

## The Architect and the House: Building Relationships

Duo Dickinson

*This is an edited version of a talk presented by Duo Dickinson (B.Arch. 1977) to the Arkansas chapter of the A.I.A. Dickinson won a House of the Year award from Architectural Record in 1985, and in 1987 was represented in House Beautiful's Best Small House competition. Also in 1987 Progressive Architecture featured his work in the Young Architects Issue. The following year Dickinson won an Unbuilt Project award from the Concrete Society of America.*

*Dickinson's work includes residences in New York and Connecticut, commercial and institutional designs, and historic preservation projects. He has written numerous articles as well as two books, Adding On and The Small House, both published by McGraw-Hill. Also from McGraw-Hill is the forthcoming Common Walls, Private Places, a work on attached*

*housing. Dickinson is principal of the firm Duo Dickinson, Architect, in Madison, Connecticut, and teaches architectural design at Yale.*

Houses have a unique place in our hearts and minds. They are at once the most familiar and idiosyncratic of buildings. A house consumes the lion's share of our wallet and the sweetest side of our material dreams. Successful houses not only fit their particular occupants but also serve as cultural icons.

Although everyone is an expert about his or her dream house, building or renovating a house is one of the most stressful discretionary acts possible: it empowers and threatens, exhilarates and depresses, and ultimately gives a family its worldly focus.

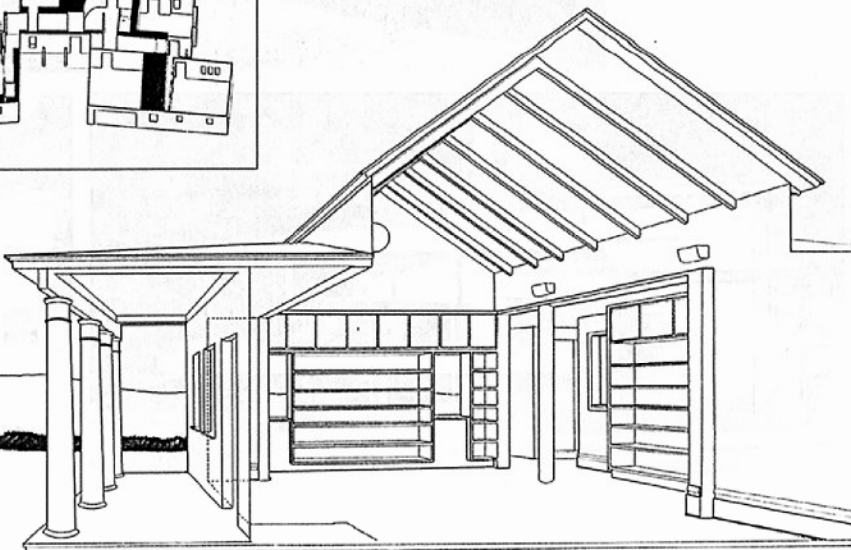
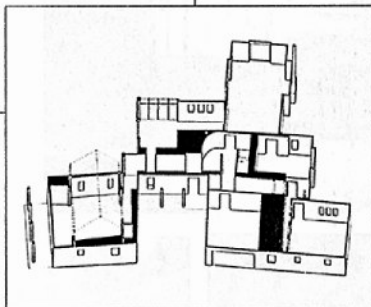
Because experience is not mandatory in designing a house, young architects often design private residences. Moreover, architect-designed houses can be the height of esoterica. The results can be an ever-widening circle of legendary blunders and insensitivities: it leaks, it rots; you trip, you freeze; doors hit each other; furniture doesn't fit. The client ends up hurt, angry, and broke.

Why is it that despite unlimited energy and enthusiasm so many things can go wrong?

First of all, in architecture school students are judged by the quality of their work—the product of their labor. When designing a house, however, the quality of the design process keys its success. School encourages architects to be visionary, direct, and focused. Left unanswered in the classroom is the quality of fit between the house and the housed. Architect-designed houses can be so pristinely distilled or exuberantly expressive that they lose the touch of humanity that distinguishes a house from other kinds of buildings.

Whether the blind arrogance of an architect or the confused motivations of a client, the lack of proper perspective triggers most design failures. A house, for instance, will not fix a troubled marriage or make children love their parents. On the other hand, if the architect's hidden agenda is to use the project to progress to bigger and better commissions via

Plan and drawing of "A House for Two," Vincent Mulcahy, architect and Cornell faculty member. The house, all on the first floor, has study space for two academics. It faces south and overlooks a valley.



designing for the camera and publication, the client will be pushed out of the picture with unfortunate results.

Although the design and building of a house is a loaded proposition, the design process itself can be used to reduce anxiety. Because I seldom know my clients before starting a project, I begin our association by presenting low-key, open-ended preliminary sketches. In that way I open my mind

to the clients and, from their reaction to my musings, the clients reveal themselves to me. The egos of residential architects must be big enough to listen to the people whose dreams they are crystallizing, to pay attention to the builder they are working with, and, when renovating, to respect the building they are re-creating.

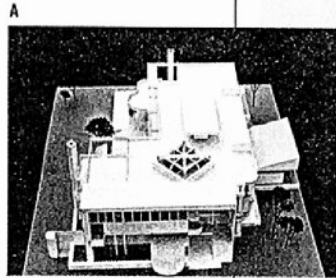
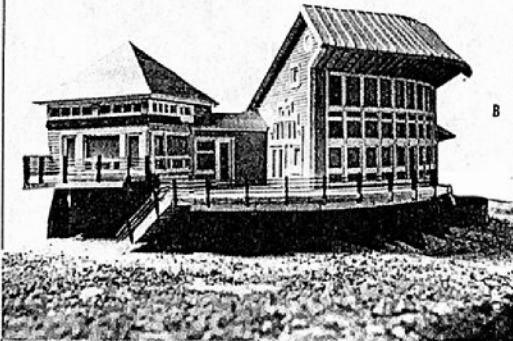
Designing a house is inherently pressurized, frightening, and frustrating. Yet, more than any other type of building, a house can convey the quiet power of truth, and, like poetry or music, it can have a resonant meaning that defies explicit analysis.

With the unprecedented evolution of lifestyles over the

past twenty years, there are few programmatic givens left. Nonetheless, I have stumbled across a few design absolutes:

- A house that leaks is inherently flawed.
- A bad builder can poison any project, no matter who the architect.
- The more time invested in the design, the better the house.
- The more open the design process for all involved, the better the design product.
- Additions or renovations that mock the parent building are inappropriate.
- Cheap thrills don't weather well.
- No matter how much money you have when you begin construction, it's never enough.

The above rules have aesthetic implications, but they are not explicitly architectural. Perhaps, with houses, architectural rules are best left to those who work together to create a house—the owner, the architect, and the builder.



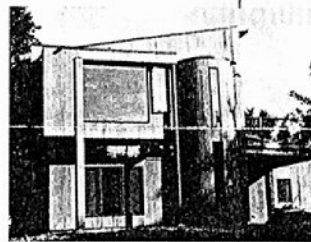
**A** Model of the Parzin residence, Yuko Toshkovich (B.Arch. 1965), architect, president of Pound Ridge Contemporaries, and member of the college's Advisory Council. Toshkovich's overriding design preoccupation with light is exemplified in this 14,000-square-foot house under construction in Harrison, New York.

**B** "Island House" (under construction), Duo Dickinson, architect. Unlimited views dictate a screen of glass; privacy demands a semidetached bedroom.

**C** House in Westchester, Duo Dickinson, architect. The client requested a design incorporating "every window you can think of." (Photograph by Mick Hales.)

**E** Siwanoy II, Yuko Toshkovich, architect. This 7,500-square-foot house was built on spec in Pound Ridge, New York, in 1985. Bold horizontal planes on the south elevation interplay with vertical massing of chimneys on the east and west elevations. (Photograph by Norman McGrath.)

**F** Model of a spec house, Yuko Toshkovich, architect. Toshkovich creates and markets high-quality houses such as this 7,500-square-foot example. He also designs for private clients.



**D and G** Two houses designed for Cornell faculty in Ellis Hollow, Ithaca; George Hascup, architect and Cornell faculty member. Above: the design of the Krumholz house incorporates wood and steel beams from a contractor's storage shed. Below: design for the Terasaki residence includes an art gallery addition and renovation of the existing house, which was originally designed by Cornell architecture professor Thomas Canfield in 1955.

