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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 2

Chapter 2: The Exploration Meeting

Every great home begins with a conversation.

Not with drawings. Not with square footage targets or a list of must-have features. Those things have their place, and we will get to them. But before any of that, there is a meeting, and in that meeting, I listen intently.

I call it the “Exploration Meeting”, and it is the foundation upon which everything else is built. It is also nothing like what most first-time clients expect from an architect. There is no presentation. There are no preliminary sketches spread across a table. There is a site, a walk, a conversation, and if the day unfolds as it needs to, a lot of smiles, laughs, with a good meal and a bottle of wine to cap it off.

A few hours invested, a lifetime of home.

Starting Where the House Will Sit: The Site

Most of my clients are building in private clubs or gated communities, mountain settings, lake properties, sites with significant topography and terrain with views that have strong opinions about where a house should be placed. We begin there. Before we talk about rooms, we walk the land.

A site visit at the outset tells me things no survey or aerial photograph can. I want to see where the sun rises and sets. I want to understand the views, which ones are worth pursuing with glass, which are best softened or screened. I want to feel how the land slopes, where it drops and where it levels, because the conversation between terrain and structure is one of the first and most consequential design decisions of any project. I want to understand how a car arrives, how the driveway will approach, where a guest will stand when they first see the house, because arrival is one of the most underrated elements of residential design and one of the first experiences a visitor will feel.

A sloping lot suggests one kind of home entirely. It opens the possibility of main-level living above and a lower level that steps down into the landscape, guest rooms, recreation spaces, a workshop, all tucked beneath the primary living floor with walkout access to grade. A flatter lot calls for a different solution: main-level living with rooms above, or a sprawling single-story plan that spreads across the land rather than stepping through it. Neither is inherently better. But they are fundamentally different homes, and understanding which you are standing on changes every conversation that follows. After the site, we sit down. Usually at the clubhouse, or a restaurant nearby with a good table and a little more time. Then the real conversation begins.

How Do You Want to Live?

The questions I ask in an Exploration Meeting are not the ones most clients expect. I am not leading with ceiling heights or room counts. I am trying to understand something more fundamental: how these people want to inhabit this house.

Who cooks? Where do you eat breakfast? Do you eat lunch at home, or is the house quiet until evening? How do evenings unfold, is there a cocktail hour on the screened porch, a quiet dinner for two, or a house full of people on a Friday night? Do you entertain formally, casually, or rarely at all? Do grown children visit, and if so, how long do they stay? Do they need privacy and separation, or do they fold naturally into the rhythm of the household?

These questions might sound like small talk. They are not. The answer to “who cooks” shapes the relationship between the kitchen and the rest of the house, whether the cook is part of the gathering or sequestered from it, whether the kitchen opens generously to the living room or functions better as its own contained world. The answer to “do you entertain” determines how the public and private zones of the house are organized relative to each other. Whether a couple winds down together on the porch each evening or retreats to their own separate spaces tells me something essential about how the floor plan should breathe.

I ask about mornings in particular. Does the kitchen face east, into the first light of the day? For some clients this matters enormously, they want the sun coming across their coffee cup, and if the lot allows it, I will orient the house to make that happen. It sounds like a small thing. Lived daily for thirty years, it is not small at all. Its pure joy.

Room relationships, what architects call adjacencies, are some of the most practical and impactful decisions in developing a floor plan, and they almost never come up in the kind of design conversation that starts with style or appearance. Where does the garage sit relative to the kitchen? Is there a pantry positioned between them, so that carrying groceries from the car is a single fluid movement rather than a journey across the house? Is the primary bedroom on the main level, where it will serve a couple well not just today but twenty years from now? These are not glamorous questions. They are the questions that determine whether a house works.

I also ask about hobbies, about habits, about what has quietly frustrated every home they have lived in before. People will tell you what they want. If you listen carefully enough, they will also tell you what they need, and those two things, in my experience, are not always the same.

Occasionally, clients share things more intimate than they initially planned. Preferences about privacy within a marriage. The particular rhythms and requirements of a life lived closely with another person. I receive all of it with discretion. Nothing said in that room shapes anything other than the house. All of it informs the design.

The Language of Inspiration

After we have talked about how they live, I ask clients what they love. Here is where the meeting takes on a different character entirely, less interview, more collaboration.

The most prepared clients arrive with something tangible to share with me. Magazine clippings gathered over months or years, torn from architectural publications and sorted into a folder that has been waiting for this conversation. Photographs taken on travels, a hotel lobby in Charleston, a farmhouse in the Italian countryside, a friend's mountain house they have admired for years. Images saved from design publications or residential websites, organized into something that begins to tell a story about what beauty means to them. Engagement is a creative accelerant.

I take all of it in. I study it, keep it, and return to it throughout the design process. The images become part of what I call my "Reveal" presentation, the moment, later in the project, when I show clients what I have heard and how it has shaped the design. That presentation is one of the most important trust-building moments in our relationship. When a client sees their own sensibility reflected back in a design that also solves every practical problem we discussed, something shifts. They stop wondering whether I was listening. They know.

But I have learned to ask questions about the images, because a picture rarely means what it appears to mean. A client once brought me a photograph of a beautiful kitchen, refined, well-appointed, the kind of room that stops you on a page. I was ready to discuss the cabinetry, the layout, the material palette. When I asked what drew them to it, the answer was immediate: the range. Just the range. Nothing else in the photograph was relevant to what they wanted. Everything else was, in fact, the opposite of their taste.

That exchange taught me something I have not forgotten. An image is not a directive. It is the beginning of a question. The beginnings of an idea. My job is to ask the question well enough to understand what, precisely, is being communicated, and what is not.

The clients who cannot yet articulate what they love are not lost causes. They simply need a different kind of conversation. I ask them about places that have moved them emotionally, not houses specifically, but any space that has made them feel something. A restaurant. A chapel. A library. A particular afternoon light in a room they cannot quite describe. People carry more aesthetic knowledge than they realize. My job is to help them access it, and then to translate it into something built that they will enjoy.

When Clients Already Know

Some clients arrive at the Exploration Meeting with a very specific vision already formed. They have a house in mind, sometimes literally, a photograph of someone else's home that they have fallen in love with and want to recreate. I understand this impulse completely. These clients have been paying close attention. They know what moves them. They want to make sure it happens.

The challenge is that specificity of this kind, applied too early, can work against the very outcome they are hoping for.

A house that costs twenty million dollars does not become a two-million-dollar house through simplification. The proportions, the materials, the site relationships that make a grand home feel as it does are not surface qualities. They are structural to the experience. When the images a client brings me represent a scale their budget genuinely cannot reach, I tell them so, directly, and early. Discovering that mismatch after months of design work has been invested is far more painful for everyone involved than hearing it honestly at the first meeting.

There is also the matter of imitation. When a client asks me to replicate another architect's design, to copy it, essentially, and build it on their lot, I decline. Not out of arrogance, but out of professional ethics and genuine conviction about what design is. What I will always offer instead is this: the spirit of what they love is entirely available to us. The feeling of that house,

its character, its relationship to materials and light and landscape, all of that can inform what we create together. The specific design cannot be reproduced. But something better can be created.

What I find, in most of these conversations, is that clients who arrive with very specific directives have often not yet had the experience of working with an architect. They are accustomed to telling a draftsman exactly what to draw. The relationship works differently here. I am not waiting for instructions. I am listening for essence, for the feeling they are after, the life they want the house to support, and then I am bringing my own judgment, training, and my years of experience to bear on finding the right form for it.

When clients are willing to make that shift, to offer the essence and trust me with the form, that is when the work becomes something neither of us could have arrived at alone.

The Exploration Meeting is where that possibility opens. It is a long conversation about views and terrain, about morning light and grocery runs, about the meals and the evenings and the particular way two people move through a life together. It sounds unhurried. It is. But in those few hours, if I am doing my job, I learn everything I need to design a home that will serve this family for the rest of their lives.

I do not take that lightly. I never have.