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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 13

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.