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THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook

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Foreword

Architecture is more than a service. It is an act of stewardship.

When a family entrusts me with the design of their new home, they are offering me far more than a budget or a piece of land. They are inviting me into their vision of how they hope to live: how morning light will settle across their kitchen, how children will grow up playing in the hallways, how the house will one day host gatherings within its walls for decades. These hopes may sound abstract, but they are among the most personal a family will ever articulate. They deserve to be received with care, and shaped with thought.

That is why I have never been able to think of this work as a transaction. It is a responsibility I take seriously, every time, without exception.

As we say in the South, I came to this work "honestly". My father was a builder, a maker, a man who understood materials and craft from the inside out. He took me to jobsites before I understood all the parts, and he built houses with his own hands while I worked alongside him. By the time I studied architecture formally, I already understood that buildings are not drawings. They are physical things, made by real people, inhabited by real families, and shaped, for better or worse, by the quality of decisions made long before the first line is drawn. That foundation to the building trades has never left me. It is in the way I draw the detail of a roof connection, the way I speak to a framing crew, the way I consider every material I specify, knowing it will be seen, touched, weathered, and lived with for generations.
That understanding has guided my practice for many years.

I have spent those years designing custom homes across the Southeast, on the steep mountain sites and lake properties of the Southern Appalachians, in private communities where demanding architectural standards ask for both creativity and discipline. The families I work with are, almost without exception, building a custom home for the first time. They arrive with dreams, a rough budget, and an incomplete picture of what lies ahead. They have never navigated the process before, and no one has given them a roadmap.

This book is that roadmap.

It is also, I hope, something more. It is an argument, made across sixteen chapters, through stories and principles and hard-won practical advice, for what the design and building process can be when it is done with the right team, in the right spirit, toward the right ends. It is about the first walk on their site, the Exploration Meeting, where design begins, and the final punch list, where the design at last becomes real. It is about the builder who is a partner, not an adversary, and the interior designer who takes the architecture and makes it sing. It is about the budget conversations nobody wants to have and the aging-in-place decisions nobody thinks to ask for. It is about Vitruvius, Palladio, Lutyens, and the long line of masters on whose shoulders I stand, whose proportions and traditions have been making buildings feel right for two thousand years. It is about the heavy timber and local stone of the Southern Appalachians that root a house to its landscape and give it a sense of belonging to the place where it stands.

I wrote this book because I believe homeowners deserve a better experience than they typically get. Not because the process is flawed or the people within it uncaring, but because building a custom home is genuinely complex, opaque, and most people enter it in the dark, feeling their way through unfamiliar terrain without a guide. They make decisions under pressure, without full information, and often without anyone in the room whose sole loyalty is to them. I have spent my career being that person, that guide. This book is my attempt to extend that role further, to reach people before the process begins, so that they can move through it with clarity, with confidence, with protection, and, I hope, with a measure of joy.

But this is not only a practical guide. It is also an expression of what I believe architecture can be at its very best: a creative act in service of humanity. I want to help people understand the architects value. I want to earn their trust. I want to add something real to the world, homes that are beautiful, that are honest in their construction, that reward the people who live in them, and that endure long after we are gone. A well-designed home does not merely shelter a family. It elevates their lives. In time, it becomes part of who they are.

That is the architect's advantage. It is yours to claim.

Chapter 1: The Guide You Didn't Know You Needed

For most people, building a custom home is a first-time experience. They arrive at the process with excitement, a rough sense of what they want, and an incomplete picture of what lies ahead. They know they need a lot. They know they need a builder. What they often don't know, what nobody told them, is that they also need a guide.

That guide is the architect.

Not because the law requires one. Not because it signals a certain stature of project or prestige. But because building a home is one of the most complex, consequential, and emotionally charged undertakings a family will ever enter, and attempting it without the guidance of someone whose only interest on the project is yours is a risk that rarely announces itself until it's too late. I have spent many years in that role. The first thing I tell every new client is this: I am here for you. I will be with you every step of the way. Not as a vendor, not as a contractor, not as someone with a financial interest in any particular outcome. As a guide and a vessel, someone who listens deeply, thinks carefully, and translates your needs and your dreams into a home that will serve you for decades.

Before a single line is drawn, I sit with clients and I listen intently. Not to take notes toward the program, although that comes too. I listen to understand who they are, how they live, how they move through a day, what matters to them, what has frustrated them about every place they've lived before. The home that results from that conversation is fundamentally different from one that begins with jumping into a floor plan. This endeavor is specific. It is intentional. It is uniquely theirs.

The Misconception That Costs People the Most

There is a persistent belief that architects add cost to a project. It is one of the most damaging ideas in residential construction, and it deserves a direct response. It is true that some architects specify finishes and fixtures without regard for budget, gold-plating a project in ways that serve their portfolio more than their clients. Good architects do not work that way. My commitment is to meet a client's budget, not exceed it, and within that budget, to identify the decisions that add genuine value: lasting happiness, structural integrity, and long-term return. There is a meaningful difference between spending money and investing it. Part of my job is knowing which is which, and guiding clients accordingly.

What an architect prevents, far more often than people realize, is the kind of expensive mistakes that begin as a reasonable-sounding request. A client wants a wall here, an addition there, a dramatic room with a wall of windows facing the wrong direction. On paper, early in the process, an architect can see what the client cannot yet see, that the wall closes off the light, that the house's footprint fights the site contours, that the sun glaring into that beautiful room will make it unbearable to live in after noon. These are the conversations that happen over the drawings, long before anything is built, and this insight is where an architect earns their keep.

The Builder Partner

Builders are skilled professionals, and the best of them are among the most valuable relationships an architect can have. I know this not just from practice, but from working in the construction trades, building houses summers and vacations while in school and learning everything I could about materials, craft, and the dignity of building things well. My respect for builders is not professional courtesy. It is personal.

The relationship between architect and builder, at its best, should be a genuine partnership. A builder's job is to construct something excellent. My job is to give them something excellent to build, and to make sure that when questions arise during construction, the client has someone who can translate, advocate, and keep their vision intact. These are complementary roles, not competing ones. The projects that go best are always the ones where that partnership is working.

What makes that partnership function is a shared vision, a language, and that language is something a licensed architect spends years acquiring. Architectural education is not simply an exercise in aesthetics or history, though both matter deeply. It is a rigorous, hands-on immersion in every system that makes a building work: structure, building envelope, mechanical systems, material science, site conditions, and the codes that govern all of it. A licensed architect has not only studied these things academically, they have worked through them in practice, project by project, until the knowledge becomes instinct. Before earning a license, an architect must complete thousands of hours of documented field experience across every phase of a project, from design through construction administration. Then they must pass one of the most rigorous and comprehensive professional examinations in any field.

This matters to you as a homeowner because it means that when your architect reviews a framing condition, specifies a roofing assembly, or raises a concern during a site visit, that judgment is grounded in genuine technical fluency, not opinion. It is the same fluency that allows an architect to speak a builder's language on the jobsite and earn their respect, while simultaneously holding a broader view of the project that no single trade can hold alone.

A draftsman can produce drawings. Many are talented and conscientious. But licensure carries something beyond technical skill, it carries legal accountability, a strict code of professional ethics, and a fiduciary obligation in the client's best interest. A licensed architect is not simply a designer for hire. They are professionals who have earned the right to practice and accepted the responsibility that comes with it.

This is not a distinction about status. It is a distinction about protection: yours.

The Shape of a Project

A disorienting aspect about building a custom home is that most people have no frame of reference for how the process should unfold. They know it starts somewhere after the drawings and ends with a far-away move-in date, but everything in between is a mystery. Part of what I provide from the very first meeting is a roadmap, a clear view of the steps ahead.

A project moves through several distinct phases, each building upon decisions made during the last. My process begins with the Exploration Meeting, but more on that in a moment, then proceeds through Schematic Design, where the first real ideas take visual shape on paper.

Concepts are developed into drawings and character sketches. Then comes an early round of estimating with a builder, a critical checkpoint that ensures the design is tracking with the budget before significant time is invested in detail.

Design Development follows, refining and resolving the design in depth. Then Construction Documentation, the complete set of drawings and specifications that a builder needs to price and build the project accurately. A final estimate confirms the budget before construction begins. Then the project is built, with the architect visiting the site periodically to review work in progress, meet with the builder, and resolve the questions that inevitably arise when a design meets the real world.

One feature of that sequence deserves a brief note here, because it is not standard everywhere and it matters enormously. I run a two-round estimating process: an early check at Schematic Design, and a final estimate after construction documents are complete. Bringing the builder in early gives clients a reality check while there is still time to respond to it, and prevents the most common and most demoralizing failure in residential construction: discovering the project is over budget only after the drawings are finished. I treat this as one of the most important protections I offer, and Chapter 11 is devoted entirely to how it works.

The other feature of my process worth naming here is something I consider one of the most valuable things I offer. Between Schematic Design and Design Development, I build a highly developed three-dimensional virtual model of the home, placed on the actual contours of the site, and I walk the clients through it before proceeding further with the drawings. Chapter 4 describes what that experience is like and why it matters.

It almost always is, because that model is my way of echoing back everything I heard in all of our meetings and discussions. It is where trust either solidifies or reveals gaps while there is still time to close them.

The Design Process – The Exploration Meeting

The first real meeting I have with every client is the one I call the Exploration Meeting, and it is not what most people expect from an architectural consultation. There are no drawings on the table. There is no agenda pushing toward a predetermined outcome. There is, above all, attentive listening. The Exploration Meeting is the foundation on which every design decision that follows will rest, and because it carries that much weight, the next chapter is devoted entirely to it.

The Service No One Thinks to Ask For

Construction administration is the phase of architectural service that clients most often overlook, and the one whose absence is most often felt later. Once a project moves into construction, it is tempting to assume the architect's work is done. The drawings are complete. The builder has what they need. What more is there? The answer, on any project of meaningful complexity, is quite a lot.

A set of construction documents is a thorough and carefully considered communication, but it cannot anticipate every condition encountered in the field. Sites have surprises. Materials arrive differently than specified. A builder's crew encounters a structural condition that requires interpretation. In each of these moments, a decision gets made. The question is who makes it, and on whose behalf.

When an architect is involved during construction, visiting the site regularly, staying in communication with the builder, remaining available to the client, decisions are made with the full context of the design intent in mind. The architect is the one person on the project who has held the complete vision from the beginning, and whose presence ensures that vision is not quietly compromised in the interest of convenience or schedule.

When the architect is not involved, a different dynamic tends to emerge. Decisions default to whoever is on site. The client, without technical training, is often asked to weigh in on questions they are not equipped to answer. Details get simplified. Substitutions get made. None of these changes may seem significant in isolation, but they accumulate, and the home that results is subtly, sometimes significantly, different from the one that was designed.
This is the difference between a home that is built and a home that is realized. Construction administration is how an architect sees the work through, not just to the permit, but through to when the keys are handed over.

Chapter 2: The Exploration Meeting

Every great home begins with a conversation.

Not with drawings. Not with square footage targets or a list of must-have features. Those things have their place, and we will get to them. But before any of that, there is a meeting, and in that meeting, I listen intently.

I call it the "Exploration Meeting", and it is the foundation upon which everything else is built. It is also nothing like what most first-time clients expect from an architect. There is no presentation. There are no preliminary sketches spread across a table. There is a site, a walk, a conversation, and if the day unfolds as it needs to, a lot of smiles, laughs, with a good meal and a bottle of wine to cap it off.

A few hours invested, a lifetime of home.

Starting Where the House Will Sit: The Site

Most of my clients are building in private clubs or gated communities, mountain settings, lake properties, sites with significant topography and terrain with views that have strong opinions about where a house should be placed. We begin there. Before we talk about rooms, we walk the land.

A site visit at the outset tells me things no survey or aerial photograph can. I want to see where the sun rises and sets. I want to understand the views, which ones are worth pursuing with glass, which are best softened or screened. I want to feel how the land slopes, where it drops and where it levels, because the conversation between terrain and structure is one of the first and most consequential design decisions of any project. I want to understand how a car arrives, how the driveway will approach, where a guest will stand when they first see the house, because arrival is one of the most underrated elements of residential design and one of the first experiences a visitor will feel.

A sloping lot suggests one kind of home entirely. It opens the possibility of main-level living above and a lower level that steps down into the landscape, guest rooms, recreation spaces, a workshop, all tucked beneath the primary living floor with walkout access to grade. A flatter lot calls for a different solution: main-level living with rooms above, or a sprawling single-story plan that spreads across the land rather than stepping through it. Neither is inherently better. But they are fundamentally different homes, and understanding which you are standing on changes every conversation that follows. After the site, we sit down. Usually at the clubhouse, or a restaurant nearby with a good table and a little more time. Then the real conversation begins.

How Do You Want to Live?

The questions I ask in an Exploration Meeting are not the ones most clients expect. I am not leading with ceiling heights or room counts. I am trying to understand something more fundamental: how these people want to inhabit this house.

Who cooks? Where do you eat breakfast? Do you eat lunch at home, or is the house quiet until evening? How do evenings unfold, is there a cocktail hour on the screened porch, a quiet dinner for two, or a house full of people on a Friday night? Do you entertain formally, casually, or rarely at all? Do grown children visit, and if so, how long do they stay? Do they need privacy and separation, or do they fold naturally into the rhythm of the household?
These questions might sound like small talk. They are not. The answer to "who cooks" shapes the relationship between the kitchen and the rest of the house, whether the cook is part of the gathering or sequestered from it, whether the kitchen opens generously to the living room or functions better as its own contained world. The answer to "do you entertain" determines how the public and private zones of the house are organized relative to each other. Whether a couple winds down together on the porch each evening or retreats to their own separate spaces tells me something essential about how the floor plan should breathe.

I ask about mornings in particular. Does the kitchen face east, into the first light of the day? For some clients this matters enormously, they want the sun coming across their coffee cup, and if the lot allows it, I will orient the house to make that happen. It sounds like a small thing. Lived daily for thirty years, it is not small at all. Its pure joy.

Room relationships, what architects call adjacencies, are some of the most practical and impactful decisions in developing a floor plan, and they almost never come up in the kind of design conversation that starts with style or appearance. Where does the garage sit relative to the kitchen? Is there a pantry positioned between them, so that carrying groceries from the car is a single fluid movement rather than a journey across the house? Is the primary bedroom on the main level, where it will serve a couple well not just today but twenty years from now? These are not glamorous questions. They are the questions that determine whether a house works.

I also ask about hobbies, about habits, about what has quietly frustrated every home they have lived in before. People will tell you what they want. If you listen carefully enough, they will also tell you what they need, and those two things, in my experience, are not always the same.

Occasionally, clients share things more intimate than they initially planned. Preferences about privacy within a marriage. The particular rhythms and requirements of a life lived closely with another person. I receive all of it with discretion. Nothing said in that room shapes anything other than the house. All of it informs the design.

The Language of Inspiration

After we have talked about how they live, I ask clients what they love. Here is where the meeting takes on a different character entirely, less interview, more collaboration.

The most prepared clients arrive with something tangible to share with me. Magazine clippings gathered over months or years, torn from architectural publications and sorted into a folder that has been waiting for this conversation. Photographs taken on travels, a hotel lobby in Charleston, a farmhouse in the Italian countryside, a friend's mountain house they have admired for years. Images saved from design publications or residential websites, organized into something that begins to tell a story about what beauty means to them. Engagement is a creative accelerant.

I take all of it in. I study it, keep it, and return to it throughout the design process. The images become part of what I call my "Reveal" presentation, the moment, later in the project, when I show clients what I have heard and how it has shaped the design. That presentation is one of the most important trust-building moments in our relationship. When a client sees their own sensibility reflected back in a design that also solves every practical problem we discussed, something shifts. They stop wondering whether I was listening. They know.

But I have learned to ask questions about the images, because a picture rarely means what it appears to mean. A client once brought me a photograph of a beautiful kitchen, refined, well-appointed, the kind of room that stops you on a page. I was ready to discuss the cabinetry, the layout, the material palette. When I asked what drew them to it, the answer was immediate: the range. Just the range. Nothing else in the photograph was relevant to what they wanted. Everything else was, in fact, the opposite of their taste.

That exchange taught me something I have not forgotten. An image is not a directive. It is the beginning of a question. The beginnings of an idea. My job is to ask the question well enough to understand what, precisely, is being communicated, and what is not.

The clients who cannot yet articulate what they love are not lost causes. They simply need a different kind of conversation. I ask them about places that have moved them emotionally, not houses specifically, but any space that has made them feel something. A restaurant. A chapel. A library. A particular afternoon light in a room they cannot quite describe. People carry more aesthetic knowledge than they realize. My job is to help them access it, and then to translate it into something built that they will enjoy.

When Clients Already Know

Some clients arrive at the Exploration Meeting with a very specific vision already formed. They have a house in mind, sometimes literally, a photograph of someone else's home that they have fallen in love with and want to recreate. I understand this impulse completely. These clients have been paying close attention. They know what moves them. They want to make sure it happens.

The challenge is that specificity of this kind, applied too early, can work against the very outcome they are hoping for.

A house that costs twenty million dollars does not become a two-million-dollar house through simplification. The proportions, the materials, the site relationships that make a grand home feel as it does are not surface qualities. They are structural to the experience. When the images a client brings me represent a scale their budget genuinely cannot reach, I tell them so, directly, and early. Discovering that mismatch after months of design work has been invested is far more painful for everyone involved than hearing it honestly at the first meeting.

There is also the matter of imitation. When a client asks me to replicate another architect's design, to copy it, essentially, and build it on their lot, I decline. Not out of arrogance, but out of professional ethics and genuine conviction about what design is. What I will always offer instead is this: the spirit of what they love is entirely available to us. The feeling of that house,

its character, its relationship to materials and light and landscape, all of that can inform what we create together. The specific design cannot be reproduced. But something better can be created.

What I find, in most of these conversations, is that clients who arrive with very specific directives have often not yet had the experience of working with an architect. They are accustomed to telling a draftsman exactly what to draw. The relationship works differently here. I am not waiting for instructions. I am listening for essence, for the feeling they are after, the life they want the house to support, and then I am bringing my own judgment, training, and my years of experience to bear on finding the right form for it.

When clients are willing to make that shift, to offer the essence and trust me with the form, that is when the work becomes something neither of us could have arrived at alone.

The Exploration Meeting is where that possibility opens. It is a long conversation about views and terrain, about morning light and grocery runs, about the meals and the evenings and the particular way two people move through a life together. It sounds unhurried. It is. But in those few hours, if I am doing my job, I learn everything I need to design a home that will serve this family for the rest of their lives.

I do not take that lightly. I never have.

Chapter 3: Both Seats at the Table

There is a rule in my practice that is non-negotiable.

Both partners come to every design meeting. Every single one. Together.

I did not arrive at this policy through philosophy. I arrived at it through experience, specifically, through the particular misery of presenting a design to one spouse, refining it through several rounds of careful work, and then meeting the other spouse for the first time at a moment when everything was already in motion. What followed, in more than one instance, was the architectural equivalent of starting over. Except that nobody wanted to say so out loud, which made it considerably worse.

I made the rule. The rule has served everyone well ever since.

Two People, One House

Building a custom home is, among other things, an extended exercise in collaboration, and joint decision-making is something that even the most harmonious couples find unexpectedly revealing. A home is not a vacation to plan or a car to buy. It is a complete physical expression of how two people intend to live, what they value, what they are willing to spend, and what they absolutely cannot compromise on. It surfaces disagreements that have been successfully tabled for years. It introduces entirely new categories of disagreement that neither person knew existed.

I sat across from couples who have been married for decades, people who have built lives together, raised children, navigated genuine hardship with grace, and watched them reach an impasse over the placement of a kitchen island with an intensity that suggested something larger was at stake. Sometimes something larger was at stake. That is not my department. The kitchen island, however, is very much my department.

What I have learned, over my career is that these conversations, is that disagreement between partners is not a problem to be avoided. It is information. The only way to work with that information productively is to have both people in the room when it surfaces.

The Referee

I will not pretend that my role in these moments is purely architectural. There is a reason my clients sometimes joke, after a particularly spirited design meeting, that I missed my calling as a marriage counselor. I take that as a compliment, though I accept it carefully.

When two people disagree in front of me, my first job is to listen, not to the argument itself, but to what each person is actually protecting. Disagreements about a house are rarely just about the house. The spouse who is pressing hard for a larger kitchen is often expressing something about how she wants to live, how she wants to feel in her own home, how she has always imagined this chapter of her life. The spouse who keeps steering the conversation back to budget is often carrying the anxiety of the whole project alone, quietly, because someone has to. Both of those things are valid. Both of them deserve to be heard.

My approach is to take neither side but to provide space for both opinions. I ask questions that help each person articulate not just what they want but why, because when the why is on the table, compromise becomes possible in a way it simply isn't when the conversation stays at the level of square footage and finish selections. People are surprisingly willing to give up a specific thing when they feel confident that the underlying need it represented will be met some other way.

What I am also doing, quietly, is guiding the conversation toward what is achievable. A project that exceeds its budget does not get built. A design that one partner secretly resents will eventually make itself known in the life of that house. Neither outcome serves anyone. Part of my value in these meetings is that I have no emotional stake in the outcome, I am the one person in the room who can hold the practical reality steady while the conversation moves through its necessary emotional weather.

The Dreamer and the Realist

In my experience, most couples contain one of each.

The dreamer arrives at the meeting with a folder of images clipped from home magazines, rooms that have appeared in features on coastal estates and European renovations, spaces of extraordinary beauty and extraordinary expense. They have been imagining this house for years. They are ready. They want everything, and they want it to be perfect, and they are genuinely puzzled when the conversation turns to what things cost.

The realist has been running the numbers in their head since before they pulled into the parking lot. They have a figure. They are holding it. They are watching their partner describe a kitchen that belongs in a different tax bracket and calculating, with growing concern, the distance between that vision and what the checking account will support.

I love them both. I need them both. The dreamer keeps the project reaching toward something worth building. The realist keeps it tethered to the earth. My job is to find the design that resides in the space between them, beautiful enough to satisfy the one, honest enough to reassure the other.

Sometimes the way through is to make the budget conversation explicit and then set it aside for a moment, so that we can first establish what the project is really trying to be. When people understand the design intent clearly, when they can feel what the house is reaching for, they make better decisions about where to spend and where to pull back. A client who understands why a certain room needs a certain ceiling height will find a way to afford it. A client who is just looking at a line item has no basis for that judgment.

Other times the way through is reinforcement. I have a small but effective strategy for those moments when a couple is deadlocked and I am reasonably certain I know the right answer: I bring in an ally. When an interior designer is involved in the project, which I highly recommend, the two of us can approach a decision together. If both the architect and the designer are in agreement about what serves the project and the clients best, the dynamic shifts. We are not ganging up on anyone. We are, as gently and good-naturedly as possible, outnumbering the resistance and providing our best advice.

It works more often than you might expect. And we do it with enough warmth that nobody feels ambushed.

What the Meeting Is Really For

There is something I want every couple to understand before they sit down with me for the first time: the friction you experience in these meetings is not a sign that something is going wrong. It is a sign that something important is being worked out, in words, around a table, with time to think and revise and respond, rather than in the walls of a house that have already been built.

Every disagreement resolved in a design meeting is a disagreement that will not surface during construction, when resolving it costs real money and real time. Every compromise reached before a foundation is poured is a gift to the marriage, to the budget, and to the house itself.

I have had couples tell me, years after moving in, that the design process was one of the most clarifying experiences of their relationship. That sitting down together and being forced to articulate what they wanted, individually and together, taught them things about each other and about themselves that living side by side had not. I believe it. A house is an intimate endeavor. Designing it together is an intimate act.

Both seats filled at the table, please. Every time.

That is not a policy. It is, I have come to believe, a form of respect, for the project, for the process, and for both of the people whose life the house is ultimately going to hold.

Chapter 4: From Napkin to Detail

People often ask me how long it takes to design a house. The honest answer is that it takes the entire project, that design is not a phase with a beginning and an end but a continuous act of discovery that begins the moment I walk a site and does not fully resolve until the last detail is confirmed in the field during construction. A house reveals itself gradually, to the architect and to the clients alike, and the best design work happens when everyone involved is willing to follow that path of discovery wherever it leads.

That said, something must go on paper first. And the journey from blank page to finished set of construction documents is deliberate, sequential, and more collaborative than most clients imagine before they experience it.

The Design Reveal

Within a few weeks of the contract being executed, I am ready to sit down with clients for what I call the Design Reveal. This is the first moment they see their new house, and I have learned, over many years, that how you present a design matters almost as much as the design itself.

Floor plans alone do not excite people. This is one of the most consistent truths of my practice, and it took me some time to fully appreciate it. A floor plan is a logical, technical document. It communicates room sizes and relationships with precision, but it does not communicate the feeling of a house, the way the entry opens into the living space, the way the roof line meets the landscape, the way the front elevation will look on a winter afternoon when the lights are on inside. For most clients, a floor plan without an elevation is a set of abstract shapes. They nod politely and try to imagine.

So I give them the "sizzle to go with the steak", so to speak.

The "Reveal" presentation includes the site plan, showing the house on the lot with the driveway, the orientation, the relationship to topography and views. It includes the floor plans for every level as well as a fully rendered exterior elevation, a detailed, finished drawing of the front of the house that shows materials, shadows, proportion, and character. The rendering is what makes the room go quiet. It is what makes a client lean forward and say, for the first time, that is my house.

There is another deliberate choice embedded in how I present that first design, and it is one that took me years to fully articulate even though I have practiced it instinctively for most of my career. The drawings I bring to a Design Reveal are hand drawn, or rendered to look that way, loose, gestural, slightly sketchy in quality. Not because I cannot produce hard-lined computer drawings at that stage. I can. But because I have learned that a crisp, technically perfect drawing does something to a client that works against everything the Reveal meeting is supposed to accomplish.

When a drawing looks finished, people treat it as finished. They are reluctant to suggest changes to something that appears to have taken enormous effort to produce in its current form. They soften their honest reactions. They tell you it looks wonderful when what they mean is that they have a question they are afraid to ask. The polish of the presentation inadvertently

communicates that the design is further along than it is, and that revising it would be an imposition.

A hand-drawn sketch communicates something entirely different. It says: this is still in motion, your input is not only welcome, it is the reason we are here. Clients lean in differently. They point. They ask questions. They say things like "what if this were over here instead", and that is precisely the conversation I need us to be having. This is the moment in the project when changes are easiest and least costly to make. A line moved on a sketch takes seconds. The same move made during construction documentation takes hours, and made in the field, it may not be possible at all.

The approachability of a hand-drawn presentation is not an aesthetic preference. It is a strategic invitation, one that says the design belongs to both of us, and that we are not done making it yet.

The relationship between the exterior and the interior of a building is one of the deepest preoccupations of my work. A floor plan and an elevation are not two separate documents. They are two views of the same idea, and they must be developed together, in conversation with each other, or the house will feel like a box with decoration applied to the outside. When clients see the exterior rendering alongside the plans, they begin to understand that relationship for the first time. The rooms make sense because the house makes sense.

Most of the time, I get the design right for the initial Reveal presentation. The first presentation requires only minor adjustments, a room shifted, a roofline reconsidered, a question about the entry. Occasionally I do not get it right, and we regroup. Clients sometimes do not know what they want until they see what they asked for, and that is not a criticism, it is simply the nature of designing something that has never existed before. When the first scheme misses, we have a much richer conversation about why, and the second scheme is always stronger for it.

The 3D Virtual Model

Once the floor plans and exterior elevation are settled and approved, not roughly agreed upon, but genuinely resolved, I start work on the 3D virtual model.

I want to be specific about the sequence. The 3D model is not something I develop in parallel with the floor plans, or as a preliminary exploration tool. I have been visualizing the roof and a myriad of other aspects of the house beyond the plans all along. The model comes after the fundamental decisions have been made and confirmed. A detailed three-dimensional model takes significant time to create, and building one before the plan is settled is an investment that the design may not survive. I have learned not to waste that work, but to take decisions one step at a time.

Once the foundation is solid, the model becomes one of the most powerful things I offer.
I place the house on the contours of the actual site, the real topography, the real orientation, the real relationship to the land my clients walked with me at the very beginning of the project. Then I take them through it. We enter through the front door. We move through the entry sequence into the main living space. We look toward the view. We step onto the terrace. We

walk the bedroom wing and understand how the primary suite relates to the rest of the house. We go downstairs, if there is a lower level, and see how it connects to grade.
The reaction is almost always the same. Quiet, at first. Then something that looks like recognition.

What clients are experiencing in that moment is the echo of their own Exploration Meeting, their answers to questions about how they live, what they love, what they have always wanted a home to be, returned to them in a tangible form. When the model reflects what was heard in that first conversation, trust does not just grow. It solidifies into something that carries the project through every difficult decision ahead.

This is also the moment when clients see things that no floor plan alone could have revealed for them. A sight line that opens unexpectedly toward the view. A room whose proportions feel even better in three dimensions than they did on paper. A connection between two spaces that suddenly reads as exactly right. The model makes these discoveries possible at the ideal moment, while every decision is still easy to refine, still open to the imagination, still part of a design that belongs to both of us. This is the power of seeing the house before it is built. Every informed adjustment made here pays dividends for decades.

The Design Development Phase

After the model is approved, we move into Design Development and then into construction documentation, the full set of drawings from which the house will be built. This phase is longer and less visually dramatic than the Reveal, but it is where the house becomes real in ways that go well beyond what most clients realize is happening.

Construction Documentation Phase

After Design Development, we move into what is often the longest phase of the design effort and, from the outside, the quietest. Construction Documentation typically runs a few months, during which the design is translated into the complete technical set of drawings that a builder will use to price the project and that the trades will use to build it.

The drawings change character at this stage. The schematic plans and the three-dimensional model were produced in a visual language, one meant to help the client see and understand the design. The construction documents are produced in a different language entirely, the technical language of the contractor and the trades. Every dimension called out, every assembly detailed, every material specified with the kind of precision that allows a framer, a roofer, a tile installer, or a cabinetmaker to build what I have drawn without ambiguity, and without the questions that slow a jobsite or introduce a surprise at bidding. The goal is a set of documents so clear that the final estimate comes back firm, the subcontractors have a true road map for what they are expected to produce, and the standard I am holding them to is visible on every sheet.
Clients sometimes expect this to be a silent period on their side. That is not how I run it. We meet weekly or biweekly during CD, reviewing the progress of the drawings together and working through the specific details that require client input. I do not leave clients alone for weeks at a time. They are constantly being pulled back into the process, because the documentation phase generates hundreds of small decisions, and those decisions are made best when the people who will live in the house stay engaged in making them.

In each of these meetings, we work through a specific layer of the design, decorative ceiling treatments, interior architectural features, exterior materials and colors, door and window details, finish selections. One decision builds on another. I will not move forward to the next layer until the current one is resolved to my satisfaction and the clients', not because I am inflexible, but because a house whose decisions are not made in the right order will eventually contradict itself in ways that are expensive and disheartening to unravel.

When the documents are complete, I review them one last time, sign and seal them, and release them. They go out for final pricing, for permitting, and for review by the Architectural Review Board. For most clients, this is the moment the project starts to feel real in a new way. The long, careful process of design is behind us. Everyone is ready to see dirt being moved and framing going up.

My work, though, is far from finished. The completion of construction documents is not a finish line. It is a gateway, a threshold into the next part of the process, the construction phase, where I stay engaged from the groundbreaking meeting through the final punch list. That is the subject of Chapter 12. For now, it is enough to say that the sealed set is not a farewell. The drawings go to the builder. I go with them.

There is something I want to be honest about, because I think it is widely misunderstood about the design process. An architect does not proceed into the design phase with a fully formed image of the finished house already in their mind. The idea that a designer sees the complete building in a single flash of inspiration, that the work of documentation is merely the recording of a vision already realized, is a romantic notion that has very little to do with how design really works. What I have at the beginning is a direction, a set of principles, a strong intuition about what this house wants to be. The house reveals itself gradually, through the act of making it. Every decision teaches me something about the next decision. Every detail, once resolved, illuminates the detail adjacent to it.

The clients are part of that (revelational) journey. Their reactions, their questions, their growing understanding of the project all inform how the design develops. By the time we reach the final construction documents, the house that emerges is not exactly the one I imagined at the beginning. It is better, shaped by two sets of minds working in the same direction, refined by the practical realities of site and structure and budget, made specific by the particular lives it has been designed to hold.

That evolution is not a failure of vision. It is the process working exactly as it should.

Chapter 5: Practical vs. Ideal

There was a Roman architect named Marcus Vitruvius Pollio who died roughly two thousand years ago and has not stopped influencing the way buildings are designed since. His surviving treatise on architecture, written in the first century BC, proposed that every great building must satisfy three conditions simultaneously*: firmitas, utilitas*, and *venustas*, firmness, commodity, and delight. Structural soundness. Functional usefulness. Beauty.

His influence did not stop with antiquity. Through the Renaissance, through the great classical revivals of Europe, and into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Vitruvian principles found their way into the architectural pattern books that shaped American residential building at every level of the market. Pattern books, those widely distributed volumes of house designs, building details, and proportional guidance published by architects and builders alike, brought the classical tradition into the hands of carpenters and contractors across the country, embedding its proportions and its logic into the vernacular of the American home. The well-proportioned farmhouse, the dignified colonial, the graceful craftsman bungalow, all of them carry Vitruvian genetics, whether their builders knew his name or not.

Two millennia of architectural history have not produced a more concise or more accurate description of what a well-designed building is supposed to be. I return to it constantly, not as an academic exercise but as a practical checklist. Every house I design is measured against all three. A house that is beautiful but leaks is a failure of firmness. A house that is structurally sound but difficult to live in is a failure of commodity. A house that works perfectly well but gives its owners no pleasure to inhabit is a failure of delight. The goal, always, is all three at once.

That balance is harder to achieve than it sounds.

Firmness, The House That Stands

Firmness is the least glamorous of the three virtues but the most fundamental. A house must be structurally sound. It must be detailed to shed water, resist wind, and endure the specific demands of its climate and site. It must be built of materials appropriate to their context, not merely because it will look better, but because a material used outside its proper application will eventually fail, and when it does, the failure will be expensive and sometimes dangerous.
This is where my background in the construction trades, jobsites and weekend projects, earns its keep in ways that purely academic training cannot replicate. I understand how buildings are assembled from the inside out. I know what happens at a roof-to-wall connection when flashing is detailed incorrectly. I know which materials perform and which ones photograph beautifully and then deteriorate within a decade. When I specify something, I specify it with that knowledge behind it.

Clients rarely think about firmness until something goes wrong. My job is to think about it constantly so that nothing does.

Commodity, The House That Works

Commodity is where the Exploration Meeting earns its full return. A house is commodious, useful, functional, genuinely livable, when it is designed around the unique patterns of the people who will inhabit it. Not around an idealized notion of how people live in houses, but around the routines, habits, and rhythms of this family, on this site, in this chapter of their lives.

The practical challenges of commodity are often expressed in the language of square footage and budget, and they are real. There is a direct and non-negotiable relationship between the size of a house and what it costs to build. Clients who want more bedrooms, larger rooms, additional bathrooms, and expanded living spaces are not wrong to want those things, but they must understand that each element carries a cost, and that the physical area available within a given budget is not infinitely elastic.

I have this conversation early and I have it plainly. If a client's program, their list of spaces and sizes, does not fit within the budget or area restraints they have described, we resolve that tension before a single line is drawn. Adding square footage after the design is underway is far more disruptive and expensive than establishing the right size at the beginning. The most functional house is not necessarily the largest one. It is the one whose spaces are scaled correctly for their purpose and arranged in relationship to each other with intelligence, logic, and care.

Room adjacency, the question of which spaces are next to which, is one of the most consequential design decisions in any floor plan, and one of the most visible once the house is built. A kitchen that opens naturally to the living area creates a kind of daily ease that its owners will appreciate for decades, never consciously attributing the feel to design. A primary bedroom on the main level, accessible without stairs, serves a couple well today and serves them even better twenty years from now. A pantry positioned between the kitchen and the garage makes the simple, weekly ritual of unloading groceries easy. These are not dramatic gestures. They are the quiet crafting of a plan that works.

Delight, The House That Moves You

And then there is delight. This is the territory I find most difficult to explain and most impossible to abandon.

I want to be careful here about what I mean by high design, because I do not think of my work in those terms, at least not in the way the phrase is sometimes used to suggest a kind of rarefied aesthetic that exists in tension with practical living.

What I practice is something closer to what the great traditional architects understood: that beauty in a building is not decoration applied to a functional object, but an expression of proportion, material, and composition that emerges from the practical design itself when it is done with knowledge and discipline.

The principles I design from are not novel. They are documented and tested across centuries of architectural history. The proportional mathematics of Andrea Palladio, the sixteenth century Venetian architect whose influence on residential design in the western world is so pervasive that most people absorb it without knowing his name, but remain as useful and as visually satisfying

today as they were when he codified them. The golden ratio, that mathematical relationship found throughout nature and embedded in the great buildings of antiquity, governs the proportions of windows, doors, rooms, and facades in ways that the eye registers as correct even when the mind cannot explain why.

These are not lofty abstractions. They are practical tools. When a window is proportioned correctly relative to the wall that contains it, the room feels right and the exterior is balanced. When a roofline is proportional to the massing of the house and in proper relationship, the exterior has a quiet gravity that no amount of decorative or applied detail can manufacture in its absence.

My architectural education introduced me to these principles formally, but it was travel that made them instinctive. Sketching the massing of an English country house by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the great English architect of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or examining the material and craft of C.F.A. Voysey, the Arts and Crafts master whose work is experiencing a well-deserved resurgence of interest, I understood in a way that no textbook could convey why certain buildings feel inevitable. Not fashionable. Not impressive. Predestined, as though they could not have been any other way.

That quality of inevitability is what I am reaching for in every house I design. It has nothing to do with trends and everything to do with getting the fundamentals right.

When Clients Don't Know What They're Asking For

There is a particular challenge that arises when a client asks for a specific architectural style without fully understanding what that style requires. It happens regularly, and I have learned to navigate it with care and patience.

A client who asks for a Craftsman style house, or a traditional Georgian, or something in the manner of the English Arts and Crafts, is expressing a genuine aesthetic preference. They have seen something they love and they want to live in it. What they may not understand is that the style they admire is the product of a specific set of proportional rules, material relationships, geographic context, and detailing conventions that have been developed and refined over generations. Simplifying those conventions, or applying them inconsistently, does not produce a more affordable version of the style. It produces something that looks like a copy of a copy, familiar in outline but a blurry shadow of the original.

When I design within a particular architectural tradition, my intent is to offer its best modern expression, one that is grounded in authentic precedent and carried through with disciplined scale, proportion, and the use of durable, appropriate materials. It is not a menu of stylistic options so much as a clear point of view. I do not dilute the language of the style or offer watered-down variations at the outset.

Occasionally, clients realize that what they were initially drawn to was a lighter interpretation, something inspired by the style rather than a fully committed expression of it. That's a perfectly valid preference. But my responsibility is to first present the truest, most resolved version of that

architecture, so that any decision to move toward a looser interpretation is made with clarity and intention, not as a default or compromise.

I will not condescend a style. If a client asks for traditional architecture, I give them traditional architecture, proportioned correctly, detailed honestly, rooted in the history that makes it worth doing. We have the conversation about what that means, and what they want to live in.

That conversation, in my experience, is one of the most educational and ultimately rewarding moments in the entire design process. It is where clients move from consumers of images to participants in tradition. It is where a house stops being a performance and becomes a place of belonging.

Firmness. Commodity. Delight. Two thousand years on, Vitruvius was right.

Chapter 6: Designing for Time

The best decision you can make about the next chapter of your life in a home is one you make before the first line is drawn.

I recognize that is not a comfortable topic. Most of my clients are in the prime of their lives when they sit down with me, energetic, ambitious, planning a home that reflects everything they have worked toward. The last thing on their minds is a walker in the hallway or a wheelchair at the threshold. I understand that. I also understand that the house we design together today may well be the house they live in for the next thirty or forty years, and that the people who will inhabit it at the end of that span will have different needs than the people sitting across from me now.

My job is to design for both.

This is what the term "Aging in Place" means, properly understood, not a clinical accommodation grafted onto a design as an afterthought, but a set of considered, invisible decisions woven into the fabric of the house from the beginning. Done well, these decisions cost very little at the time of construction and save an enormous amount, in money, in disruption, and in dignity later. Done poorly, or not at all, they leave a family facing expensive retrofits at exactly the moment when the stress of those changes is hardest.

The Conversation I Always Have

When a client tells me they intend to build a legacy home, a house they plan to inhabit not just for years but for decades, a place that will support them through every chapter ahead, I ask them directly how long they expect to stay, and I tell them plainly what designing for that timeline requires.

Some clients in their forties or fifties resist the conversation initially. They are not thinking about limitations. They are thinking about possibilities. I respect that entirely, and I do not frame aging in place as a concession to limitation. I frame it as the intelligent exercise of foresight. The same quality that drives every other good decision in this process. A client who would never dream of designing a kitchen without thinking about how it functions daily is perfectly capable of understanding why they should design a hallway with the same long view in mind.

What I find, almost without exception, is that once clients understand what these decisions look like, once they realize that aging in place does not mean clinical corridors and grab bars protruding from every surface, they embrace the ideas readily. The goal is a house that accommodates the full arc of a life without ever looking like it was designed to do so.

What I Build In, And Why

The specific decisions I consider non-negotiable on any house intended as a long-term home begin with the plan itself. Main level living is the single most important aging in place decision in residential design. A primary bedroom suite on the main floor, accessible without stairs, connected directly to the daily living spaces of the house, means that a couple can inhabit the full

comfort of their home regardless of what mobility challenges may eventually arise. This is not merely a concession to age. It is simply good residential planning, and I advocate for it on nearly every project regardless of the client's current age or physical condition.

Adjacent to the primary suite, I often propose a room that can serve multiple purposes over time. Today it might be a study or a sitting room. Tomorrow it might be a caregiver's room, or an additional bedroom for a family member who needs to be close. Designing that flexibility into the plan costs almost nothing. Reconfiguring a plan that was not designed with it in mind costs considerably more later.

Corridor widths are another decision that is easy to get right at the design stage and difficult to correct later. Standard residential corridors are frequently too narrow to accommodate a walker or wheelchair adequately. A slightly wider hallway, one that reads as generous rather than institutional, solves that problem permanently and adds nothing meaningful to the cost of construction. The same principle applies to door widths throughout the house. Minor effort now can reap tremendous benefits later in life.

In bathrooms, I specify zero-clearance shower entries, flush with the floor, no threshold, no curb, as a standard practice. The absence of a step into a shower eliminates one of the most common and most serious trip hazards in a residential bathroom. A curbless shower also simply looks better, cleaner, more considered, more spa-like in character. This is a case where the aging in place solution and the design solution are identical.

I also specify wood blocking within shower walls, solid backing installed behind the finish material during construction, invisible once the tile is set, at the locations where grab bars may eventually be needed. Installing blocking costs almost nothing during construction. Installing grab bars without it means opening walls. The blocking goes in whether the client expects to need it or not, because I have no way of knowing what thirty years will bring, and neither do they.

Lever door hardware throughout the house is another one of my standard specifications. A lever handle requires no grip, it can be operated with a closed fist, an elbow, a forearm, and for anyone whose hands have been affected by arthritis or injury, the difference between a lever and a round knob is the difference between independence and assistance. Lever hardware also simply looks refined. There is no design penalty for choosing it.

Lighting control systems deserve mention. A well-designed lighting system, one that can be adjusted by a simple press rather than a traditional switch, that can be preset to different levels for different times of day, that can be operated remotely, if necessary, serves clients beautifully throughout their lives and becomes genuinely essential as vision changes with age. I consider these systems an investment in daily quality of life at every age, not merely a future accommodation.

The Elevator That Isn't There Yet

One of the most cost-effective aging in place decisions I make on any multi-level home is one that clients rarely notice at all: I stack closets above one another.

On a home with a main level and either an upper or lower floor, I position adequately-sized closets on each level directly above or below one another. This creates a vertical shaft in the house, a space that currently holds clothing and storage and costs nothing beyond what those closets would have cost anyway. If an elevator is ever needed, that shaft is already there. The structural modifications required to install a residential elevator in a pre-planned shaft are modest. The modifications required to create that shaft in a house that was not designed for it are invasive, expensive, and often involve relocating structural elements.

I have had clients who initially questioned why their closets needed to be stacked. Years later, when a health event in the family made the elevator a genuine consideration, the conversation I remember most vividly is the one where they thanked me for thinking of it before they knew to ask.

That is exactly what this chapter is about.

Beyond Mobility, The Future-Proofed Home
Aging in place is the most personal dimension of future-proofing, but it is not the only one. A house designed to serve its owners well over decades must also anticipate the ways that technology, family structure, and daily life will evolve in ways that are impossible to predict with certainty.

I design oversized garages as a matter of course. The immediate benefit is practical, there is room to open car doors fully, to move around vehicles without contortion, to store the things that accumulate in any active household. The longer benefit is flexibility. A garage that is generously sized today can accommodate a workshop, a home gym, an additional vehicle, or any number of uses that the client has not yet imagined. Space is the most adaptable material in architecture.

I provide dedicated closets or rooms for audio-visual equipment and home technology infrastructure, sized larger than what is currently needed. The pace at which residential technology evolves makes it virtually certain that whatever systems exist today will be supplemented or replaced within a decade. A house that was designed with accessible, expandable infrastructure for those systems will adapt gracefully. One that was not will require the kind of interventions, wires run through finished walls, equipment crammed into spaces never intended for it, that quietly degrade the quality of the home over time.
I always provide accessible routes into attic spaces and below-floor areas on lower levels. Future wiring, future mechanical systems, future technologies not yet invented, all of them may eventually need to reach places in the house that are currently concealed. Designing those access points in from the beginning is a form of hospitality toward the future owners of the house, including the current owners in thirty years.

Exterior walks, patios, and terraces deserve attention as well. Transitions between grade changes, gentle slopes integrated into the landscape rather than abrupt steps, make outdoor spaces navigable for everyone at every age, and they read as considered design rather than

accommodation. A beautifully detailed stone ramp alongside a single entry step is not a clinical intervention. It is simply thoughtful.

Rooms that are slightly more generous than strictly necessary offer the same kind of long-term adaptability. Furniture arrangements change. Families change. The way people use their homes changes in ways that are rarely predictable at the time of design. A space with a little breathing room will absorb those changes gracefully. A room sized to its minimum will eventually feel constraining.

Invisible Foresight

What I am describing throughout this chapter is a quality I think of as invisible foresight, decisions made early in the design process that leave no trace of themselves in the finished house except their effect. A house with wider corridors does not announce that it was designed for a wheelchair. It announces that it was designed by someone who understood proportion and ease of movement. A house with lever hardware and curbless showers and stacked closets does not look like a house that was planned for limitation. It looks like a house that was planned with intelligence and care.

That is the standard I hold myself to. The house you build today should serve you not just in the decade of its construction but in every decade that follows, through the full, unpredictable arc of a life well-lived. Designing for that arc is not a concession. It is the highest expression of what residential architecture is for.

Chapter 7: The Details That Define a Home

There is a quality that the best homes possess that is almost impossible to name in the moment you experience it. You walk through the front door and something registers, not loudly, not as a single impressive gesture, but as an accumulation of small things done exactly right. The weight of the door hardware in your hand. The way the intimate ceiling of the foyer draws your eye before releasing you into the vaulted living space. The sound your footsteps make on the stone floor. The quality of light coming through tall windows. Together, these elements produce a feeling that most people describe simply as: this house feels special.

That feeling is not an accident. It is the product of deliberate decisions made through hundreds of details, decisions about materials, proportions, craftsmanship, and the relationship between interior and exterior that give a house its character. It is also; I want to be clear, entirely distinct from the feeling produced by a house that simply looks expensive. Those are not the same thing, and confusing them is one of the most common and costly mistakes in residential design.

Materials That Age Well

The single most reliable path to a home that feels special rather than merely costly is the use of natural materials, and specifically, materials whose character improves with time rather than deteriorating over it.

Cedar shake roofing weathers from its initial warm tone through silver-gray, developing a texture and depth that no manufactured material can replicate. Slate roofing is permanent. Installed correctly, it will outlast every other element of the house, by generations. Copper gutters and downspouts begin bright and metallic and patina over years into a soft verdigris that looks as though the house has always been exactly as it is. Natural stone, on floors, on exterior walls, at the base of a chimney, carries the weight and presence of something pulled from the earth and shaped carefully by hand of the mason.

Wood windows deserve mention. A wood window made of a durable species, mahogany, Douglas fir, teak, will outlast any aluminum or vinyl alternative, will accept paint and stain beautifully over decades of refinishing, and will maintain its proportional elegance in a way that extruded materials simply cannot. The initial cost is higher. The lifetime cost, when measured against the replacement cycles of lesser materials, is not.

These choices matter most in period style homes, where the integrity of the design depends on the authenticity of the materials. A traditional house clad in fiber cement siding and fitted with vinyl windows is a costume, not architecture. The materials are the style, as much as the proportions or the roofline. Substituting them undermines the entire project.

For clients who question the premium associated with natural materials, I ask them to think about what they are buying. A cedar shake roof is not merely a roofing system. It is a material that will grow more beautiful every year for the next thirty years, that will mark the passage of seasons on the exterior of their home, and that will signal to anyone who approaches the house that the people inside value quality and permanence. That is not a luxury. That is an investment in everything the house is meant to be.

The Interior, Craft Over Cost

On the interior, the decisions that define a home's character are less about the price of individual elements and more about the coherence and quality of the craft applied to them.
Wood planked ceilings, boards laid with care, their joints resolved cleanly, their finish selected to complement the rooms below, bring warmth and human scale to a space in a way that smooth drywall simply cannot. Decorative wood beams, placed in a rational manner that suggests structural logic rather than decoration for its own sake, reinforce that quality while connecting the interior visually to the traditional building methods that inspired the design. The key word is rational. A beam that appears to carry something, that reads as part of the building's structural story, adds meaning. A beam applied arbitrarily is incongruent.

Door and window trim, base moldings, and the transitions between surfaces are where a house reveals whether it was designed with real attention or merely assembled. These elements can be custom milled for a specific home, cut to a profile that responds to the scale of the rooms and the character of the style, from poplar or other hardwoods that will endure years of contact, cleaning, and the ordinary abrasion of daily life. The difference between custom millwork and stock trim is visible to anyone who looks, and it is felt even by those who do not consciously examine it. It is part of what makes a room feel considered.

Hardware deserves more attention than it typically receives. Door hardware, window hardware, plumbing fixtures, and cabinet pulls are among the most frequently touched elements in any home, they are the points of physical contact between the architecture and the people living in it. Specifying quality hardware, pieces with genuine weight and finish durability, is one of the highest-return investments in the details of a house. It will be touched thousands of times a year for the life of the home.

I have a strong preference for decorative surface lighting over recessed can lights, particularly in period style homes. A recessed can light is a utilitarian solution, functional, unobtrusive, and almost entirely without character. A well-chosen ceiling fixture, a sconce, a picture light, these are elements that participate in the design of the room rather than merely illuminating it. In a traditional or classical interior, a grid of recessed cans reads as an anachronism. A decorative fixture reads as intention, emphasizing the style.

The Primary Suite, A Place to Luxuriate

I have always said that there are two kinds of primary bedroom clients: those who use the bedroom to sleep, and those who use it to luxuriate. The latter have become considerably more prevalent over the course of my career, and the primary suites I design today reflect that shift completely.

The primary bedroom itself has grown in its expectations without necessarily growing in its dimensions. What clients want is not a large room but a considered one, a generous king bed with substantial nightstands on either side, places to sit and read, built-in cabinetry for books and personal mementos, and occasionally a fireplace that anchors the room and gives it a focal point beyond the bed or TV. The goal is a room that feels like a retreat from the rest of the house, private, quiet, unhurried in its atmosphere.

The dressing function has largely migrated out of the bedroom and into a transitional zone between the sleeping room and the bathroom, a dressing area with well-designed built-ins that allows the bedroom itself to remain furniture-light and serene. Two separate closets, one for each partner, have become the standard expectation at this level of the market. The days of the shared walk-in are largely behind us.

The primary bathroom has undergone perhaps the most dramatic evolution of any room in the residential program over the past fifteen years. The large, built-in jetted tub, that fixture that dominated luxury bathroom design through the nineties and into the early 2000's, has fallen decisively out of favor. Most clients who have owned one will tell you the same thing: they used it twice, found the maintenance burdensome, and watched it occupy a significant portion of their bathroom floor area for the remainder of their time in the house.

What has replaced it is considerably more interesting. The freestanding sculptural tub, a single piece, often of cast iron or stone, placed deliberately in the room as an object of beauty as much as a fixture of function, has become the standard of contemporary luxury bathroom design. It does not pretend to be a piece of equipment. It is an art piece within the bathroom, and it is chosen and positioned with the same care one would give to a significant piece of furniture. Some clients, particularly those who genuinely do not use a tub, choose to omit it entirely in favor of expanding the shower, a perfectly valid decision that I support when the lifestyle warrants it.

The shower itself has expanded in ambition. Large, multi-fixture showers, designed for two, fitted with body sprays, steam, and a rain head and a bench and abundant natural light, have become the centerpiece of the primary bathroom in the way that the jetted tub once was. Curbless entry is now both the aging in place standard and the design standard simultaneously. The two have converged.

Vanities have separated. His and hers, simply two generous individual vanities with their own mirrors, their own storage, their own zones of the bathroom, reflect the reality that two people sharing a bathroom have different needs and different routines, and that a well-designed bathroom respects both. Undermount sinks set into granite or marble countertops have become the expected finish at this level, their clean lines and ease of maintenance making the old drop-in sink feel dated by comparison. Cabinetry in the primary bathroom has risen to the standard of fine furniture, detailed, finished on all sides, hardware selected with the same care as the rest of the house.

A private water closet, a separate enclosed room for the toilet, within the larger bathroom, is another expectation I now treat as standard. It is a detail of genuine daily usefulness and a marker of the kind of thoughtful planning that clients feel even when they cannot articulate why.

What Luxury Actually Is

After many years of designing homes, I have arrived at a definition of luxury that has almost nothing to do with cost.

Luxury is scale that is comfortable without being voluminous. It is the feeling of a room that is exactly as large as it needs to be, no larger, because excess scale produces emptiness rather than grandeur, and no smaller, because constraint produces anxiety rather than intimacy. It is craftsmanship that rewards close examination, cabinetry whose joints are clean, whose finish is even, whose hardware operates with a satisfying precision. It is natural materials that carry their history visibly, that have been on the earth longer than the house and will continue to age gracefully long after its first owners are gone.

What luxury is not is the mere accumulation of expensive things. A house full of costly finishes, assembled without a governing design intelligence, does not feel luxurious. It feels like a showroom. The clients I've met who have lived in those houses, and I have met them, describe a persistent sense that something is missing, that the house impresses visitors without pleasing its owners.

What they are missing is the thing I have spent this chapter describing: the decisions made quietly, early, and with deep attention to craft and character, that give a house not just its appearance but its soul.

Those decisions are available to anyone willing to make them. That is the point.

Chapter 8: The Partner in Design

If the architect writes the music, the builder and the interior designer are the ones who perform it. I have used that analogy with clients for years because it captures something that is otherwise difficult to explain, the way three distinct professional disciplines, each bringing a different kind of expertise to the same project, can produce something together that none of them could have created alone. A piece of music exists fully on the page. But it does not become what it is meant to be until skilled musicians bring it to life with their own knowledge, sensibility, and craft. A house works the same way.

My drawings establish the architecture, the structure, the spatial arrangement, the proportions, the relationship between interior and exterior, the bones and the skin of the building. The builder executes that vision with craftsmanship and seasoned knowledge. The interior designer takes everything that has been designed and brings it to a level of finish, coherence, and beauty that the drawings alone could not fully anticipate.

They are my partner. On any project where the full team is working well together, their talent is felt in every room to the smallest detail.

What Interior Designers Actually Do

Clients who have never worked with an interior designer sometimes assume the role is primarily decorative, that an interior designer is someone you call after the house is built to help choose furniture and paint colors. This is a significant underestimation of what a skilled interior designer contributes, and it leads clients to bring them in far too late to realize the full value of the collaboration.

The decisions an interior designer influences begin well before construction and extend through every finish selection in the house. Consider the kitchen alone. The style and construction of the cabinetry. The profile of the edge detail carved into the stone countertop, a detail that costs almost nothing but elevates the entire surface when it is chosen with intention. Whether the backsplash is the same stone as the counter, clean and continuous and easy to maintain, or a tile with grout lines that will collect grease and require constant attention. The hardware, its finish, its form, its relationship to the style of the cabinetry and the broader material palette of the house.

None of these decisions is trivial. Each one is visible every day for the life of the home. And there are hundreds of them, in the kitchen, in every bathroom, in every closet, in every room where a finish material meets another finish material and the junction between them needs to be resolved with care. An interior designer navigates that terrain with a depth of knowledge and a breadth of market access that would take most homeowners years to develop independently.

The shower is one of my favorite examples. The pattern in which tile is laid, the orientation, the grout joint width, the relationship between the field tile and any decorative accents, is a decision that most people do not consciously register when it is done correctly. They simply feel that the shower is beautiful, that it has a quality they cannot quite name. When it is done without

thought, that same absence of intention reads as plainly as a wrong note in a familiar melody. An interior designer hears those notes. They are trained to.

When to Bring Them In

I typically introduce the interior designer after the floor plans and three-dimensional model have been resolved and approved, but that is not a hard and fast rule. At that stage, the architectural decisions are settled, the spatial arrangement, the room sizes, the ceiling conditions, the structural elements, and the interior designer can engage with the project from a position of clarity rather than trying to influence decisions that have already been made and built upon.

That said, I value bringing them in earlier than the finish selection phase when the project warrants it. A great interior designer can contribute meaningfully to room design, to the configuration of cabinetry zones, to ceiling treatment decisions that sit at the boundary between architecture and interior design. When I have a relationship with a designer I trust, I will pull them into a conversation during design development to have another set of informed eyes on the work. Their perspective at that stage has, more than once, improved the design in ways I did not anticipate.

The earlier a client engages the interior designer, the more value that designer can deliver. A designer who joins the project at the finish selection phase is managing choices. A designer who joins during Design Development is helping to shape them. The difference in outcome is significant.

Where the Roles Meet

The boundary between architect and interior designer is not a line. It is a zone, a territory of shared interests and overlapping expertise where the best work happens when both parties operate collaboratively.

Some architects prefer to hand the interior work entirely to the designer once the construction documents are complete and consider their role fulfilled. I have never been able to work that way. I am a classical architect, and the integrity of architecture depends on the coherence of every decision from the structural to the decorative. A ceiling beam profile, a cabinet door style, a hardware finish, these are not independent choices. They are part of a continuous composition, and I want to remain in that conversation throughout the project to ensure that the interior decisions reinforce the architectural experience intent.

What this requires is a particular kind of relationship with the interior designer, one built on mutual respect, honest communication, and a shared understanding of the project's goals. The interior designers I work best with understand where my commitments lie and why. They know which decisions I will have strong opinions about and which ones I am genuinely delighted to hand to them entirely. We have learned, through working together on multiple projects, where our boundaries are and where our abilities can lift each other. That knowledge does not come immediately. It is built project by project, disagreement by disagreement, until two professionals find their rhythm working together. New relationships take longer to find that rhythm. I extend patience, because the payoff is worth it.

A Unified Front

There is a practical dimension to the architect-interior designer relationship that deserves to be named directly, because it protects the client in ways they may not realize.

When the architect and the interior designer are aligned, when they have communicated, when they understand each other's intentions, when they present a unified position to the client on matters of design, the client benefits from the combined weight of two professional opinions rather than the uncertainty of two professionals who appear to disagree. I described earlier how I will occasionally use the interior designer's agreement to help guide a client toward a good decision that they are resisting. That dynamic only works when the relationship between the two professionals is solid enough to make the alignment credible.

I had a project recently that illustrated the value of this clearly. The client was analytical by nature, an engineer's mind applied to every decision, and had a tendency to want to manage each member of the team separately rather than allow us to function as a unit. At one point, he decided that the structural beams in the great room should be substantially larger than what I had specified on the drawings. His instinct was that bigger meant more impressive.

The interior designer and I had worked together long enough to be completely attuned to each other's thinking on questions of scale and proportion. Without any coordination between us, we both arrived at the same position independently: the beams I had sized were correct for the room. Larger beams would overwhelm the space, compress the perceived ceiling height, and produce exactly the opposite of the grandeur the client was imagining.

When the interior designer stepped in and reinforced my position, calmly, knowledgeably, without a hint of the "us against you" dynamic that could poison these moments, the client heard it differently than he had heard it from me alone. Two professionals, different disciplines, same conclusion. The beams stayed as drawn. The room, when finished, was exactly what it was designed to be.

That is the partnership working exactly as they should.

What Clients Should Know

If you are planning to build a custom home and you have not yet thought about engaging an interior designer, I want to leave you with a simple encouragement: do it, and do it early.
The investment in a skilled interior designer is not a luxury reserved for the largest projects or the most generous budgets. It is a professional service that delivers measurable value, in the quality of the finish decisions, in the coherence of the home's interior character, in the hundreds of small choices that accumulate into the feeling of a house that has been designed with complete attention rather than assembled from individually acceptable parts.

The architect writes the music. The interior designer refines and enhances it. The builder conducts the symphony. When all three are working together, in communication, toward the same vision, that is when a house becomes something that moves the people who live in it.

That is what we are all working toward. Every one of us, every time.

Chapter 9: The Matchmaker

There is a moment in nearly every project, somewhere between the completion of the design and the breaking of ground, when I find myself doing something that has nothing to do with architecture and everything to do with human nature.

I am making a match.

The relationship between a homeowner and their builder is one of the most consequential relationships they will enter into. It will last the better part of a year, sometimes longer. It will involve daily communication, significant sums of money, moments of stress and moments of genuine shared pride. It will be tested by weather delays and material shortages and the thousand small decisions that arise when a design meets the physical world. Whether it ends with a handshake and a standing invitation to the housewarming, or with attorneys exchanging letters, depends in no small part on whether the right two parties were brought together in the first place.

This is not something I leave to chance.

What I Read

By the time I am ready to recommend a builder, I have spent months with my clients. I know how they communicate. I know how they handle uncertainty. I know whether they are the kind of people who need frequent reassurance and detailed reporting, or whether they are comfortable with a weekly check-in and a builder they trust to handle the rest. I know whether they are working with a comfortable budget or a tight one. I know whether one of them has a professional background that will make them a particularly exacting presence on a jobsite.

All of that shapes the recommendation I make.

Budget is often the first filter. A client with a genuinely constrained budget is best served by a smaller builder, someone with lower overhead, a leaner operation, and the flexibility that comes from not carrying a large staff. That savings is real and it passes directly to the client. But a smaller builder comes with trade-offs. They typically have less administrative infrastructure, fewer people to manage the details, and less capacity for the kind of formal reporting and project management that some clients require.

For clients who need more hand-holding, and there is no judgment in that phrase; building a custom home is an unfamiliar and emotionally charged process, and some people simply need more contact and reassurance than others, I lean toward larger, more established firms. These companies have project managers whose entire job is client communication. They have the personnel to answer questions promptly, manage selections, and provide the structured oversight that makes a complex project feel controlled rather than chaotic. That infrastructure costs money. For the right client, it is worth every dollar.

Then there is the client who is simply difficult to please, not through any fault of character, but because trust does not come easily to them, because they have been burned before, or because the stakes of this project feel extraordinarily high. For that client, I want a builder with depth. Multiple people for them to engage with. Redundancy in the relationship so that if one personality doesn't click, another is available. A difficult client paired with a one-man operation is a recipe for tension that serves no one.

When the Match Goes Wrong

I have made good matches and I have made imperfect ones, and the difference is usually visible within the first few weeks of construction.

One pairing comes to mind that taught me something I have not forgotten. The client was an engineer, detail-oriented, analytically rigorous, someone accustomed to working in a professional environment where everything is documented, scheduled, and reported with precision. In the interest of keeping his budget manageable, I paired him with a smaller builder, a genuinely skilled craftsman with years of excellent work behind him, but a relaxed operational style that ran on relationships and intuition rather than formal, rigid systems.

The builder knew how to build a beautiful house. What he did not have was the infrastructure to produce the bar-chart schedules, the written weekly reports, and the documented decision trails that my engineer client considered baseline expectations. Neither man was wrong in what he needed. They were simply mismatched in how they understood professionalism to look.

It was frustrating for the client for longer than it needed to be. The house, ultimately, was well built. But the journey had more turbulence than it should have, and the responsibility for that lands, at least in part, on my recommendation.

What I learned is that technical competence, while necessary, is not sufficient. The way a builder operates, how they communicate, how they document, how they manage the daily rhythm of a project, must align with how the client needs to receive that information. A great builder in the wrong context is still the wrong builder.

What to Look For, and What to Watch

By the time I recommend a builder to a client, I have usually worked with that builder before. My referral carries the weight of that history. Clients understand this, and they trust it, though I always encourage them to do their own due diligence as well.

We still ask for references from previous clients, and we call those references. Not to ask whether they were satisfied, people rarely say no to that question, but to ask how the builder handled challenges. Every project has problems. What separates a great builder from a mediocre one is not whether difficulties arose but how they were managed when they did. Did the builder communicate proactively when something went wrong? Did they take responsibility or deflect it? Did the final product reflect the quality and integrity of what was promised at the start?

I also tell clients to ask a question that surprises them at first: how does the builder handle money?

Specifically, are client funds held in a separate account, or are they commingled with the builder's general operating funds? This is an essential question. A financially stable, professionally run construction company maintains clear separation between client funds and business operations. What you never want to discover, midway through your project, is that your deposit has been used to cover costs on someone else's job, that Peter is being robbed to pay Paul, as the expression goes, and that your project's momentum depends on the financial health of projects you have nothing to do with.

I have seen this happen. It is deeply unpleasant for everyone involved and genuinely dangerous to the project. Asking the question early costs nothing. Not asking it can cost a great deal.

The Relationship That Outlasts the Project

Here is something worth understanding about the builder relationship: by the time your house is finished, you will likely know your builder better than you know your architect.

This is simply a function of time and proximity. My involvement is intensive during the design phase and present but periodic during construction. The builder is there every day. They are the ones calling when a question needs an answer. They are the ones walking the site when you stop by on a Saturday morning. They are the ones who will hand you the keys.

A good builder becomes something close to a trusted friend. Clients often stay in touch with their builders long after the project is complete, calling them for advice on maintenance, referring them to neighbors, inviting them to the parties held in the house they built together. That relationship is real, and it is valuable, and it begins with a good match.

My job is to make sure that when you sit across from a builder for the first time, you are sitting across from the right one, someone whose skill, temperament, and way of working aligns with who you are and what this project needs. The design I give them will be the best I can produce. The work they do with it will shape the next chapter of your life.

That introduction matters. I take it seriously.

Chapter 10: What Builders Do (And What They Don't)

Building a custom home is a team sport. The architect designs the game plan. The builder executes it. The client owns the outcome. Like any team worth belonging to, the best ones are built on mutual respect, honest communication, and a shared commitment to the work that runs deeper than any single project.

I have worked with builders across the full range of ability, temperament, and professional approach over thirty-six years of practice. I have had partnerships that felt genuinely collaborative, two professionals pushing each other toward better outcomes, and I have had experiences that reminded me how quickly a poorly functioning team can undermine even the strongest design. What separates those experiences is not always technical skill, though skill matters enormously. It is something harder to quantify and equally impossible to fake: the willingness to treat the project as a shared endeavor rather than a transaction, hastily completed.

What Great Builders Bring

The builders I love working with best do something that mediocre builders almost never do: they challenge me.

Not dismissively, not in front of clients, and not without reason, but with the kind of engaged professional challenge that comes from deep experience and genuine investment in the outcome. A great builder will look at a material specification and raise a question about its long-term durability in the specific conditions of this site. They will suggest a newer building practice that delivers better performance at better value than the method I specified, because they are closer to the current market than I am and they have seen what works and what doesn't. They will push back on a detail that they believe will be difficult to execute correctly in the field and propose an alternative that achieves the same visual result with greater reliability.

These conversations make the project better. I can only detail my drawings to a certain level of specificity. Beyond that point, the builder's expertise and judgment are essential to executing the design with the quality it deserves. The best builders understand this, and they bring their full knowledge to bear on it rather than simply building what is in front of them without comment.

What I ask in return is that these conversations happen between us, directly, professionally, outside the client's hearing when we disagree. A builder who openly questions an architect's decisions in front of a homeowner is not being transparent. They are being undermining, whether they intend it that way or not. Given my background with the building trades, I am entirely comfortable with direct technical disagreement. What I will not accept is a dynamic that erodes the client's confidence in the team they have assembled, because that confidence is one of the most important assets of the entire project.

The best builders protect that confidence. They support the design decisions in front of the client and work through their disagreements with me directly. The result is a unified team presenting a consistent front, which is precisely what a client paying a significant sum of money to build the home of their dreams deserves to experience.

When the Match Isn't Quite Right

I am currently working on a project with a builder who was brought to the table by the client rather than selected through my usual process. He is a capable man and an earnest one. He has also spent his entire career building tract homes; production houses designed for efficiency and repeatability rather than the kind of custom craftsmanship that an architecturally designed home requires.

The difference is significant, and it has required patience from everyone involved.
Tract home construction operates on a logic of standardization and modularity. Materials are selected for cost and availability. Details are simplified to what can be executed quickly by crews moving from house to house on a production schedule. The mentality is not wrong for what it is designed to accomplish. It is simply not the mentality of custom home building, where the detail on a cornice or the joint between two materials deserves individual attention precisely because there is no other house exactly like this one.

I have spent considerable time on this project gently redirecting, explaining not just what the drawings require but why, helping a good builder understand the different standard he is being asked to meet. It is an investment of time I am willing to make because the client's home deserves it. But it is also a reminder of why the builder selection conversation matters so much. I cover it in Chapter 9 at greater length. The right builder, working from strong drawings, needs very little of that redirection. The project simply moves forward smoothly.

How the Jobsite Actually Works

Most of my clients do not live near the site where they are building. They are constructing a mountain retreat or a lake house in a community some distance from their primary residence, which means that the rhythms of construction administration look somewhat different than they might on a project where the owner can stop by every afternoon.

We plan our site meetings around the key stages of construction, the points where decisions need to be made or progress needs to be evaluated in person. The first of these typically happens when the site is being prepared with grading for the foundations. There is something about standing in a newly excavated site, looking at the footprint of the house that makes the project real in a way that drawings never quite accomplish. The footings and foundation walls are poured next. I want clients there for these moments.

Another major milestone meeting comes after framing is complete, when the walls are up, the roof is on, and the windows are being installed. This is what I call the rough-in walk-through, and it is one of the most productive meetings of the entire project. The builder, the architect, the interior designer, the electrical contractor, and the clients all move through the structure together. We locate every light switch, outlet, fixture, and control panel. We determine the height of every wall sconce. We lay out the kitchen cabinetry within the framed space so that everyone can feel how it will be arranged. Decisions made in this walk-through, with everyone present and the actual space surrounding us, are better decisions than anything that could have been made at a table over drawings.

Beyond these scheduled meetings, clients often visit the site on their own. They are building the home of their life and they are excited, and they should be. I have spent more than a few weekends walking a site with owners who have come to town and want to talk through how a finish will look or work through a question that occurred to them on the drive over. I do not begrudge those visits. They are part of the relationship, and they are part of what it means to be genuinely present for a client through the full arc of a project.

Transparency is the governing principle of my communication during construction. When something unexpected arises, a site condition that requires a design modification, a material that has become unavailable, a change that will affect the budget or the schedule, I tell the client immediately and clearly. I present the options, offer my best advice, and then step back. The client is always the final decision maker. The builder, the interior designer, and I are there to give them the best possible information on which to base that decision, and to respect the outcome regardless of which direction they choose.

What to Expect When the Walls Go Up

There is a phenomenon so consistent across the construction of custom homes that I have come to regard it as one of the reliable entertainments of my practice.

During framing, when the structural skeleton of the house is standing but the walls are nothing more than exposed studs, every client walks through and thinks the rooms are impossibly small. They look through the open framing, see the neighboring spaces beyond, feel the absence of enclosure, and become quietly alarmed. The kitchen seems cramped. The primary bedroom seems like a cell. The great room, for all its square footage on the plan, seems like it could not possibly hold an eight-foot sofa.

Then the drywall goes up.

Suddenly, with the walls defined, the ceiling plane established, and the rooms reading as actual rooms rather than structural diagrams, every client walks through and thinks the spaces are enormous. The kitchen is generous. The primary bedroom is a sanctuary. The great room is, perhaps, even larger than they need.

Nothing has changed. The rooms are exactly the same size they were during framing, exactly the size they were on the plan, exactly the size that was discussed and agreed upon months ago. But the spatial experience has shifted completely, because space is perceived through enclosure and the enclosure is now present.

I tell clients about this in advance because forewarned is forearmed. When the framing moment arrives and the rooms feel small, I want them to remember this conversation. It happens every time, on every project, without exception. Trust the plan.

Trust the Team

Which brings me to the most important piece of advice I can offer about the construction phase of a custom home: trust the team we've assembled. Trust my process.

This is not a passive instruction. It does not mean standing aside and hoping for the best. It means engaging actively with your builder, your architect, and your interior designer, asking

questions, raising concerns, staying informed, while also extending to them the professional confidence they have earned. The licensed professionals on your team, and a properly assembled team includes licensed professionals, are bound by codes of ethics that obligate them to act in your best interest. They are also, in my experience, people who care deeply about their craft and who derive genuine satisfaction from doing excellent work.
Most people in the construction industry are earnest. They work hard. They feel strongly about what they build and how they build it. The framework that sometimes obscures this, the anxiety about budget, the stress of decisions, the occasional miscommunication, can make the process feel adversarial when it is not. The process is collaborative, from the first site walk to the final punch list, and it works best when everyone in it is treated as a partner rather than a vendor.

The house at the end of that process will be the evidence of how well the team functioned. The best ones produce homes that exceed what any single member of the team could have designed or built alone.

That is what I am always working toward. It is why the team matters as much as the drawings.

Chapter 11: Estimating, Your Early Warning System

There is a moment in every custom home project that carries more weight than almost any other, a moment that can either confirm everything the client has been hoping for or introduce a reality check that, if it arrives too late, becomes genuinely painful.
That moment is the estimate.

I have structured my practice to ensure that it arrives early enough to be useful, early enough that the response to it, whatever that response requires, costs time and conversation rather than money and regret. The two-round estimating process I described briefly in Chapter 1 is worth examining in full here, because understanding how it works and why it is structured the way it is will help you navigate one of the most consequential phases of your project with clarity rather than anxiety.

The First Estimate, A Threshold

After schematic design is complete, after the floor plans are settled and the exterior character of the house has been established by the renderings, I bring a builder into the process for the first time. Not to build. Not yet. To price.

The builder I select for this preliminary estimate is chosen with the same care I described in the matchmaking chapter. Their overhead, their subcontractor relationships, their experience on similar projects in similar locations, all of these factors affect the number they will produce, and a number produced by the wrong builder tells me very little about what the right builder will eventually charge. Matching the builder to the project matters even at the estimating stage.

What this builder receives at the preliminary estimate is not a complete set of construction documents. It is the schematic design, floor plans, site plan, exterior elevations, and enough information about the intended materials and systems to produce a meaningful ballpark. Window brand and material. Roofing type. General exterior finish approach. Structural system. These are the variables that move the per-square-foot cost most significantly, and getting them into the conversation early means the preliminary number is genuinely informative rather than merely approximate.

The builder provides this estimate as a courtesy, a professional investment in a relationship that may lead to a construction contract. I respect that investment enormously. I would never engage a builder through the time-consuming work of producing an estimate and then discard their participation in favor of someone else without cause. The preliminary estimate is the beginning of the builder's involvement in the project, not a competitive exercise. My intention, when I invite a builder to estimate, is to continue working with that person through construction documents and ultimately to award them the project.

I think of this first estimate as a gateway that the project must pass through before proceeding. If the number comes back at a level the client's budget can accommodate, we proceed with confidence. If it does not, we have decisions to make, and we have the time and the design flexibility to make them well.

When the Numbers Don't Line Up

I do this work often enough to have a well-calibrated sense of what things cost in the markets where I practice. By the time a preliminary estimate arrives, I have already been communicating my own expectations to the client, factoring the square footage, the complexity of the exterior, the quality of the intended materials, and the site conditions into a running conversation about what the project is likely to cost. The preliminary estimate should, in most cases, confirm rather than surprise.

When it does not, when the number comes back higher than the budget supports, we have options, and we have the time to exercise them thoughtfully.

Sometimes the path back to budget runs through the design itself. A simpler roofline reduces framing complexity and cost. Moving the house on the lot can decrease the amount of site preparation, retaining walls, and foundation work required by a challenging topography. A material substitution, a less expensive cladding, a different roofing system, can recover meaningful dollars without altering the character of the design in ways that matter to the client. These are not compromises in any painful sense. They are the kind of intelligent trade-offs that good design thinking makes possible.

Sometimes the path back to budget runs through expectations. If a client has come to me wanting five thousand square feet for a budget that the market will not support at that scale, I tell them so directly and I tell them early. Managing expectations is not a failure of service. It is the most important service I provide. A client who understands from the very first conversation what their budget will and will not buy is a client who can make informed decisions throughout the process. A client who discovers the mismatch after months of design work has been invested is a client who has been failed by the people they trusted.
I would rather have a difficult conversation in the first meeting than a devastating one in the last.

Staying Connected Between Estimates

The months between the preliminary estimate and the final one are not a period of silence between me and the builder. They are a period of ongoing communication, a quiet but continuous calibration that keeps the project on course.

As design development and construction documentation proceed, I watch for the things that move costs. When a client falls in love with imported stone for a floor system, I flag it, not to discourage the choice, but to make sure the builder is aware that the structural implications and the material cost both need to be factored into the final number. When a room grows slightly in the course of documentation, or when a ceiling treatment adds complexity to the framing, I note it. The builder is a running consultant throughout this phase, and keeping them informed means the final estimate arrives without the element of surprise.

My expectation, when the complete construction documents go out for final pricing, is that the number produced will be reasonably consistent with the preliminary one. Not identical, the level of detail in a finished document set allows for much more precise pricing than a schematic design, but not dramatically different either. When the two numbers are far apart, it usually

means something changed significantly between them, and understanding what changed and why is the first order of business.

The Final Estimate, A Contract in Waiting

The final estimate is produced based on the completed set of construction documents. The builder sends the drawings to their subcontractors, the framer, the roofer, the mechanical trades, the finish carpenter, the tile installer, and assembles their individual bids into a comprehensive project cost model. This is the number that will form the basis of the construction contract. To that assembled cost, the builder adds their fee, typically expressed as a percentage of the total construction cost, covering project management, general conditions, overhead, and profit. This addition surprises some clients when they see it for the first time. Each line item in a construction budget seems manageable in isolation. Prices for windows, plumbing fixtures, lighting, stone, all are expected and understood. But when every line item is assembled and the builder's fee is applied on top of the total, the number is larger than the sum of its parts. That premium, typically in the range of fifteen to twenty percent of the construction cost where I practice, is the price of having a professional manage the hundreds of moving pieces of a custom home project. It is real money. It is also real value, when the right builder is delivering it.

This is one of the reasons I am so careful about which builders I recommend and why I maintain long-term relationships with the ones who have proven themselves. An honest builder produces an honest estimate, one that reflects actual costs and a fair return, without the padding that protects against problems the builder anticipates but has not disclosed. I have worked with builders brought to the table by others who produced preliminary estimates that seemed attractive and final estimates that bore little resemblance to them. The gap, by that point, arrives too late for graceful resolution. Either the project is cancelled, or it proceeds under duress, or we begin the painful process of value engineering and editing a design that was not conceived with those constraints in mind.

None of those outcomes serves the client. My job is to prevent them, by controlling the builder relationship from the beginning, by maintaining transparency about costs throughout the design process, and by never allowing a client to reach the final estimate without already having a clear and honest picture of what it is likely to state.

What Things Actually Cost

There is one more thing worth saying plainly, because it is something almost every first-time custom home client discovers with some degree of shock regardless of how carefully I have prepared them.

Building a custom home costs more than most people expect.

Not because anyone is being dishonest. Not because the industry is inefficient, though it has its inefficiencies. But because the individual components of a custom home, each of which seems, in isolation, like a manageable expense, combine into a whole that reflects the true complexity of what is being built. Quality windows for a well-designed house are expensive. Hand-laid natural stone is expensive. A custom cabinetry package is expensive. Copper gutters are expensive. Each of these decisions is defensible on its own merits, and I have spent much of this

book making that case. But when every defensible decision is added to every other defensible decision, the total is a number that requires the client to have been prepared for it from the very beginning of the process.

That preparation is my responsibility. It begins at the Exploration Meeting and continues through every phase of the design. By the time the final estimate arrives, a well-informed client should be able to look at the number and say, not without feeling it, but without genuine surprise, that this is what we always said it would cost.

That is the goal. It is achievable. It begins with an early warning system through prudent estimating that is honest, consistent, and built on deep relationships both parties appreciate.

Chapter 12: On the Jobsite

There is an experience that never gets old for me.

The smell of fresh cut lumber, sawdust in the air, the sunlight that falls through a framed opening before the windows go in, these are the sensory signatures of a house becoming real, and after many years of walking jobsites, they still stop me for a moment every time. This is what I got into this work for. Not the drawings, as much as I love them. Not the meetings, as valuable as they are. This is the moment when something that existed only in my mind and on paper begins to take its place in the physical world, built by skilled hands, rising from the earth into existence.

Construction is where the design is tested. It is also where it is completed, where the decisions made across months of careful work either hold together or reveal the places where they need help. My presence on the jobsite is the final act of advocacy I offer a client, and I take it as seriously as anything else I do.

What I Carry, What I Look For

I always bring the drawings to a site visit. Not because I haven't memorized them, I have, largely, but because a drawing held against a physical condition is the most efficient tool for catching a discrepancy before it becomes a problem. The drawing is the intention. The building is the execution. My job on every visit is to compare the two with fresh eyes.

What I look for changes depending on the phase of construction. When the footings and foundation walls are going in, I am examining anchor bolt placements, checking waterproofing membrane installation, and reading the concrete work for anything that deviates from the structural drawings. These are not glamorous observations, but a foundation detail missed at this stage is a detail that lives with the house forever.

During framing I cast a wider eye. I am looking at the quality of the work itself, the precision of the cuts, the plumb of the walls, the overall cleanliness and organization of the site, which tells me something about how the superintendent is running the project. I check plate heights and ceiling joist bearing heights against the drawings. I look carefully at the quality of the framing and the location of wood blocking within the walls, the solid backing installed to accommodate the attachment of cabinetry, grab bars, television mounts, handrails, and the many other elements that will need a secure anchor downstream. Blocking installed correctly now is invisible forever. Blocking missed now means opening finished walls later, and that is a conversation nobody wants to have after the tile is set. I examine the roof forms, how the valleys are sloping, whether the drainage geometry is what we designed, whether there is anything in the built geometry that I did not fully anticipate at the drawing stage. Eave and soffit framing gets particular attention, because architects detail overhangs differently and framers accustomed to one convention will sometimes default to it even when the drawings specify another.

Window and door head heights are something I watch carefully throughout the framing phase. I vary those heights deliberately on the exterior of a house, introducing slight differences in head height that create visual interest and rhythm in the facade, and that kind of intentional variation is exactly what a framer, focused on efficiency and pattern, is most likely to inadvertently

normalize. When it gets missed, the exterior loses something that most people could not name but would absolutely feel off.

I direct my observations and questions to the general contractor's superintendent or project manager rather than to individual subcontractors. This is a matter of professional protocol and practical efficiency. The superintendent is responsible for coordinating the trades. Going around them to address a subcontractor directly creates confusion in the chain of command and, occasionally, resentment that finds its way back into the work. I bring my observations and concerns to the right person and let that person act on them.

When It Matters Most

The value of a site visit is not always visible in the moment. Much of what I do on a jobsite is confirmatory, verifying that things are proceeding correctly, noting progress, calibrating my mental model of the project against its physical reality. That work has value even when nothing is wrong.

But sometimes something is wrong, and what happens next is the reason construction administration exists.

On a recent project, a curved roof form was intersecting the main roof of the house, a sweeping gesture that was one of the defining features of the exterior design. During a framing visit I looked at the curvature of that form and something registered as not quite right. The geometry was close. In isolation, most people would not have noticed. But against the intention of the design, the specific arc I had drawn, the particular relationship between that curve and the roofline it joined, it was off in a way that would have read on the finished house as slightly uncertain, slightly unresolved. This roof deserved to be crafted well.

We stopped. We talked through the geometry with the framing crew. Before the roof sheathing went on, the framing was adjusted, a modest intervention at that stage, an expensive and potentially impossible one after the roof was complete. The finished curve has exactly the swoop and definition the design called for. Nobody who visits that house will know a correction was made. That is precisely the point.

These moments are not rare. They are the ordinary texture of construction administration on a complex project, and they accumulate across the course of a build into an outcome that is meaningfully better than what would have resulted from the drawings alone. A set of construction documents is a thorough and precise communication of intent. It is not a guarantee. The guarantee comes from the person who authored the intent staying present as it is executed.

The Rhythm of the Build

Springtime is when the momentum builds on most of my projects. The ground thaws, crews return to full strength, and the pace of a jobsite quickens into something that feels genuinely alive. I visit more frequently during the active framing phase than at any other point in construction, because this is when the structural decisions are being made physical, when the forms I designed are being realized in wood, and when the window for catching and correcting missteps is still open.

Later in the project, visits shift in character. During finish installation I am walking the house with the builder and often the interior designer, reviewing how materials are being installed, checking that tile patterns and cabinetry configurations match the design intent, looking at light fixture placement against the electrical plan. The rough-in walk-through I described in an earlier chapter, that meeting with the full team present to locate every switch and sconce, is typically where the finish phase begins in earnest.

I am also in ongoing communication with the builder between visits. Questions arise on an active jobsite, and many of them can be resolved with a photograph and a brief conversation rather than a physical visit. I stay accessible because delays in answering field questions have a way of becoming delays in the schedule, and schedule delays have a way of becoming cost increases. Responsiveness is part of my service.

Throughout all of it, I keep the client informed. When something changes, a material substitution, a field condition that required a design modification, anything that affects what the client was expecting, I communicate it immediately and clearly. Transparency during construction is not optional. It is the foundation of the trust that carries the project to completion.

The Moment the Design Meets Reality

There is a particular kind of delight that I live for, and it happens during construction.
A client walks through their house for the first time when the framing is complete, when walls are defined and openings are cut and the spatial sequence of the design can be felt physically rather than imagined from a plan. They move through the entry. They pass through the first opening. That big view we planned emerges. Then, down a hallway, through a series of aligned doorways, another view opens, a vista that runs from one end of the house to the other, framing the landscape beyond. They stop. They did not know this was coming. I designed it in, quietly, months ago, knowing they would not see it until this moment.

Or the light. The way the morning sun comes streaming through the stair window at exactly the angle I positioned it for, falling across the treads and the wall in a way that makes the stair feel like something more than a way to get between floors. The client notices and turns to me with an expression I have seen hundreds of times and never tire of.

That is when the design meets reality. That is when all the conversations, all the drawings, all the decisions made carefully across months of work resolve into a single, physical, irreversible moment of delight. The builder is busy. The crew is moving. Hammers are sounding somewhere in the structure. And in the middle of all of it, a client is standing in the house of their life for the first time, understanding for the first time what it is going to be.
That is what I got into this work for. That is what keeps me going, thirty-six years in, just as surely as it did after that ice cream shop addition when I was nineteen years old and the world of building first opened up to me in all its extraordinary possibility.
It does not get old. I hope it never does.

Chapter 13: The Conversations I Always Have

Every project is different. Every client is different. Every site, every budget, every vision of what home means to a particular family at a particular moment in their lives, all of it is specific, unrepeatable, and deserving of my fresh attention.

Yet, across my years of practice, certain conversations happen on nearly every project. Not because I follow a script, but because the same human tendencies, the same understandable anxieties, and the same gaps in knowledge show up reliably enough that I have learned to address them proactively rather than waiting for them to become problems.

Seasoned construction guys love to tell stories, and after many years I've collected my share. This chapter is a distillation of those conversations, a benefit of experience delivered in a single sitting, the things I would tell you if we were sitting down together for the first time and I had nothing to sell you and no reason to be anything other than completely honest.

Trust the Process

The first thing I tell nearly every client, and the thing I find myself returning to throughout the project, is this: trust the process.

I do not say this to discourage questions or to position myself beyond accountability. I say it because I have watched, more times than I can count, what happens when a client's anxiety overrides their confidence in the team we've assembled, and it rarely produces a better outcome. It produces a more expensive one.

The design process I describe in this book is not arbitrary. It is sequential by design. Each phase builds on the one before it. Decisions made early create the foundation for decisions made later, and when a client loses confidence in that sequence, when they want to revisit the floor plan during construction documentation, or reconsider the exterior material during framing, the cost of that reconsideration is not just the time it takes to redraw. It is the disruption to every decision that was downstream of the one being reconsidered.

I have been doing this for a long time. I have designed homes on flat lots and mountain sites and lakefront properties, for first-time builders and clients on their fourth custom home. I have seen what works and what doesn't, what holds up and what fails, what clients are grateful for a decade later and what they wish they had done differently. When I give advice, it is grounded in that history. I am not guessing. I am drawing on a wealth of accumulated experience in service of this one project and this one family.

Trust me to do what you want in a way that will meet your needs and make you happy. That is the commitment I bring to every project. What I ask in return is the confidence to do the work.

Plan for the Future

The second conversation I have with every client is the one about time, specifically, about how long they intend to live in this house and what that timeline demands of the design.

I covered aging in place in an earlier chapter, but I return to it here because it is not merely a design strategy. It is a philosophy of stewardship. A house that is designed only for who you are

today is a house that may well fail who you are twenty years from now. The decisions that protect against that failure are, in almost every case, decisions that cost almost nothing when made at the design stage and a great deal when made after the fact.

Main level living. Stacked closets for a future elevator shaft. Blocking in the shower walls. Wider corridors. Lever hardware. These are not clinical accommodations. They are the marks of a house that was designed by someone thinking about the full arc of a life, not just the chapter currently in progress.

I also think about the future in terms that go beyond mobility, the technology infrastructure that will need to grow and change, the family dynamic that will shift over decades, the rooms that need to be able to serve different purposes at different times. A house that was designed with flexibility built into its bones will absorb those changes gracefully. One that was not will resist them expensively.

Plan for the future. Not with anxiety, but with the same clear-eyed intelligence you would apply to any other long-term investment. Your home is the largest one most people ever make.

The Decisions Worth Getting Right

Over the course of a career, patterns emerge. Certain choice points appear on project after project, in different markets and with different clients, reliably enough that I have come to think of them less as individual decisions and more as predictable crossroads where good guidance saves a client real money. Helping clients navigate these moments is one of the most tangible benefits of having an architect in your corner.

The most consequential of these is the temptation to go lean on infrastructure. A client who has managed their budget carefully through the design process will sometimes, in the final stretch of finish selections, look for places to recover a few dollars. The windows are a frequent target. A less expensive window line from a recognized manufacturer, or a discount option entirely, can seem like a reasonable trade-off. The windows look similar, they perform adequately at installation, and the savings appear real.

What the savings do not account for is the replacement cycle, and this is where an experienced eye earns its keep. Quality windows, properly specified and correctly installed, will perform for the life of the house. Lesser windows will have failing seals within a decade, the insulated glass units fogging, the frames deteriorating, the hardware becoming unreliable. Replacing windows in a finished house is an expensive and disruptive undertaking, and it is entirely avoidable. The money saved at selection is spent back, with interest, at replacement. When I walk a client through this math at the selection stage, the decision usually makes itself.

The same principle applies to plumbing fixtures, roofing materials, exterior cladding, and door hardware. These are the infrastructure elements of a home, the systems and surfaces that interface with weather, with daily use, and with time. Spending appropriately on them is not extravagance. It is the most practical financial decision in the entire project.

The second pattern I see consistently is the tendency to overbuild, to add square footage, rooms, and complexity beyond what the budget can support. The excitement of designing a custom home is real, and it is one of the things I love most about this work. But excitement, unchecked by honest budget management, produces a house that is larger and more complex than the client can afford to build well. A smaller house built with quality materials and careful craft is a better home than a larger house built with compromises throughout. Every time.

I manage this tendency from the very beginning of the process. I set expectations about what a given budget will produce at the Exploration Meeting. I track square footage through every phase of design. I have the budget conversation as many times as it needs to be had, because a client who understands our constraints clearly will make better decisions within them than one who is perpetually hoping the numbers will somehow work themselves out.
They rarely work themselves out on their own. It requires diligent attention.

The Questions You Should Ask
Before hiring an architect, the most important question is not about style or portfolio. It is about process. How do you work? What does your contract cover? How do you handle the estimating process? How involved are you during construction? The answers to those questions will tell you whether the person across the table is a guide or a service provider, and the difference between those two roles is everything.

Ask to see references from past clients and actually call them. Ask not whether they were satisfied but whether the process went as they expected, whether the communication was transparent, whether the budget was managed honestly, whether the architect was present and engaged through construction. Those conversations will tell you more than any portfolio.
Before hiring a builder, ask about their experience with projects of similar complexity and scale. A builder who has spent their career on production housing is not automatically disqualified from a custom project, but they will need more guidance, more patience, and more oversight than one who has spent years on architecturally designed custom homes. Know what you are working with.

Ask about their subcontractor relationships. A builder is only as good as the trades they manage, and a builder whose subcontractor base lacks experience with the quality level your project demands will produce results that reflect that gap regardless of how good the builder themselves may be.

Ask about their financial practices. Client funds should be held in accounts separate from the builder's operating finances. Projects should not be subsidizing each other. The financial stability of the builder matters, a contractor who cannot meet their obligations midway through your project will leave you with an unfinished house and a legal situation that is both expensive and deeply unpleasant. Ask the question before it becomes relevant.

Before breaking ground, be honest with your team about how you want to live. The more transparent and engaged you are with your architect and your interior designer from the very beginning, the better the outcome will be. I can design a beautiful house for anyone. I can

design the right house only for someone who has told me the truth about who they are and how they live.

That honesty is the foundation of everything.

What I Have Learned

Thirty-six years is a long time to do anything. It is long enough to see trends arrive and depart. Long enough to watch materials that were fashionable become dated and then occasionally return to fashion again. Long enough to have designed homes for clients whose children have grown up and called me to design homes of their own.

What I have learned, distilled to its simplest form, is this: the clients who get the best outcomes are the ones who trust their team, engage fully in the process, make decisions based on long-term value rather than short-term savings, and approach the whole extraordinary undertaking with the patience and the openness it deserves.

Building a custom home is one of the most complex and emotionally significant things a family will ever do. It is also, when it goes well, one of the most profoundly satisfying. I have spent my career trying to make it go well, for the clients, for the builders, for the interior designers, and for the homes themselves, which will stand long after all of us are gone and deserve to be built with the care that implies.

That is the conversation I always have. In one form or another, on every project, from the first meeting to the final walkthrough.

I hope you were listening.

Chapter 14: What Makes a Home Beautiful

I am my own worst critic.
When I stand in front of a finished house, one that has taken months of design work, years in some cases from first conversation to final walkthrough, I see it with a particular kind of double vision. I see what it is, and I see what it might have been. The missed opportunity in a roofline. The detail that could have been resolved with more elegance. The proportion that is good but not quite inevitable. These observations are not self-pity. They are the engine of improvement, the thing that has kept me reaching back through years of practice rather than settling into what I already know how to do.

But underneath that critical eye, something else is present. Pride. Satisfaction. The quiet happiness of a client who is genuinely delighted. And occasionally, not always, but often enough to sustain a career, something closer to awe at what the art of building can produce.
That is what this chapter is about. Not the mechanics of beauty, though those matter and I will return to them. But the meaning of it, why it matters, what it costs to pursue, and what it gives back to the world when it is achieved.

What I See

When a house feels truly beautiful to me, I am not responding to any single element. Beauty in architecture is not a feature you can point to on a plan or circle in a catalog. It is the result of a handful of ordinary things done well together: proportions that are right with the eye, materials chosen for the place they are going, details executed by people who cared about the work, and a building that belongs to its setting rather than imposing on it. When those four are in agreement, a house looks settled, as though it could not have been built any other way.
The bracket that holds a roof overhang at a garage, a heavy timber element, scaled precisely to the mass it appears to carry, is a small thing. When it is right, you do not notice it. You simply feel that the house is composed and resolved, that every part of it has been considered, that someone was paying attention all the way to the edge. When it is wrong, too slight for the overhang it supports, too heavy for the scale of the facade, it announces itself as a mistake in a way that undermines the whole composition.

That sensitivity to scale and proportion is not decorative instinct. It is a discipline rooted in the same principles I described in the chapter on Vitruvius and Palladio, proportional systems developed across centuries of careful observation, encoded in the great buildings of Europe and carried forward into the residential tradition I practice. When a window is sized correctly relative to the wall that holds it, the wall feels right. When a room is proportioned with attention to the relationship between its width, length, and ceiling height, the room feels right. These are not subjective impressions. They are the predictable responses of human perception to relationships that have been understood and documented since antiquity.
I also look at how the house sits on its land. A house that belongs to its site, that reads as if it grew from the ground rather than was placed on it, has a quality of rootedness that no amount of architectural elaboration can substitute for. The locally sourced stone at the base. The roofline that responds to the topography rather than ignoring it. The eaves that reach out generously to shade the walls from the southern sun, saving energy and giving the house its characteristic shadow line. These are decisions made early in the design, often invisible in the finished

product, that determine whether a house feels like it deserves to be there or like it arrived recently from somewhere else.

The Responsibility of Building

Robert Venturi, one of the most provocative architectural thinkers of the twentieth century, wrote compellingly about the built environment we too often accept without question, the strip shopping centers, the gas stations, the buildings assembled from cost and convenience rather than from any consideration of what they add to the world around them. His observation was not merely aesthetic. It was moral. We build things that last. What we build becomes the context that everyone who comes after us must inhabit. That is not a neutral act.

I think about this often, and I think about it particularly in the Southern Appalachian Mountains where most of my work is created. This landscape has a character, a particular relationship between stone and wood and weather and topography, that has shaped the building traditions of the region for generations. The materials that were historically used here were used here because they came from here: the stone pulled from local quarries, the timber harvested from local forests, the details evolved from the particular conditions of the climate and the site. Houses built from local materials by local craftsmen belong to their place in a way that imported materials, however beautiful in another context, rarely achieve.

I specify locally sourced stone and wood whenever the project allows it. Not as a gesture toward sustainability, though that matters too, but because these materials carry the context of their origin into the houses I design. A house built of stone quarried from the mountains it sits in is in harmony with its landscape in a way that connects it to something larger than any individual project.

The energy discussion matters as well. Generously designed eaves and overhangs are not decorative gestures in the South. They are functional responses to a climate that delivers significant solar heat gain for much of the year. A roof that extends far enough over the walls to shade them during the steep summer sun angle, while allowing the lower winter sun to reach the glass and contribute warmth, is a house that works with its climate rather than against it. Quality glazing that reduces glare and heat gain without sacrificing light or view is an investment in the daily comfort of the people inside and in the reduced energy demand of the building over its lifetime.

These are not separate concerns from beauty. They are expressions of it. A house that responds intelligently to its climate, its materials, and its site is a house that belongs where it is. That belonging is one of the deepest qualities of architectural beauty, and it cannot be applied from the outside. It must be designed in from the beginning.

What Outlasts Us

I carry with me, on every project, the awareness that most of what I design will outlast me. This is not a morbid observation. It is a clarifying one. A house built well, of quality materials, with honest craft and genuine design intelligence, will stand for a hundred years or more. The family that builds it will age and pass it on. Their children will inherit it. Strangers will eventually live in it. All of them will be shaped, in small ways and large, by the spaces they inhabit, by the quality of the light, the generosity of the rooms, the relationship between interior

and exterior that either draws people outward toward the landscape or turns them inward away from it.

That is the legacy of a well-designed house. It is not a monument to its architect. It is a quiet, daily, ongoing gift to the people who live in it, some of whom will never know the name of the person who designed it, and do not need to.

This is why I believe in timeless design over fashionable design. Trends are temporary by definition. A house designed to express the aesthetic preoccupations of a particular moment will look dated within a decade and antiquated within two. A house designed from enduring principles, proportion, material, craft, context, will age with the same grace as the natural materials it is built from. It will look not like something built in a specific year but like something that has always belonged to its place.

I want the houses I design to say something about the care with which they were made. About the dignity of the labor that shaped them, the stone masons and timber framers and finish carpenters who brought them into being with their hands. About the families who trusted me with one of the most intimate and significant undertakings of their lives. About the place where they stand, and the materials of that place, and the traditions of building that have accumulated in that landscape over generations.

I hope, when someone encounters one of my houses decades from now, that they feel something. Not necessarily the name of the person who designed it. Not the particular moment in which it was built. But something more essential, the sense that this house was made with love and intelligence and genuine respect for the people who would live in it and the world that would hold it.

What Architecture Can Be

I have been to Europe a few times and I always come back changed. Not by the fashionable architecture, but by the ancient. By the buildings that have stood for centuries and still stop you in your tracks. By Palladio's villas in the Veneto, where proportion and light and the relationship between building and landscape achieve something so precisely right that it feels less like design and more like discovery, as though the building had always existed and he simply found it. By the Pantheon in Rome, that impossible dome, that perfect relationship between the pattern of the marble in the floor and the circle of the oculus through which the stream of sunlight enters, that building that has been standing for nearly two thousand years and still produces awe from the people who experience it.

What those buildings teach me is not what to design. They teach me what architecture can aspire to. They remind me that a building, at its best, is not merely a shelter or a service or an expression of its owner's status. It is an artistic act, a creative intelligence applied to the physical world in service of human life, capable at its heights of uplifting the spirit and touching something in the people who encounter it that they cannot quite name.

I do not build Pantheons. I build homes for families in the South. The scale is different. The program is different. The resources are different. But the aspiration is the same.

Every house I design is my attempt to add something beautiful and enduring to the world. Something that honors the materials it is made from and the hands that made it. Something that serves the family inside it not just today but across the full arc of their lives. Something that belongs to its place and its time without being imprisoned by either.
Something that, when the light falls across it at the right angle on a winter afternoon, makes someone stop and feel, if only for a moment, that the world is better for having this particular house in it.

That is what makes a home beautiful. That is why, after all the years I've practiced, I still cannot imagine doing anything else.

Chapter 15: Finding Your Architect

Everything in this book has been building toward a single practical question: "How do you find the right architect for your project?"

It is not a simple question. Architecture is a deeply personal profession, and the relationship between a client and an architect is unlike almost any other professional engagement you will enter into. It is longer than most. It is more intimate than most. It touches the most personal aspects of how you live and what you value. Getting the chemistry right matters enormously, and getting it wrong can be an expensive and unsatisfying experience that taints the entire project.

I want to help you get it right.

Where to Look

Architecture is a regional profession. Architects are licensed by the states in which they practice, and while licensure can be extended across state lines for specific projects, the best residential architects tend to be deeply rooted in the places where they work. That rootedness is not a limitation. It is a source of value. An architect who has spent years designing homes in a specific landscape, climate, and building culture brings a contextual knowledge to your project that no amount of general talent can substitute for.

This means that finding the right architect begins with geography. Who is doing excellent residential work in the area where you intend to build? Who has experience with sites like yours, the topography, the climate, the local building trades, the material palette of the region? Start there.

The internet has made this search considerably more accessible than it once was. A well-maintained website, a thoughtful body of work presented with clarity, and a social media presence that reflects genuine engagement with design and craft are all reasonable signals that an architect takes their professional presentation seriously. Word of mouth remains equally powerful, perhaps more so. A neighbor who has built in your community, a real estate agent who works regularly with clients at your stage of the process, a builder whose judgment you respect, all of these can point you toward architects worth meeting.

What you are looking for in that initial research is evidence of two things: design quality and professional character. The portfolio tells you about the first. The way an architect writes, communicates, and presents themselves tells you a great deal about the second. An architect whose online presence is inaccessible, jargon-heavy, or dismissive of the practical realities of residential construction is giving you useful information before you have even made contact.

What to Be Wary Of

I want to say something plainly here, because it is something I believe deeply and something that the homebuilding public deserves to hear. Not all architects are the right architects for a residential project.

The best architects are genuinely curious about their clients' lives. They see each commission not as an opportunity to impose a signature vision but as a chance to understand how a particular family actually lives, and to shape a home around that understanding. This, in my view, is what our profession is fundamentally for.

You can recognize an architect of this kind by a few clear signals. They ask more questions than they answer, especially early on. They want to know how you cook, how you move through your morning, what has frustrated you about every house you have lived in. They treat your budget as a meaningful creative parameter rather than a nuisance beneath their concern. They speak about your needs before they speak about their own aesthetic. Their portfolio may include houses that photograph beautifully, and when you call their former clients, you hear about a collaborative process and a home that feels like the owners' own rather than a stage for someone else's artistic statement.

I raise this because not every practice operates this way. There is a strain of architecture more concerned with the architect's own vision than with the client's life, and it has, at times, strained the profession's relationship with the homebuilding public. The good news is that architects who take a different view, who place the client at the center of the work, are not hard to find. You simply have to know what to look for, and now you do.

The best residential architects are grounded, in the construction process, in the practical realities of budget and site and schedule, and above all in genuine interest about the people they are designing for. My own grounding came from summer jobs on jobsites, from the houses I built with my own hands. That foundation, the understanding of how buildings are actually made, from the footings to the ridges, has kept me connected to the craft and the client in a way that purely academic training does not always produce.

What you want is an architect who is capable of beautiful design and committed to your outcome. The two are not in tension. In the best practices, they are inseparable.

What the First Meeting Should Feel Like

The first meeting with a potential architect should feel like the beginning of a collaboration, not the beginning of a transaction. You should leave that meeting feeling heard and understood, with the sense that your words have been mirrored back to you in ways that show the architect was genuinely listening. Not processed, not the sense that your information has been collected and will be translated into drawings according to a formula, but genuinely heard. An architect who listens well, who asks follow-up questions, who seems genuinely curious about how you live and what matters to you, is an architect who will design from that understanding rather than despite it.

You should also leave feeling excited. Not just about the house you might build, but about the process of building it in collaboration with this particular person. The design of a custom home is a long and demanding undertaking, and the quality of the relationship that carries you through it matters as much as the quality of the drawings that come out of it. If you do not feel, after the first meeting, that this is someone you could trust with one of the most significant investments of

your life, someone whose judgment you respect, whose integrity you believe in, whose enthusiasm for your project feels genuine, pay attention to that feeling.

Some questions worth asking in a first meeting: How do you approach the estimating process, and how do you protect clients from budget surprises? How involved are you during construction? What does your contract cover, and what does it not? Can you walk me through a project from beginning to end, from the first conversation to the final walkthrough, and describe what that experience was like for the client? May I speak with some of your past clients?

The answers will tell you a great deal. So will the questions the architect asks you. An architect who spends the first meeting talking about their own work without asking about your life is an architect who may not be as interested in your life as they should be.

When the Relationship Is Working

A client-architect relationship that is working well has a particular feeling to it, one that is difficult to describe in advance but immediately recognizable when it is present.

It feels like trust. Not blind confidence, but the earned kind, the trust that comes from watching someone do what they said they would do, from seeing your own values reflected back in a design that is better than what you could have imagined on your own, and from the reassurance of knowing that someone with real expertise is looking out for your interests throughout.

It feels like collaboration. Not the false kind, where your opinion is solicited and then set aside, and not the quieter version in which your preferences are gradually shaped to fit the architect's signature style, but a genuine creative partnership, the back and forth between what you know about your own life and what I know about design and construction, producing something neither of us could have arrived at alone.

The clients I remember most vividly are not the ones with the largest projects or the most generous budgets. They are the ones who brought their full selves to the process, who came to the Exploration Meeting with ideas and questions and genuine excitement, who trusted the team we assembled, and who made decisions with care and without regret.

Those are the projects that remind me why I practice. They are what this relationship, at its best, looks like.

Chapter 16: What it all Costs and what The Architect Provides

Let's talk about money, what design professionals refer to as "fee".

It's the question every client wants to ask in the first meeting but isn't quite sure how to raise it. You have decided you want to build something, a new home, a major addition, a renovation that finally makes the house work and somewhere in the back of your mind is the quiet, nagging question: What is this going to cost me, just to have someone help me design it?

You deserve a straight answer. That's what this chapter is for.

I bring the fee conversation up early, deliberately, without apology, and before we have gone very far down the road together. I have no interest in spending weeks developing a relationship and a project scope with someone who is simply kicking the tires, and I have no interest in a client investing their time and excitement in a process they are not yet ready to commit to. So after an initial conversation about the size of the house, the scope, and the budget, I provide a full written proposal. Everything is included; my fee, the fees of the consultants who will be part of the team, the scope of services at each phase, the deliverables, and the timeline. No ambiguity. No surprises waiting around the corner. That clarity is a form of respect for both of us.

What You Are Paying For

Before we get into how fees are structured, I want to say something that I think every client deserves to hear.

From the Exploration Meeting to the final construction walkthrough, I will typically spend three hundred to four hundred hours on your project for a custom-design, new-construction house. Many of those hours are visible to you as the Design Reveal, the 3D model, the site visits, the meetings where we work through details together. Many of them are not. The hours spent studying your site before I have drawn a single line. The hours resolving a structural condition in the drawings before it becomes a problem in the field. The hours reviewing submittals, answering builder questions, coordinating consultants, and making the hundreds of small decisions that keep the project moving in the right direction.

You are not just paying for the drawings. You are paying for six years of education, thirty-six years of professional experience, and accumulated judgment, and the instincts that catch a problem before it is built, the knowledge that guides a material decision toward something that will last, the professional accountability that comes with a licensed architect signing and sealing a set of documents and standing behind every line on every page.

That is what the fee represents. When you understand it that way, it is not an additional cost. It is one of the most productive investments in the entire project.

How Architects Charge

There is no single standard fee arrangement in residential architecture. Depending on the project, the firm, and the scope of services, you may encounter any of the following approaches or a combination of a few.

A percentage of construction cost is one of the most common structures for custom residential work. The architect's fee is calculated as a percentage of the total construction cost, and that percentage varies from firm to firm based on the scope of services included and the nature of the practice. The logic is straightforward: larger and more complex homes generally require more design work, more detailed drawings, and more construction oversight, and a percentage fee scales with that reality.

A fixed fee, sometimes called a “lump sum”, means the architect agrees to provide a defined scope of services for a set dollar amount regardless of how long it takes or what the construction ultimately costs. This gives clients budget certainty, which many people find reassuring. The trade-off is that a fixed fee requires a clearly defined scope upfront. If the project evolves significantly with a program change, an added garage, a kitchen that is relocated, the fee may need to be revisited. For well-defined projects with decisive clients, fixed fees work beautifully.

An hourly arrangement means you pay for exactly the time spent. This is completely transparent but can create anxiety without a clear sense of how many hours the project will require. Hourly billing works best for limited-scope work like a feasibility study, a zoning consultation, help evaluating a property before you buy it. For full project services, most clients prefer a structure that gives them more predictability.

A per-square-foot rate is sometimes used as a rough benchmark in early conversations, particularly in certain regions. It can be a useful starting point but tends to oversimplify the real variables of a project. A four-thousand-square-foot home with a simple rectangular footprint and standard finishes is a very different design challenge from a four-thousand-square-foot home on a steep hillside with a complex roof and custom millwork throughout, but a per-square-foot fee would treat them identically.

My own fee structure is a blend, shaped by the size of the house, the complexity of the design, the site conditions, and the client's budget. What matters most is that whatever structure we agree on is clearly defined in the contract before work begins.

What Drives the Fee

Within any fee structure, several factors shape the ultimate number. Project complexity is the most significant. A home with straightforward geometry, standard structural systems, and conventional construction is less expensive to design than one with a complex roof, a challenging site, and custom details throughout. The more unique the project, the more time it demands and the fee should reflect that honestly.

Site conditions matter more than most clients expect. A flat, accessible lot with no unusual constraints is easier and less costly to design for than a steep hillside, a tight site, or a property with difficult soils. When the land presents challenges, the design work reflects them. The level of finish and detail is directly proportional to the documentation required. A home with varying

rooflines, exotic finish materials, intricate foundations, and extensive custom cabinetry requires a far more detailed set of drawings than one built with standard components. Every custom element must be drawn, dimensioned, and described with enough clarity that a builder can execute it exactly as intended.

Your decision-making process has a real effect as well and this one surprises clients sometimes. Projects where the client has a clear vision, makes decisions efficiently, and sticks with them move faster and cost less to administer than projects where direction changes frequently or earlier work gets revisited. This is not a criticism. Designing a home is a significant undertaking and deserves the time it takes to properly document it. But it is worth knowing that your engagement has a direct effect on the fee.

What the Fee Includes

When an architect quotes a fee, it is tied to a defined scope of services. At the baseline, a standard scope takes your project from initial concept through permitted construction documents and into construction.

Schematic Design is the exploratory phase: analyzing the site, listening to your goals, and translating your program into architectural form. You will see floor plan diagrams, preliminary site plans, and early exterior studies. The goal is to arrive at a design direction you believe in before committing significant resources to developing it further.

Design Development takes the approved schematic design and resolves it into a more detailed, buildable version. Structural systems are coordinated, window and door locations refined, and preliminary material decisions explored. This is where a good idea becomes a constructable one.

Construction Documents are the complete set of drawings submitted for permit and used by the builder to price and build the project. As a licensed architect, I sign and seal these documents before they are issued. That signature is not a formality. It is my professional certification that the drawings have been prepared in accordance with applicable codes and standards, and my legal responsibility for their content. When you see that seal on a set of drawings, you are looking at the product of a licensed professional standing fully behind their work.

Construction Administration is the phase most clients overlook and most regret skipping. Once construction begins, the architect shifts to observation and communication; periodic site visits, answering contractor questions, reviewing submittals, and verifying that the project is being built in conformance with the drawings. I covered this in depth in Chapter 12. The short version is this: the construction phase is where problems are discovered and decisions are made under pressure. Having your architect present during that phase is not a luxury. It is the final act of protection the design process offers.

What Is Not Included: The Consultants

An architect's fee covers architectural design services. It does not cover the fees charged by the other licensed professionals required to complete a residential project. These consultants are essential; their work is incorporated into the construction document set but they are contracted and paid separately.

In my proposals, I include estimated fees for each consultant so that nothing comes as a surprise. The team typically includes a structural engineer, who designs the foundation system, framing, and beam and column sizing for every new home. Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineers coordinate the systems that make the house function on larger custom projects, while on smaller projects those systems are sometimes designed by the licensed contractors themselves. A civil or site engineer may be needed if the project involves significant grading, drainage design, or new driveway access onto a public road. A geotechnical engineer is required by many jurisdictions before a permit is issued, particularly on sites with unusual soil conditions. A landscape architect brings the same design intelligence to the exterior environment that the architect brings to the building itself. The interior designer, as I described in an earlier chapter, is a genuine partner in the selection of finishes, details, and furnishings that gives the house its character.

Each of these consultants represents real value. Each of them also represents real cost. Understanding that the architect's fee is one part of a larger professional services investment is essential to budgeting the project honestly.

How to Evaluate a Fee Proposal

When you receive an architectural fee proposal, read it carefully and ask questions before you sign anything.

Look at the scope, not just the number. A lower fee is only a better deal if it covers the same services. A proposal that appears cheaper may simply be providing less and the difference will show up later, in the quality of the documents, the level of construction oversight, or the absence of consultants who should have been there.

Ask what happens when the scope changes. It may. The best proposals define clearly what triggers an additional services request and what additional work will cost. Vague language here creates friction later.

Pay close attention to construction administration. Some lower-fee proposals limit or eliminate it entirely. This is a false economy. The construction phase is when the quality of the finished home is determined. Reducing your architect's presence during that phase to save a few dollars in fees is a trade-off that rarely ends well.

A fee that seems very low is a warning sign, not a windfall. Architectural services cost what they cost because they take time and expertise. An unusually low fee generally means one of three things: the scope has been reduced, the architect is undervaluing their work, or the experience level is not commensurate with what the project requires. None of those outcomes serves you.

A Word on Negotiating

Fee negotiation is normal, and professional architects do not take it personally. The most productive conversation you can have is also the most direct one: here is what I am able to spend on design fees, here is what I am hoping to build, can we make this work? An architect who respects you will answer that question honestly.

What can be negotiated: fee structures, payment schedules, and the scope of services included in the base agreement. What cannot really be negotiated is the time a project genuinely takes. If something requires thirty hours of work, offering to pay for fifteen does not produce thirty hours of work. It produces fifteen.

If budget is a genuine constraint, some architects will structure their services in separate phases, schematic design as one engagement, design development as a second, construction documents as a third, spreading the financial commitment over a longer period. What is important to understand is that phasing changes when you pay, not how much you pay. The work required to take a project from first sketch to a complete permitted set of drawings is what it is. Phasing simply allows you to approach it in stages.

Negotiate before you sign, not after. Have the fee conversation thoroughly, make sure every agreement is reflected in the written contract, and begin the relationship with the same clarity and honesty that you want it to carry all the way through to the day you move in.

The right fee is one that fairly compensates the architect and their consultants for the work required and gives you the level of service your project deserves. Approached openly, it is not an awkward conversation at all. It is the foundation of everything that follows.

Final Word on Fees

Of all the conversations in a custom home project, the one about fee is the one clients most want to avoid and most need to have. I understand why. Fees feel personal in a way that other project costs do not. The stone and the framing and the cabinetry are numbers attached to materials. The fee is a number attached to a person, and attaching a number to a person can feel uncomfortable in a way that attaching a number to a roof does not.

I want to relieve that discomfort, here, at the end of this chapter. An honest fee, fairly set and openly discussed, is not an awkward thing. It is the start of a professional relationship built on clarity. The scope of work is defined. The compensation is agreed to. Everyone knows what is owed, by whom, and for what. From that foundation, the rest of the relationship can unfold without the quiet tension of money left unresolved.

A clear fee, a clear scope, a clear starting line. That is what every client deserves. It is what I aim to deliver, every time, from the very first conversation.

Conclusion: The Process You Deserve

There is an analogy I have used with clients for years, usually offered with a smile somewhere in the middle of a project when the decisions are accumulating and the finish line still feels distant. Building a custom home, I tell them, is a little like having a baby. It is expensive. It is messy. It is longer and more demanding than you expected when you started. There are moments of genuine discomfort and moments of exhilarating progress, often within the same week. You will make decisions under pressure that you second-guess afterward, and you will make others that feel so right you wonder how you ever lived without them. People will give you advice you didn't ask for. Things will not always go according to plan.

At the end of it, when you are standing in your finished home for the first time, in rooms that were designed for the specific shape of your life, on land that you walked with your architect on a morning that now feels like the beginning of everything, you will feel something that makes all of it worth it. Something you will carry for the rest of your life.

You will feel home.

What This Book Was For

The homebuilding process is genuinely complex. It involves significant financial decisions, a team of professionals whose roles and relationships take time to understand, a design process that is more iterative and collaborative than most people expect, and a construction phase that will test your patience before it rewards it. None of that should be hidden from you. All of it can be understood, with time and a good guide beside you.

That is what a good architect provides. Not just experience and drawings, but true guidance. Not just design, advocacy. Not just a set of construction documents, a relationship that runs from the first site walk to the final turn of the key, characterized throughout by genuine commitment to your outcome and honest counsel about how to achieve it.

An architect is ethically bound and professionally obligated to act in your best interest. That is not a marketing claim. It is a condition of licensure, enforced by a code of professional ethics that has been developed over generations of practice. When you hire a licensed architect, you are hiring someone who has accepted that obligation and whose professional standing depends on honoring it.

What it means in practice is that your architect should be helping you spend your money wisely, steering you toward the decisions that add lasting value and away from the ones that add only cost. It means designing a home that uses its materials honestly and efficiently, that belongs to its place and its climate, that is built to last rather than to impress and then deteriorate. It means caring about the resources that go into a building, the stone and the timber and the labor of the craftspeople who shape it, because those resources deserve to be used in the service of something enduring rather than squandered on something that will end up in a landfill.

A home built well is not just a gift to its owners. It is a gift to the community it stands in, to the landscape it inhabits, and to the people who will live in it long after the people who built it are gone.

What I Hope You Are Feeling

If you have read this far and you are thinking about picking up the phone, I want to tell you what I hope you are feeling in that moment.

I hope you are feeling excited. Not just about the house you might build, but about the process of building it, about the Exploration Meeting where it all begins, about the Design Reveal where you get to see your home for the first time, about the 3D model where it becomes real, about the moment during framing when the morning light streams into the kitchen through the window opening you didn’t foresee, and you understand, suddenly and completely, what all those months of careful work were building toward.

I hope you are feeling confident, that the process is knowable, that the team you assemble is trustworthy, that the decisions ahead of you are navigable with the right guidance. That your dreams are not too large or too specific or too particular to be realized. That the home you have been imagining, the one that fits your life exactly, that serves you today and grows with you over decades, that sits on its land with quiet authority and holds your family with warmth and security, is genuinely possible.

Because it is. I have spent my career years proving it, one house, one family, one site at a time.

I want to meet you. I want to hear about the land you have found and the life you want to build on it. I want to ask you how you take your coffee in the morning and whether you cook and whether you entertain and what has frustrated you about every house you have lived in before. I want to bring the full weight of my experience, my training, and my genuine love for this work to bear on designing something that will exceed what you dared to hope for.

I want us to have some fun too.

And at the end of it, when the house is finished and you are soaking in the moment, when the view is right and the rooms are exactly as we designed them with the materials that have the special quality of having always been there, I want to be standing beside you. Not taking credit. Just sharing the moment. Sharing your joy.

That moment is what I do this for. It is what I have always done this for.

On "Home"

After over three decades of designing homes, I find that the word itself has grown in meaning for me rather than shrinking. I understand it better than I did, and I hold it more carefully.
Home is not a square footage or a style or a list of rooms. It is a feeling, specific, personal, and irreplaceable. It is the smell of a familiar kitchen and the quality of afternoon light in a room that has held years of living. It is the warm comfort of knowing exactly where you are and feeling, without having to think about it, that you are exactly where you belong.

That feeling cannot be manufactured. But it can be designed for. It can be planned, with care and intelligence and genuine attention to the people who will inhabit the space. It can be built, by skilled hands, from materials that carry their own history and dignity. It can be given, by an architect who cares about the work and the people it serves, as the most enduring gift one professional can offer another human being.

And at the end, when the house is finished and you are standing in it for the first time as its owner, in rooms that were designed for the specific shape of your daily life, what you feel is something close to gratitude. On both sides.

That is the architect's advantage. Not a competitive edge. Not a marketing position. A genuine, hard-earned capacity to help you build the home you deserve, the one that fits your lifestyle, honors your resources, endures through time, and becomes, in every sense of the word, yours.

Great homes don't happen by accident. Let's create yours together.