spaces for human habitation and contemplation. Safe has had a fascinating career. Pursuing Latin American Studies at Notre Dame University during his summer breaks, Safe received his Master of Environmental Design from Yale University in 1970, and a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Minnesota in 1966. In the late 1960s, he was a faculty member of the Universidad de San Simon, Cochabamba, Bolivia and organized and developed summer design studios in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico during the summers of 1974, 1975 and 1981.

He began teaching at what is now the School of Design and Architecture, Sam Fox School of Design and Art at Washington University, in 1970, mentoring students in design and architectural support courses.

Safe’s design and teaching philosophies give weight to the interconnection between humanism and technology. In his architectural designs, he is careful to consider how the existing can mesh with the new, how materials can take on new meaning in differing contexts, providing an integrated spatial story and most critical—meshing the needs and dreams of the client and the budget with his own artistic vision. His understanding and sensitivity to these factors has helped him to create built environments that are both dynamic and humane.

In his furniture design, Safe often plays with and against the materials that he uses, creating juxtapositions and outcomes that are sometimes deliberately anti-intuitive. The furniture forms he has created, particularly those he has designed for himself and his family, make strong statements in space. These objects serve both a practical purpose and offer an elevated, artistic, sculptural expression. He likens his most successful designs to musical scores, with cerebral depth constructed from a combination of complex ideas that mesh with the kinds of materials used.

Safe’s photographs are informed by his sensibilities as an architect. He is keenly aware of line, texture and surface, elevations and how bodies relate to and against their surroundings within the frame. Most of his images include some reference to the human condition in relationship to the built environment. Safe captures moments of grace, as well as the banal, providing narrative moments about how we perceive ourselves both in reality, and in the ideal.

In addition to teaching courses at Washington University in St. Louis in his Emeritus status, Safe continues his professional practice, focusing on residential architecture as well as retail, commercial projects and furniture design at his office, Carl Safe Design Consultants, in the University City Loop.

About Design By Carl Safe

This exhibit grew out of a conversation in which I was asked if my architectural design work, my furniture design and my photography had any relationship to one another, whether or not they informed each other, and if so, how. It was a good question for which I had no clear response.

Curating this exhibit was a way of discovering an answer for myself. Perhaps you can draw some conclusions of your own.

Architectural Design

It’s complicated.

Ideally, it begins with an idea about how our built environment should define our relationships with each other. Of course, it is a response to “the program,” or set of objectives supplied by a client. Most projects begin with the need to solve some kind of “puzzle component”—for example, how can all pieces be juxtaposed so that they respond positively to the goals of the client on a particular site within a defined budget and compliant with all legal requirements?

Architecture is considered a profession because architects are supposed to be design experts. Governments require an architect’s professional seal and signature before issuing a building permit to certify that a proposal satisfies all code requirements for public safety.

However, there is no requirement that a proposal be “beautiful” or “well-designed.” “What a building looks like” grows out of the decisions of the architect, the predilections of the paying client, and occasionally by the largely arbitrary tastes of local architectural review boards.

Importantly, architecture takes time, a lot of time.

To move a project through several developmental phases (programming, conceptual design, design development, presentations, financing, construction documents, permits and construction) it takes months for simple projects and years for complex ones. The challenge is to move through all of these phases and not lose sight of an idea, and to arrive at a clear and even poetic objective that satisfies both the clients’ and society’s aspirations.

Furniture Design

Furniture is the most intimate architecture.

We touch it, we eat off of it, we sit on it, we gather around it, it defines space. It is also a good antidote to architectural design. Where architectural projects take years to complete, furniture projects can be “turned around” in a period of weeks or months. It is also a milieu in which, as a designer, I feel I have much greater freedom to explore ideas: form, materials and methods. The cost, both in time and money, is substantially different (less) as is the liability.

Perhaps most important, furniture design is a field in which detail development can still be indulged. Much of architectural design has been reduced to compositions of whole notes. Furniture design allows for compositions of finer grain resolution, quarter notes, eighth notes and with luck, an occasional grace note.