

Fine Homebuilding[®]

SPECIAL ISSUE ON

HOUSES

Communication between architect and client

The design of a home is an exquisitely human act, with each player in the drama having a singular agenda, area of expertise and method of communication. The home owners know how they live and can communicate what they envision for their new house. The architect uses drawings and models to communicate a synthesis of fantasy and utility. The builder transforms materials into a house, and communicates in terms of budget and schedule.

Architects are not trained to deal with the personal aspects of designing a house. In school, communication occurs in discrete acts—first, the professor presents a problem, then the student proposes a solution, and the professor gives a critique. Judgments rendered by professors in the form of grades respond to the student's design on the basis of its being a *product*. But the design of a home is an interpersonal *process*, a coming together of people with different roles who, together, make a series of interdependent decisions. School teaches architects to be advocates first, adaptors second. In the world of real construction budgets, the client often gets left out of the process because the architect wasn't taught that communication with the client is the key to designing a successful house.

An architect who doesn't focus on what the client asks for during the design of a house may regret it later. I heard of an architect who insisted on designing a kitchen around a huge island of cabinets despite the client's protests, which were swept aside with "I'm the architect." Six months after the house was built, the contractor returned to rip out the kitchen and install a new one in a configuration that responded to the way the client cooked.

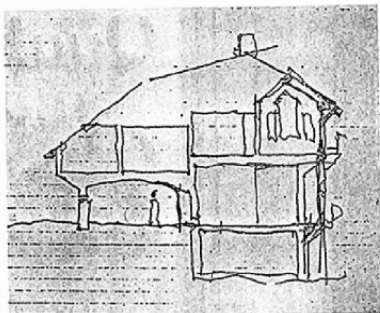
Another architect I know arrived at a job to oversee the installation of a custom TV/stereo cabinet. Despite having reviewed a number of drawings and models and having attended meetings explaining the cabinet, the client was horrified at the sight of it. Hours of pleading could not replace the careful listening that was missing from the design process. It's hard to say who didn't listen to whom, but the expensive unit now sits in the architect's office.

Buildings are not well described by words, but a client's words are grist for the mill of residential architecture. If an architect is to commit a practice to good design, communication must occur at various levels. The architect needs two types of information from the client. The first type is objective, or statistical, and the second is subjective.

To get the ball rolling, I use a simple handout that lists those items I need from the client before design begins. I ask for a signature on the owner/architect agreement that I prepared, my retainer, and the objective information. This includes a professionally prepared survey of the site with existing buildings and setbacks noted. Topography should be included if there is any new construction to be performed. We also ask the client to find out the zoning of the lot and to obtain a copy of the appropriate zoning ordinance from the local building department.

I also ask for a best-guess budget from the client, with a 5% to 10% contingency cushion allowed for new homes. For renovations and additions, the allowance should range from 15% to 20%, depending on existing conditions. These allowances are not only for unseen costs; they will also cover those undeniable desires for space, materials or furnishings that the client discovers as the house takes shape. Next, or perhaps during the design process, I ask for a list of local contractors enthusiastically recommended by owners who have completed similar projects.

The subjective information is more problematic. I ask my clients to prepare a prioritized list of features, images and relationships that are both needed and wanted. When two or more strong-minded people are



From paper to plywood. A preliminary sketch shows a client what a house can look like.

involved, each person will prepare a separate list, so some negotiation will be required. I also suggest that clients gather photos of projects or objects they like, clipped or photocopied from magazines. These images need not have direct bearing on the project at hand and may even be of things the clients *don't* want.

If the project is a new home or a complete rebuilding of one, I give my client a questionnaire based on a comprehensive list appearing in *The Place of Houses* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979) by Charles Moore,

Gerald Allen and Donlyn Lyndon, three of the most respected architects in the U. S. This conscientious book attempts to turn the language of the client (expressed in words) into the language of the architect (expressed in design). This questionnaire covers basic living habits, from how garbage is collected to where winter clothes should be stored.

After I collect this data, I use the design process itself as a way to demystify what architects do. Because school has taught the student to present the *fait accompli*, the architect may present to a client a dazzling set of renderings or an intricate model, which creates a sense of tension as well the expected sense of awe. Whether intended or not, such high-impact presentations have an implicit "take-it-or-leave-it" quality about them, and may stifle the flow of information on the spot.

Instead of gearing my schedule to blow-out presentations, I open up the design process in two ways. First, I meet with the clients on a weekly or biweekly basis, or use the mails for a "quick hit." I often begin the process with two to five different schemes, presented as sketches in a small scale ($\frac{1}{4}$ in. = 1 ft.). I don't ask the clients for a verdict, but instead encourage thoughtful reflection.

"Consumer shopping is the last thing I want," one architect told me last year. Thinking in terms of shopping simply underscores the architect's work as product. My final design for a house is often a combination of the original alternatives. As the process unfolds, the drawings become larger scale, hard line and more specific—and client input graduates from space, shape and flow to material, fixtures and details.

Despite all of the best efforts on the part of an architect to present a design to a client, the actual building of a house will reveal potential and actual problems and opportunities that were unforeseen. I spend a lot of time at a job site during construction listening to clients as they see the actual spaces, listening to innovations that the builder proposes and acting on my own responses to the house as it becomes a reality.

A design process that is based on communication and partnership, unlike design that is based on presentation and product, takes more time. But in the end, an inclusive design process actually creates a superior product. Just as a family is not a predictable social group, their home will not be an entirely predictable object.

Homes are at once our most intimate and public possessions, costing the largest quantity of money anybody is likely to spend in one place, and taking the most time and energy to live in. To me, a home is a beckoning enigma of the familiar and the mystical, holding the lure of both the common ground and infinite variety of human experience. Incorporating that experience into a house is impossible without work, trust and, of course, communication.

—Duo Dickinson, architect in Madison, Conn., and author of several books on residential architecture.