

CRAFTARCHITECTURE.COM

ARCHITECTURE BY

J. Dishner

LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

by Jeffrey L. Dishner, AIA, NCARB

Guidebook: Chapter 1

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.