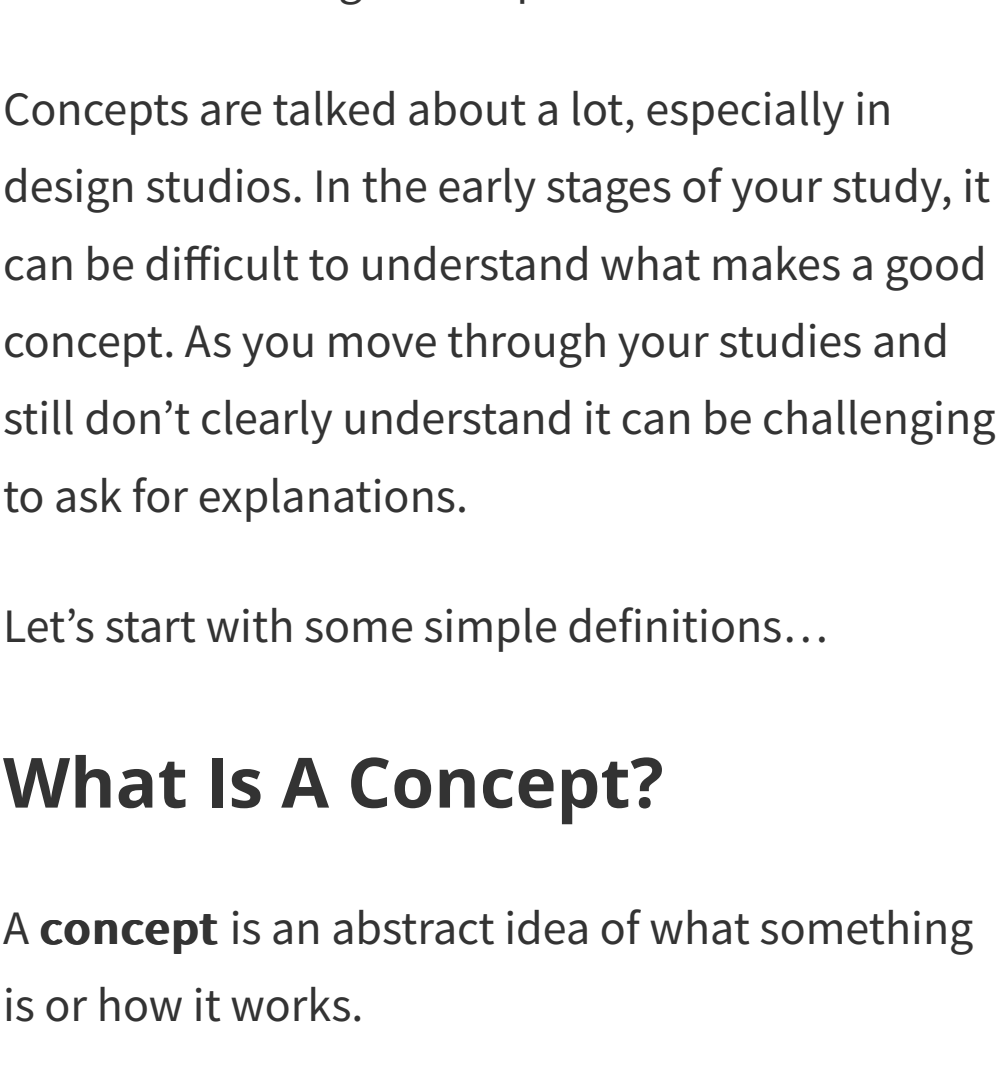


# What Is An Architecture Design Concept (And What Makes It Great)



One of the biggest challenges many architecture students have is grasping what an architecture design concept is, and what makes a great architecture design concept.

Concepts are talked about a lot, especially in design studios. In the early stages of your study, it can be difficult to understand what makes a good concept. As you move through your studies and still don't clearly understand it can be challenging to ask for explanations.

Let's start with some simple definitions...

## What Is A Concept?

A **concept** is an abstract idea of what something is or how it works.

**Abstract** is an expression of a general idea or essence of something, rather than a literal reality.

In other words, a concept is something abstract or intangible. We cannot see it or hold it. It is not something that is easily identified. It is the essence of something.

In architecture, a design concept is what the designer feels and thinks of when they connect to their design. It is what the user or visitor moving through the finished structure and spaces feels, thinks and experiences on their journey.

It is not one thing that creates a concept. It is not the materials, the layout of spaces, the activities, the people, or the site. It is the combination of every aspect of the project coming together in particular ways to create something different and unique.

*Learn more in the article titled [“Abstraction And Representation In Architectural Communication”](#)*

## What A Concept Is Not...

To help understand what a concept is, let's consider what a concept is not.

9 different elements come together to create a good design. A concept is just one of them.

At the start of the project, we gather information about the site, typology, brief, users and programme. These become the foundational project context, parameters and requirements that we are working with.

During the design process, we use materials and technology, formal design elements and principles, and collaboration to create an architectural structure, spaces and experience that responds to the project parameters.

**A concept is not these things. A concept is not the site, typology, brief, users, programme, materials and technology, formal design elements and principles and collaboration.**

**A concept uses and responds to these things, but these are not the concept.**

These become our tools or building blocks of design to express and create the architectural design concept.

Let me give you some examples.

After initial research, beginner students will often come out with concepts such as:

- Clusters of trees, sloping to the water, meandering laneways, open and exposed ground plane, wind or sun – These are not concepts. These are site conditions or aspects of site analysis.
- Vertical school, openable shelter, modern hospital or shopping strip – These are not concepts. These are typologies.
- Sustainable design, flexible spaces, or an innovative hub – These are not concepts. These are brief requirements.
- Outgoing, adventurous, introverted, quiet or intelligent – These are not concepts. These are the qualities and characteristics of users and activities.

These items above are things that everyone is dealing with. They are not unique to your design.

- Grid, clustered, centralised or linear – These are not concepts. These are formal design principles that are ways of arranging space and structure.
- Transparent, heavy, dense, layered or organic – These are not concepts. These physical qualities and characteristics are created through the use of design elements such as plane, volume, shape, form, light and shadow.
- Timber, concrete, steel, mesh or plastic – These are not concepts. These are materials.

Again, the items above are not unique. They are generic options that everyone has.

None of the design factors is a concept. Even combining these things does not create a concept. Linear clusters of timber pods or layers of teaching spaces are not concepts. They are decisions made to help express the concept, but they are not the concept.

*Learn more in the article titled [“Top 9 Architecture Design Factors For ALL Architecture Projects”](#)*

## So What Is A Concept Again?

**A concept is the essence of the project. It is what ties everything together. It is the experience, emotion, qualities and characteristics people immediately identify when they enter a structure or space.**

A concept may be one, clear, single overarching idea. Or it may be a series of smaller ideas that connect around a theme.

A concept may easily arise at the start of the project. Or it may slowly, and perhaps more painfully appear as ideas are tested, experimented and explored.

A concept may derive from the project context or parameters, or it may be something that uses the project to explore and express independent ideas.

**A concept is an idea about space, structure, inhabitation and human experience.**

**A concept responds to the site, typology, users, brief and programme and is expressed with materials and technology, design elements and principles and the innovation of collaboration.**

## What Is The Purpose Of A Concept?

The purpose of a concept is to provide a framework and set of guidelines for the design process and final experience of the finished structure and spaces.

A clear concept allows the designer to assess every decision and determine a way forward that supports and aligns with the concept. A good concept is considered and expressed in every detail and at every scale, in every drawing, every material selection and every line on a page.

Nothing is generic. Every way you look at the developing design, it reflects the physical qualities and characteristics, and ultimately the experience of the over-arching concept.

Every way you experience the finished structure and space it expresses and explores the concept.

## Where Does A Concept Come From?

A concept arises from one or more of the design factors. We spend time researching, documenting and understanding the site, typology, users, brief and programme.

We document existing site conditions and start to analyse these look for patterns, connections and relationships at the mega, macro and micro scales.

We look to precedent of similar typologies to understand best practice, what works and what does not.

We analyse the programme and again start to find functional relationships and patterns.

We interrogate the brief to find a project vision and aspirations.

We interview users to fully understand their needs, wants and desires.

We consider possible materials and technology that may be relevant or excluded.

During this process ideas and concepts arise about what the experience of this structure could be. Research and pre-design are all about going deep and finding opportunities. Possible concepts should be jumping out all over the place. If you cannot find a concept after considering all this information, you are not going deep enough in your research.

Some examples of architectural concepts might include:

- A response to the existing context, conditions, patterns or parameters – Because of (an aspect of site, typology, user, brief, programme) the concept is...(Note the concept can enhance, reinforce, challenge, interrupt, reinterpret, distort etc. the parameters.)...
- A question or exploration – How can architecture...?
- An ambition or provocation – A building/ structure/ space that...

*Learn more in the article titled [“The Ultimate Architectural Site Analysis Guide”](#)*

## What Next?

Concepts can be tough to master, especially when you're starting.

Some students get it right away. Most will struggle at least through their first few design projects.

You may find that you land on a concept that everyone loves without understanding why.

Some concepts will come easily from the very beginning. Others will be slow and hard to clarify and describe.

Regardless, it is critical to continue to persevere with understanding and mastering concepts. When you finally get it and figure out how to craft a great concept, your design process is going to be so much clearer and easier, and your final design so much richer.

Keep listening to other students to understand good and bad concepts and successful projects and study great examples of concepts in architecture. Don't try to reinvent the wheel and figure it out. Study those that have gone before.

Most of all, have fun!!

**Until next time...**

**...Liz at ArchiMash**