

Fine Homebuilding

Certified green: energy-smart homes
and the LEED-H rating program, p. 94

HOUSES

ANNUAL ISSUE

Remodeling Secrets Revealed

Save money
by improving
your home
rather than
adding on, p.44

Summer 2008 No. 195
www.finehomebuilding.com
ON DISPLAY UNTIL OCTOBER 28, 2008

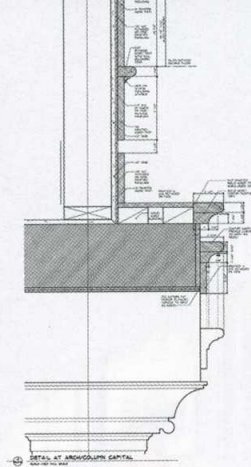
U.S. \$8.99/Canada \$9.99



Light-filled, energy-efficient bungalow, p. 52

How to Afford an Architect

Proven ways to save the design team's time and your money



BY DUO DICKINSON

When David and Nancy Stein came to see me about designing a house, their biggest concern, like most clients', was cost. Their house had just burned down, and they had to rebuild. They would be reusing most of the original foundation, and they had a builder, Clark Sellars, lined up. But they wanted to know whether they could hire me to design the new house and still stay within their budget.

The Steins' budget was limited strictly to the insurance check. If the project came in over budget, they wouldn't have the money to pay for it. Given their insurance settlement and the house's footprint, they could afford about \$115 per sq. ft., including design and structural-engineering fees. Although I knew completing the project on this budget was possible, I wouldn't be able to provide a full scope of architectural services. The Steins, however, were willing to roll up their sleeves and become actively involved in the design process.

Because this extra work required the clients' time, this approach might not be for everybody. All told, my firm's design fee was about 5% of the total construction cost. This figure is extremely low, even for the strictly limited work that we did. The Steins' experience, therefore, is a

case study of the ways involved, conscientious homeowners can reduce an architect's fees.

Design options and detailed drawings are expensive

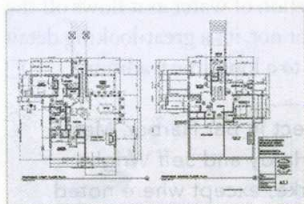
Architects most often charge some form of a fixed fee, either a certain percentage of construction costs, a dollar amount per square foot, or a lump sum. Regardless of the mechanics of billing, a client really is paying for the architect's time. If you can plead your case to an open-minded architect and explain that you will diligently limit his or her time and take on added responsibility, there is a good chance you can weave the cost of a creative, innovative, and (you hope) beautiful design into your budget.

My own firm charges all fees on an hourly basis, but we offer two different service levels: a full-service option and a consultant option. Under the full-service option, my firm serves as the architects of record and provides a full scope of architectural services,

including weekly site visits during construction. In this scenario, we typically present five or six different design options to the client and react to his or her feedback. Once the client and I have come up with a consensus design, my firm draws a complete set of construction and

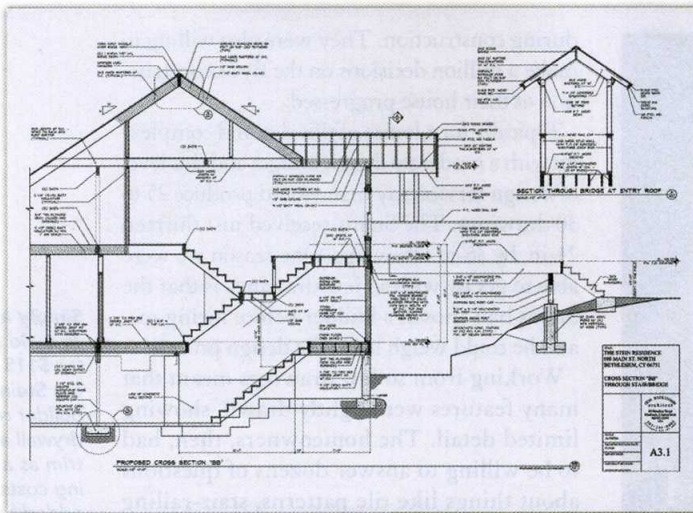


Modest budgets demand straightforward shapes and spaces. Part of an architect's job is to design a house that can be built on budget. For these cost-cutting clients, that meant simple framing (a basic roof shape) and simple materials (clapboards, T-111 siding, and asphalt roof shingles).

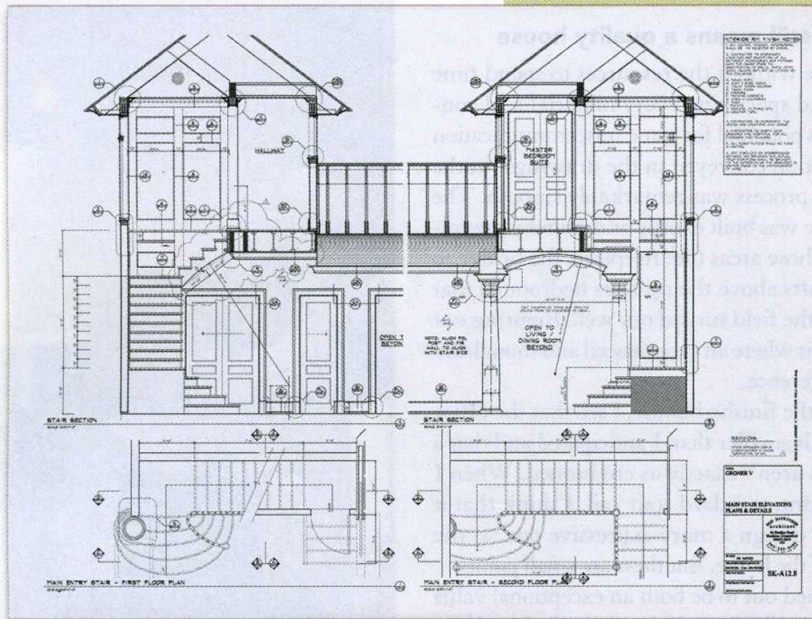


Involved, conscientious homeowners

can reduce an architect's fees.



Lightly drawn stair plan

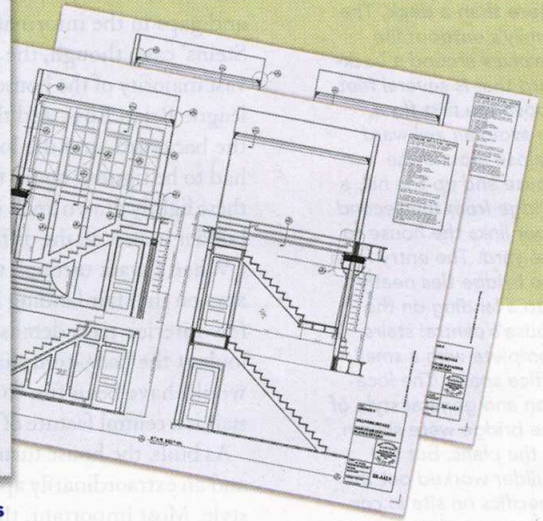


Detailed stair plans

FEWER DRAWINGS, SMALLER BILL

Labor-intensive drawings account for a large part of an architect's billable hours. For the Steins' house, my firm drew about 80% fewer drawings than we'd typically do for a full-service project. Of course, this means the homeowner and the builder have much less detail to guide them. How much less?

For the Steins, who used our consultant-service option, the staircase was lightly drawn with all its details shown in a cross section of the house (top drawing). The notes indicate the headroom required, critical framing details, and stair location. By comparison, a client with a similar staircase who used our full-service option received multiple detailed drawings showing all elevations of the stairs (bottom drawings). The plans included all dimensions and trim details, including the baluster design and placement—something that was left up to the builder and the homeowners in the Steins' case.



shop drawings, generally somewhere between 60 and 80 drawings. On average, this full-service approach costs between 16% and 18% of the construction budget.

Saving money means making more decisions yourself

With clients like the Steins, for whom limiting costs is the primary concern, I recommend our other service option. In this scenario, my firm limits the services we provide to make the project buildable for the minimum possible fee, thereby providing maximum savings to the client. We essentially serve as consultants. The client supplies explicit guidelines and design criteria. I deliver a minimum number of drawings for an accurate bid and a viable permit application. The drawings provide critical dimensions rather than complete dimensions, and the builder gets performance standards rather than product specifications.

To reduce my involvement, the client takes on greater responsibility

to interpret designs and to intercede with the builder to specify materials and finishes. In this client-architect relationship, it's important that the client and the builder have a good relationship and that the builder is involved early in the design process.

Although I'm billing an hourly rate for my time, this type of consultancy contract generally translates to a fee of between 11% and 14% of the construction budget. However, the more the client knows what he wants, the less he'll spend on design services.

With this house, we were able to reduce fees to 5% because the Steins had such a clear idea of what they wanted. David Stein had sketched a rough floor plan before we met. My firm presented the Steins with two options, and they readily approved one of them.

The Steins also took steps to reduce the time I spent on their project. For instance, they cut back on my travel time by coming to my office for design meetings and by requesting only two site visits



More than a deck. The family's outdoor life revolves around a backyard that is several feet above the first floor. To avoid an awkward trapeze around the house and up the hill, a bridge from the second floor links the house to the yard. The entry from the bridge ties neatly into a landing on the house's central stairs, complete with a small office space. The location and general style of the bridge were shown in the plans, but the builder worked out the specifics on site in consultation with the owner.

often at the last minute. On average, they said this involved about two hours a day of research and returning calls.

Reduced design fee still means a quality house

When designing a house without the resources to spend time drawing every detail and specifying every material and construction method, there is potential for some miscommunication and gaps in the information conveyed in the drawings. In the Steins' case, though, the process was remarkably smooth. The vast majority of the house was built exactly as drawn by my colleague Brian Ross, and those areas (the fireplace, the bridge to the backyard, and the lofts above the upstairs bedrooms) that had to be figured out in the field turned out well. Figuring out these lightly drawn areas is where an experienced and thoughtful builder makes all the difference.

When I walk through the finished house, I see that the office area on the stair landing is smaller than I anticipated and that a few interior-trim details aren't exactly as envisioned. When I look at the code-compliant, standard stair rail, I think that it would have been fun to design a more expressive one, as the stair is a central feature of the house. But these are small points.

As built, the house turned out to be both an exceptional value and an extraordinarily apt reflection of a family's values and lifestyle. Most important, the project was finished on budget and more or less on time. Obviously, my firm helped to make that happen, but in truth, the builder is almost always the hero when time and money issues are resolved satisfactorily. In this case, his diligence, thoughtfulness, and can-do attitude very much enabled the project to be a success for everyone concerned. □

Madison, Conn.-based architect Duo Dickinson (www.duodickinson.com) believes you shouldn't have to choose between budget-friendly mediocrity and unaffordable fantasy. Photos by Mick Hales.

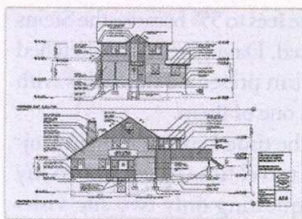
during construction. They were also willing to make a million decisions on the fly as construction of their house progressed.

Typically for a house of this size and complexity with a moderate design budget and this level of design service, my firm would produce 25 to 30 drawings. The Steins received just thirteen 24-in. by 36-in. drawings. One reason we were able to get by with so few drawings is that the Steins had chosen a builder before hiring me, and he could weigh in on the design process.

Working from so few drawings meant that many features were lightly drawn, showing limited detail. The homeowners, then, had to be willing to answer dozens of questions about things like tile patterns, stair-railing details, paint colors, and hardware choices,

Simply appealing.

To build a house for \$115 per sq. ft., the Steins and their builder relied on drywall and flat stock trim as a way of limiting costs. A taper added to the fireplace shroud makes these common materials expressive.



The homeowners have to answer dozens of questions, often at the last minute.

