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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 15

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.