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LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

# THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 12

## 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.