

## Interview with Aram Bassenian

Author of “Homes & Courtyards: 28 Homes for Outdoor Living”

**C**hairman and chief executive officer of one of the country’s largest residential architecture firms, Bassenian/Lagoni Architects in Newport Beach, California, Aram Bassenian (right) has spent more than three decades defining how Americans live. In two previously published books, “PURE CALIFORNIA” and “TUSCAN AND ANDALUSIAN REFLECTIONS,” Bassenian captured the changing face of American housing. In a just-released third volume, “HOMES & COURTYARDS,” Bassenian explores the latest major trend in new-home design – the integration of indoor and outdoor living.



**Q.:** **What are the factors behind the growing trend in indoor-outdoor living today?**

**A.:** “The pace at which we conduct our lives is certainly an important factor in home design today. That, in turn, has led to a greater need to build homes that function as *refuges* from the larger world and the near-constant attention, speed and multi-tasking it demands.

“However, we want to do more than simply stay inside our homes; we also want a sense of connectivity to the surrounding land. As a consequence, the veranda, the central courtyard, the patio, the garden have all become vital elements at the core of home design. The best designs blend inside with outside in an inventive way that enhances our daily enjoyment of both.”

“Tradition also exerts an enormous influence on residential design. In the ‘Introduction’ to HOMES & COURTYARDS, I mention some of the architects – historical and modern – who had had a major impact on Bassenian/Lagoni: Andrea Palladio, a sixteenth century Italian, the Americans Wallace Neff and Charles Moore, and Ricardo Legorreta from Mexico. Their work extends beyond any particular period. We have tried to absorb the lessons they taught so well and blend them with modern materials and technologies to express our own ideas about design.”

**Q: How does a courtyard enhance a floor plan and therefore daily living?**

**A:** “The courtyard should be an extension of the floor plan, a flowing out that connects the interior spaces to the outdoors. California architect Cliff Mays said he once designed “a two-room house with a five-room garden.” The best home designs strive to enhance that connection with the natural world. Whether it is an expansive veranda or a central courtyard, inventive architecture allows the outdoors to consistently activate the core of the home. “Courtyards also offer great flexibility in terms of location in relation to the home: entry courtyards, side courtyards, center courtyards, rear courtyards. Each option adds an element of surprise, provides the buyer a private outdoor space, infuses interior spaces with natural light, and significantly extends the livability of the interior.

“Of course, the location of the courtyard inevitably impacts a floor plan. With an entry courtyard, for example, the architect will want to introduce a living space to the front of the home – a home office, a casita or a game room. Whatever its function, this space should open to the outdoors as well.”

**Q: What are the tools for unifying interior and exterior living spaces?**

**A:** “Creating a cohesive living space between inside and outside rooms demands several design elements. You will want to introduce structural and design elements that create pleasing adjacencies. There should also be a steady play of natural materials throughout the interior to erase the distinction between indoor and outdoor rooms.

“View-through opportunities in each room facing the courtyard are a must, and courtyard spaces should be proportioned to accommodate conversation groups. Finally, the design should permit the courtyard to be furnishable in the same way an interior space is.”

**Q: Can you elaborate on how to arrange outdoor spaces to heighten livability?**

**A:** “As I mentioned, there are a great many options in locating a courtyard, and that location inevitably impacts the arrangement of these spaces. An entry courtyard, for example, should be used to soften the entry experience. To keep this space private, a gate or a solid door should be used to protect the courtyard. Landscape and hardscape within the courtyard – such as a garden, a fountain or an exterior fireplace – will help soften the enclosed space and make it an extension of the indoors.

“A side courtyard can work exceptionally well on a smaller lot where a conventional rear yard is not workable. Fountains are not employed so much in this type of courtyard, but a trellis is a popular option for creating privacy and softening the space. Fewer interior rooms are exposed to the outdoors with a side courtyard, but natural light will filter more deeply into the home. That’s a highly desirable feature with a small-lot configuration.

“Center courtyards are advantageous in less moderate climates in which outdoor living is limited to only six or seven months during the year. Surrounded on four sides, the fully enclosed center court provides a protected retreat with the greatest privacy and insulation from noise. Water tends to be a significant, organizing element in these enclosures, creating a relaxed environment that is shared by nearly every room in a home. French doors from the first floor spaces open onto the courtyard, while second-floor balconies overlook it – again blending outdoor and indoor living.”

**Q: Should portions of a courtyard be segmented and even covered?**

**A:** “Creating separate areas within a U-shaped courtyard – both covered and open – allows more of the home to orient to the outdoor living space. A covered eating area off the kitchen extends the latter living zone. A small private deck off the master suite, separated from the remaining space with landscape, introduces yet another functional area. These arrangements will allow natural light and ventilation to infuse the interior spaces.”

**Q: What special considerations govern architecture of a courtyard home?**

**A:** “The same design principles we follow for the rest of the home apply to courtyards as well, but you’re right – there are some special considerations. Take, for example, rear courtyards, which work exceptionally well on hilly or golf-course sites where expansive views will enhance the value of the home. When working with such a configuration, an architect would be well advised to reduce the massing at the rear of the house, thus creating a human scale in the outdoor living area. If the designer is featuring a pool or a fountain, push it into U-shaped home plan, so that the structure shelters the courtyard on three sides. This move will also enhance the perception of depth.

“Likewise, with a side courtyard, it is important to provide relief in terms of massing: Don’t let a looming second story overpower the outdoor space and spoil the scale.

“If an architect wishes to create a covered loggia off of a courtyard space, he or she should remember that ceilings block light filtration. Consider carefully the number and placement of windows in the interior rooms that will be affected. Also, I would recommend creating a physical division between the covered and open outdoor spaces, using columns, low walls and landscaping.”

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