



The
**FOUNTAINHEAD-
ACHE**

**THE POLITICS OF
ARCHITECT-CLIENT RELATIONS**

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Measure Twice, Cut Once Architects and Aphorisms- Therapy in the Spoken Word

Architect Duo Dickinson's humor is clearly informed by many years of experience working with clients and builders. In his wise and entertaining essay that follows, he captures the poetry and angst of the day-to-day struggles of an architect.

Duo Dickinson, a Cornell University graduate, is principal of his own five-person office in Madison, Connecticut. He has written four books on architecture, the latest Small Houses for the Next Cen-

ture, was published by McGraw-Hill in 1994. Mr. Dickinson has taught at Yale College and Roger Williams University. His work has been featured in over 40 national and international magazines, including an Architectural Record House award for his own residence in 1985.

“Measure twice, cut once.”

If a television program can synopsise our willingness as a culture to substitute clichés for substance it is “This Old House.” When architects watch this show (usually for vicarious thrills during a recession—at least we can *see* somebody building *something*), they cringe at the lack of insight and innovation presented by all parties concerned—but especially by the architects as presented to the audience by the producers. At the appropriate moment their concerned faces spout sound-bites with just enough aphoristic clout to have the tiniest bit of resonance. The collective wit and wisdom of this program has been distilled to the “common sense” comment, “Measure twice, cut once.” This quote has been emblazoned on millions of T-shirts and coffee mugs owned by Public Television elitists.

The real world of design and construction presents far more unpredictable, ambiguous, and just plain stupid vignettes. Televised craftsmanship is sterile when compared to the lack of pretense and self-imbued ego that are present when people of good will get together to build something. Witness the “anti-cliché” spouted to me by a carpenter with a vague smell of Miller on his breath on a hot summer job site at about 1:15 in the afternoon ...

“I’ve cut it three times and it’s still too short.”

Given the ups and downs and vagaries of the design/build process where the motivation to build things is seldom limited to the basic human need for shelter, and given the lack of a rule book to tell us exactly what to do at any given moment, there is a lot to be learned from the collected wisdoms of those who have distilled their humor and knowledge into *meaningful* sound-bites from which anyone can learn.

“I have a porch addition—and some smaller projects.”

This quote has been ascribed to a young Michael Graves—an architect who presumably now looks upon porches as infinitesimal specks of graphite dust on gigantic plans for huge projects—elements that have now probably fallen from his consciousness.

But within this quote lies a subtle commentary about the latent outlook of most architects. We try to put our best foot forward and convince the world (and mostly ourselves) that there is actually a real, viable, professional future in designing things for people. "God is in the details" *especially* when *all* you have the opportunity to design is detail work.

It is this sort of gallows humor that provides architects and builders with some of their best lines. This attitude reminds me of a phrase from a 1974 *National Lampoon* magazine depicting a parody of a Pillsbury advertisement for its crescent rolls. In this case it was for "Nilsbury"—and showed the classic Dough Boy figure (but in this case with ribs showing) staring vacantly into an empty cardboard tube that once held crescent roll dough and supposedly murmuring the phrase ...

"Nothing says nothing like nothing from the oven."

As bleak as this is, it does allow us to laugh at a hopeless situation when there is very little in the real world that makes sense (darkly enough in this case the Biafran famine). So it can be with architecture. Phrases that are literally cynical become almost hopeful in their irony.

"Free advice and worth every penny."

So said a young architect/builder in giving a time-consuming bid that I was extraordinarily grateful to receive. He put a spin on his services that allowed me to appreciate their *real* value despite all his hard work. In the construction industry, all professionals involved risk their time in trying to *get work* and clients are often all too willing to take advantage of this willingness to pick the brains of those who desperately want to execute their project. A valuable lesson to be learned from this young builder is that the budgeting and planning work that architects and builders do *before* things actually come out of the ground are inherently flawed and conceptual.

When I use this phrase to conclude my sales pitch to potential clients who are interviewing me, they often look blank and then giggle—realizing that I've acknowledged that any thoughts I give them with such limited data on a first blush basis are inherently incomplete and it would be silly of them to hold any view offered up in such a vacuum as anything other than a personal reaction. In this way, humor casts the bright light of truth on the presumptions of everyone concerned. It's humor

born of experience that can guide architects and clients into understanding that the business of design has very little *tangible* value and a great deal of *perceived* value that is derived from experience, trust, and the indefinable belief that aesthetics have meaning.

“A good architect can turn a screw-up into a feature.”

So spoke architect David Sellers—someone who might describe himself as relatively “out there,” beyond the world of architectural normalcy. His quote is the natural progression of the previous quote—merely that it is extraordinarily easy to offer up a design or an aesthetic construct based on imprecise data. Anything that exists on paper always *evolves* as it begins to become a physical reality. There are often extraordinarily lyric and poignant architectural elements that evidence the greatest level of skill because they *compensate* for something that was completely unanticipated.

A flowing stair that I executed in a project in New York could be said to be curvilinear counterpoint to an angular context—inserting lush ash and walnut steps into a preexisting world of unfinished redwood—but in truth we saved 20,000 dollars by *not moving* a 400-amp electrical power box (discovered once we removed part of the house that surrounded it). Should we have known that power box was there before demolition? In the best of all possible worlds, yes. Does the final product look like we did not anticipate that potentially costly feature? Hopefully not.

“Good, fast, and cheap—you can only have two—the third is always excluded.”

Think about it—if a project is “good” (high quality, lustrous materials) and “fast” (executed quickly) it involves the highest level of skill and resources, and is always relatively costly—it *won't* be “cheap.”

If a project is “fast” and “cheap,” odds are it *won't* be “good.”

If a project is “good” and “cheap” it almost always takes a *long* time to execute—skill levels are low, or there is little or no “organization” behind the construction—hence it *won't* be “fast.”

Since a builder revealed this construct to me, it has been claimed by clients of mine who are in advertising and other industries involving money and schedules.

More money can save time and facilitate quality. *More* time can compensate for less money. These are simple truths that provide perspective beyond the 1980s cliché, “You can’t have it all.”

“It’ll get done before it’s too late.”

So said a hardwood sawmill owner to stairmaker Richard Walston. He’d asked for a *date* when he could pick up his material—having waited months when weeks were quoted. When asked how *long* he’d have to wait “before it’s too late,” Walston was asked:

“How long is a piece of string?”

Building anything that has *not* been built before makes timing and costs virtually incalculable in any finite terms. Rather than let the angst get you down, these vagaries are used to spawn humor that is both cautionary and therapeutic.

Words and architecture don’t mix very well. Architects are infamous for obfuscatory polysyllabic nomenclature (and I just proved it!). So it’s often left to these seemingly jaded phrasings to capture the true essence of what makes architecture so tough to describe—both as art and as a profession.

“There are three rules of architecture: (1) get the job, (2) get the job, and (3) get the job.”

This has been ascribed to architect Vincent Kling of Philadelphia, but it conveys (not unlike the three rules of real estate, “location, location, and location”) a universal truth. In this case the point is if you design without clients and are without work to *build* you are a dilettante. An architect *builds* by “getting the job;” a dilettante makes excuses, feels bitter, and does not practice architecture so much as conceptual art. Without “jobs” to execute, there is no *architecture*—only aesthetic ideas that may (or may not) apply to building something.

Architectural theory constantly flails about, trying to locate its hard edge (or edges). Definition of aesthetic theory is akin to catching spring water in your cupped hands—you get only a little of it and it’s never easy to hold on to. Aphorisms invalidate the pretensions of the theoretical by casting the bright light of

a reality on fuzzy concepts often based on nonarchitectural values set amid personal jealousies. The more we expose pretense the thinner the emperor's garments become.

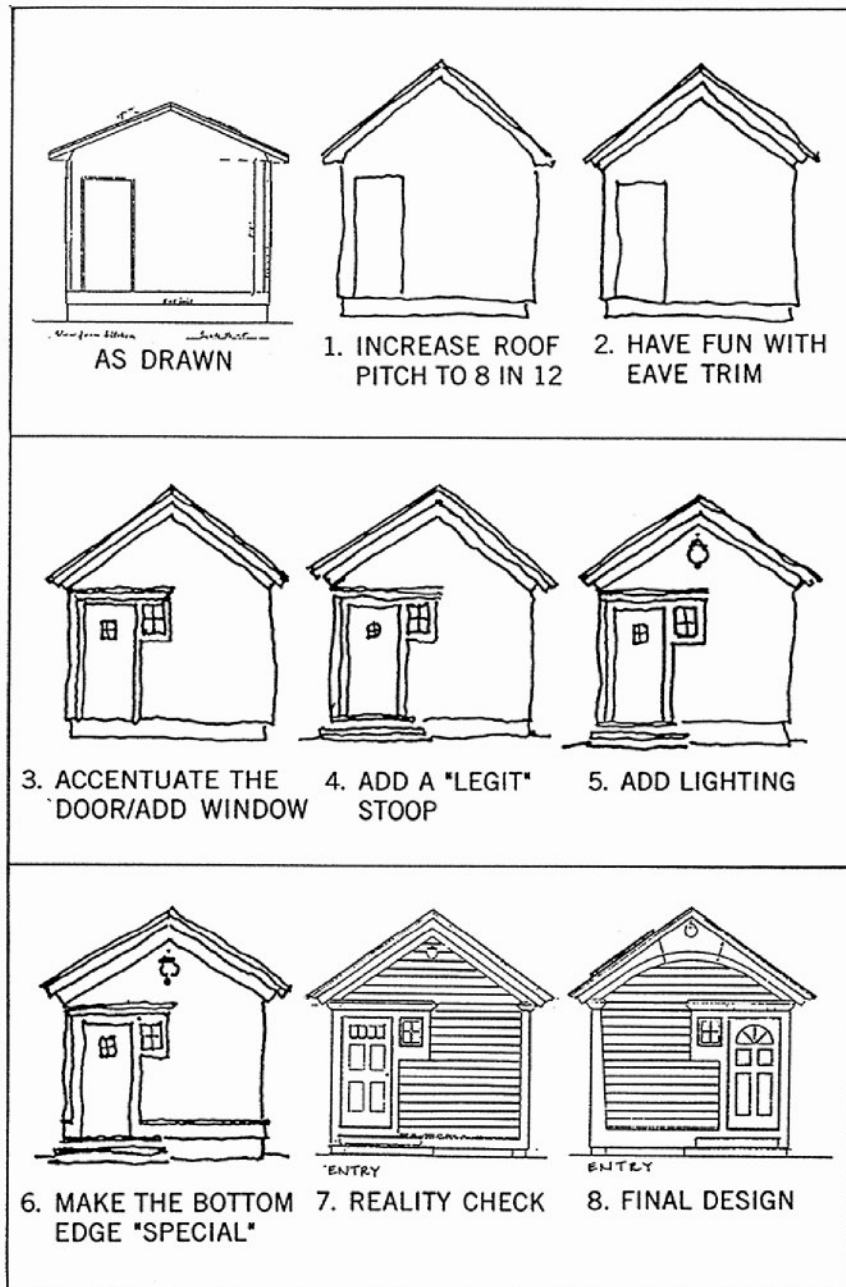


FIGURE 9-1
 Images showing the progression between a builder's sketch and the final design for an outbuilding in New Canaan, CT. In some respects these sketches present an answer to the cliché query, "Why the hell hire an architect, anyway?" That's the way I used them when the client came to me and asked, "Does it make sense to hire you?" I responded, "No job too small, no fee too high," and proceeded to transform the builder's rude image into a semiexpressive little box.