

Course T68: Helping Hands: Involving Clients in the Design Process

Opening the Black Box: Duo Dickinson

1. Architecture is taught as a fine art where a “genius” creates a “piece”. That “piece” is then bought by a “patron”. This is the classic fine arts paradigm of an isolated artist conceiving of a work of art in isolation with recognition of the artist’s genius in the form of a client patron who simply purchases the work of art (or simply the right to use it).
2. The AIA, Frank Lloyd Wright, and any number of other precursors and present hype machines have promoted the idea that architects should be the source of enlightened piece work with a “take it or leave it” mentality when it comes to marketing their work product.
3. The way residential architecture works in post economic crater 21st century America is that those providing a product are often without work (no “patrons” to give the “artist” the price tag that their “piece” should fetch). However, those architects who provide their clients with a service first with a product second are doing better because they demystify the process that school and much of our professional ethos strive to inculcate in those who might find us useful.
4. My practice, developed over 30 years (21 years on my own after 3 years of partnership and 6 years of apprenticeship) has its origins in begging for as much client input as possible before design begins, then during preliminary design, then throughout design development, and continues with on-the-spot design in situ during construction.
5. Before I will work with any client, I respectfully require that they take a full tour of my website to see the work that I do, read the words that I offer up about the design process I use, and ensure that, at least conceptually, there is a “fit” between what I have to offer for both process and product and what they want before we meet. Towards that end, the words that I use are non-“architecty”, the methods I describe are set in plain English, and the format of the process is one that is defined but responsive to the specifics of the projects that will be dealt with.
6. Once a contract is signed, the first meeting is solely dedicated to client-to-architect communication where I simply sit and listen and review the proposed budget, the prioritized list(s) of what is to be included in the designs, and photographs that are ripped from magazines or taken by the owners that show things that are beloved/turn-ons or reviled/buzz kills. Clients scribble directly onto any existing conditions that are present to convey client preconceptions. For new homes, I use the survey In The Place Of Houses, filled out by the owner.

7. At the next meeting, depending of what contract format is chosen, I provide a minimum of three and often five preliminary designs, soft line, drawn directly by my own hand, at 1/8" = 1'-0", almost always without specific exterior ramifications, but hopefully showing functional alternatives with cost implications. I respectfully request that my clients do not respond during this meeting to this presentation, but take time to look at it and apply their notes directly to what I've drawn so that the next meeting will be an interactive dialogue to what has been received and offered by both sides.
8. From that point forward, the design evolves and, if the design fee budget allows, physical models are made at a variety of scales and level of detail to allow me to explore and refine, but also to present and clarify what I'm presenting. Models are often brutalized to reflect revisions – we do not do presentation models. We almost never do computer aided design modeling as there is a far greater barrier to understanding than the actual physical model that can be held in the hands and look at from various angles and line levels.
9. Throughout the entire design process, owner input is solicited and meetings are held regularly. Many drawings are sent electronically. There are no "line in the sand"/"take it or leave it" presentations. There is no "sell, sell, sell" methodology, merely a collaborative effort to find a design that uses whatever design perspectives I have to address, interpret, and respond to the multiple desires of the client.
10. This ethic occurs throughout the bidding process where preliminary bidding gets numbers into the hands of the client that involve the defined costs of specific areas of the project, separate costs for trades that are used, and design and specification options that are offered up (both to add to or reduce the cost of the project). Once preliminary bidding is done, the design is refined with a budgetary overlay. Once the scope of work is better defined to reflect the budget, either a single builder is chosen or a reduced bid list puts a final number on the project, again with budgetary transparency to see what monies are going to what parts of the project to aid in deciding which areas can be trimmed and which should be given full indulgence.
11. During construction, holistic areas of the project are often left at a preliminary design level to allow in the field, full sized, up close and personal design review and determination. These areas include stairs, cabinetry, trim, and surface materials, all of which have had a reasonable preliminary specification for budgetary purposes, often providing explicit allowance in the contract against which the final design can be credited, but ultimately relying on the trust relationship built up between the builder, the architect, and the homeowner to spend the money that is available in the most effective manner possible. Many sketches are left on walls, mock-ups done in the field, and multiple possibilities are researched.