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*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 10

## 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.