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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 3

Chapter 3: Both Seats at the Table

There is a rule in my practice that is non-negotiable.

Both partners come to every design meeting. Every single one. Together.

I did not arrive at this policy through philosophy. I arrived at it through experience, specifically, through the particular misery of presenting a design to one spouse, refining it through several rounds of careful work, and then meeting the other spouse for the first time at a moment when everything was already in motion. What followed, in more than one instance, was the architectural equivalent of starting over. Except that nobody wanted to say so out loud, which made it considerably worse.

I made the rule. The rule has served everyone well ever since.

Two People, One House

Building a custom home is, among other things, an extended exercise in collaboration, and joint decision-making is something that even the most harmonious couples find unexpectedly revealing. A home is not a vacation to plan or a car to buy. It is a complete physical expression of how two people intend to live, what they value, what they are willing to spend, and what they absolutely cannot compromise on. It surfaces disagreements that have been successfully tabled for years. It introduces entirely new categories of disagreement that neither person knew existed.

I sat across from couples who have been married for decades, people who have built lives together, raised children, navigated genuine hardship with grace, and watched them reach an impasse over the placement of a kitchen island with an intensity that suggested something larger was at stake. Sometimes something larger was at stake. That is not my department. The kitchen island, however, is very much my department.

What I have learned, over my career is that these conversations, is that disagreement between partners is not a problem to be avoided. It is information. The only way to work with that information productively is to have both people in the room when it surfaces.

The Referee

I will not pretend that my role in these moments is purely architectural. There is a reason my clients sometimes joke, after a particularly spirited design meeting, that I missed my calling as a marriage counselor. I take that as a compliment, though I accept it carefully.

When two people disagree in front of me, my first job is to listen, not to the argument itself, but to what each person is actually protecting. Disagreements about a house are rarely just about the house. The spouse who is pressing hard for a larger kitchen is often expressing something about how she wants to live, how she wants to feel in her own home, how she has always imagined this chapter of her life. The spouse who keeps steering the conversation back to budget is often carrying the anxiety of the whole project alone, quietly, because someone has to. Both of those things are valid. Both of them deserve to be heard.

My approach is to take neither side but to provide space for both opinions. I ask questions that help each person articulate not just what they want but why, because when the why is on the table, compromise becomes possible in a way it simply isn't when the conversation stays at the level of square footage and finish selections. People are surprisingly willing to give up a specific thing when they feel confident that the underlying need it represented will be met some other way.

What I am also doing, quietly, is guiding the conversation toward what is achievable. A project that exceeds its budget does not get built. A design that one partner secretly resents will eventually make itself known in the life of that house. Neither outcome serves anyone. Part of my value in these meetings is that I have no emotional stake in the outcome, I am the one person in the room who can hold the practical reality steady while the conversation moves through its necessary emotional weather.

The Dreamer and the Realist

In my experience, most couples contain one of each.

The dreamer arrives at the meeting with a folder of images clipped from home magazines, rooms that have appeared in features on coastal estates and European renovations, spaces of extraordinary beauty and extraordinary expense. They have been imagining this house for years. They are ready. They want everything, and they want it to be perfect, and they are genuinely puzzled when the conversation turns to what things cost.

The realist has been running the numbers in their head since before they pulled into the parking lot. They have a figure. They are holding it. They are watching their partner describe a kitchen that belongs in a different tax bracket and calculating, with growing concern, the distance between that vision and what the checking account will support.

I love them both. I need them both. The dreamer keeps the project reaching toward something worth building. The realist keeps it tethered to the earth. My job is to find the design that resides in the space between them, beautiful enough to satisfy the one, honest enough to reassure the other.

Sometimes the way through is to make the budget conversation explicit and then set it aside for a moment, so that we can first establish what the project is really trying to be. When people understand the design intent clearly, when they can feel what the house is reaching for, they make better decisions about where to spend and where to pull back. A client who understands why a certain room needs a certain ceiling height will find a way to afford it. A client who is just looking at a line item has no basis for that judgment.

Other times the way through is reinforcement. I have a small but effective strategy for those moments when a couple is deadlocked and I am reasonably certain I know the right answer: I bring in an ally. When an interior designer is involved in the project, which I highly recommend, the two of us can approach a decision together. If both the architect and the designer are in agreement about what serves the project and the clients best, the dynamic shifts. We are not ganging up on anyone. We are, as gently and good-naturedly as possible, outnumbering the resistance and providing our best advice.

It works more often than you might expect. And we do it with enough warmth that nobody feels ambushed.

What the Meeting Is Really For

There is something I want every couple to understand before they sit down with me for the first time: the friction you experience in these meetings is not a sign that something is going wrong. It is a sign that something important is being worked out, in words, around a table, with time to think and revise and respond, rather than in the walls of a house that have already been built.

Every disagreement resolved in a design meeting is a disagreement that will not surface during construction, when resolving it costs real money and real time. Every compromise reached before a foundation is poured is a gift to the marriage, to the budget, and to the house itself.

I have had couples tell me, years after moving in, that the design process was one of the most clarifying experiences of their relationship. That sitting down together and being forced to articulate what they wanted, individually and together, taught them things about each other and about themselves that living side by side had not. I believe it. A house is an intimate endeavor. Designing it together is an intimate act.

Both seats filled at the table, please. Every time.

That is not a policy. It is, I have come to believe, a form of respect, for the project, for the process, and for both of the people whose life the house is ultimately going to hold.