ARCHITECTURE BY J. Dishner

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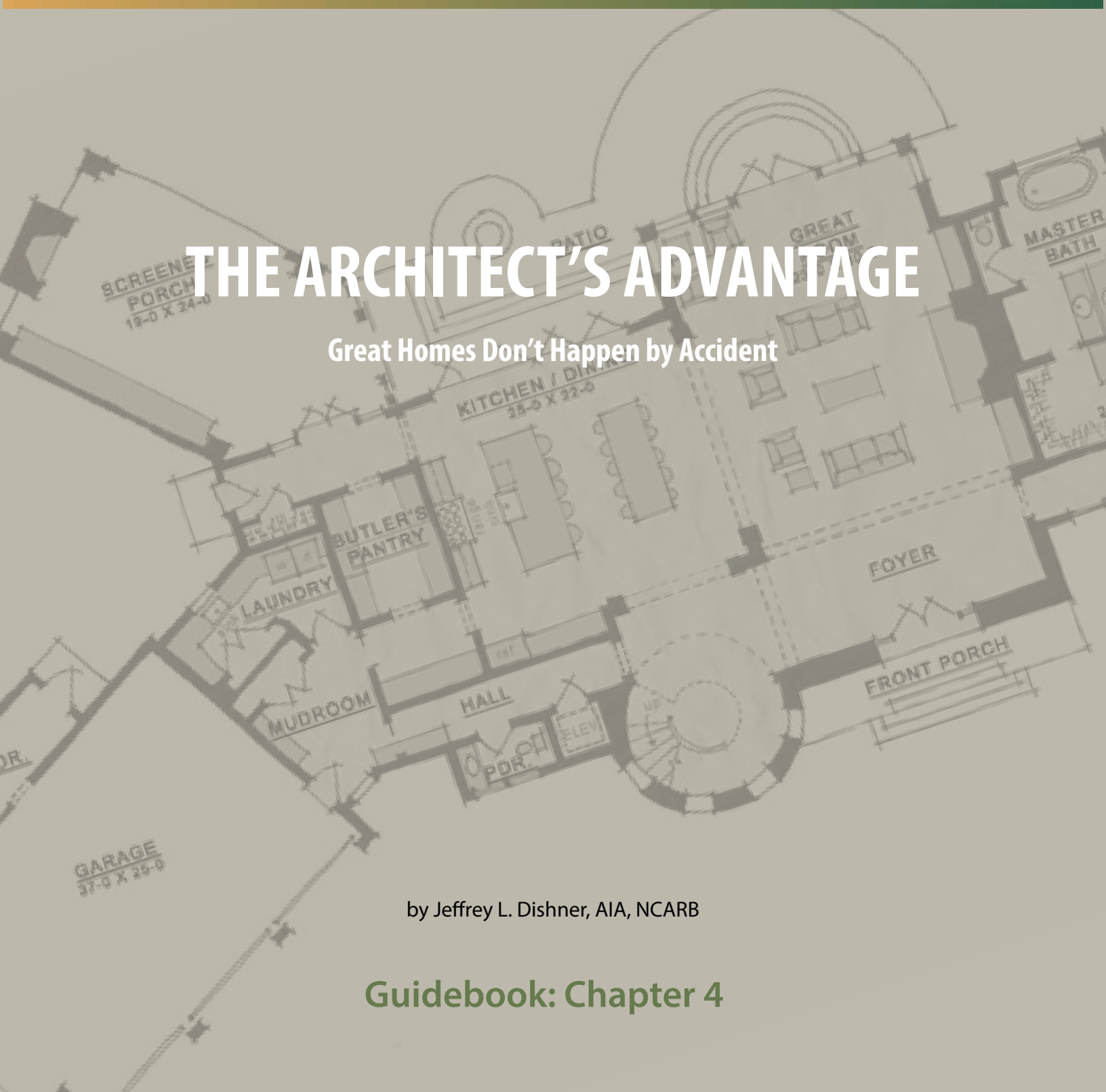
# THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

## Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident




by Jeffrey L. Dishner, AIA, NCARB

## Guidebook: Chapter 4

## Chapter 4: From Napkin to Detail

People often ask me how long it takes to design a house. The honest answer is that it takes the entire project, that design is not a phase with a beginning and an end but a continuous act of discovery that begins the moment I walk a site and does not fully resolve until the last detail is confirmed in the field during construction. A house reveals itself gradually, to the architect and to the clients alike, and the best design work happens when everyone involved is willing to follow that path of discovery wherever it leads.

That said, something must go on paper first. And the journey from blank page to finished set of construction documents is deliberate, sequential, and more collaborative than most clients imagine before they experience it.

### The Design Reveal

Within a few weeks of the contract being executed, I am ready to sit down with clients for what I call the Design Reveal. This is the first moment they see their new house, and I have learned, over many years, that how you present a design matters almost as much as the design itself.

Floor plans alone do not excite people. This is one of the most consistent truths of my practice, and it took me some time to fully appreciate it. A floor plan is a logical, technical document. It communicates room sizes and relationships with precision, but it does not communicate the feeling of a house, the way the entry opens into the living space, the way the roof line meets the landscape, the way the front elevation will look on a winter afternoon when the lights are on inside. For most clients, a floor plan without an elevation is a set of abstract shapes. They nod politely and try to imagine.

So I give them the "sizzle to go with the steak", so to speak.

The "Reveal" presentation includes the site plan, showing the house on the lot with the driveway, the orientation, the relationship to topography and views. It includes the floor plans for every level as well as a fully rendered exterior elevation, a detailed, finished drawing of the front of the house that shows materials, shadows, proportion, and character. The rendering is what makes the room go quiet. It is what makes a client lean forward and say, for the first time, that is my house.

There is another deliberate choice embedded in how I present that first design, and it is one that took me years to fully articulate even though I have practiced it instinctively for most of my career. The drawings I bring to a Design Reveal are hand drawn, or rendered to look that way, loose, gestural, slightly sketchy in quality. Not because I cannot produce hard-lined computer drawings at that stage. I can. But because I have learned that a crisp, technically perfect drawing does something to a client that works against everything the Reveal meeting is supposed to accomplish.

When a drawing looks finished, people treat it as finished. They are reluctant to suggest changes to something that appears to have taken enormous effort to produce in its current form. They soften their honest reactions. They tell you it looks wonderful when what they mean is that they have a question they are afraid to ask. The polish of the presentation inadvertently

communicates that the design is further along than it is, and that revising it would be an imposition.

A hand-drawn sketch communicates something entirely different. It says: this is still in motion, your input is not only welcome, it is the reason we are here. Clients lean in differently. They point. They ask questions. They say things like "what if this were over here instead", and that is precisely the conversation I need us to be having. This is the moment in the project when changes are easiest and least costly to make. A line moved on a sketch takes seconds. The same move made during construction documentation takes hours, and made in the field, it may not be possible at all.

The approachability of a hand-drawn presentation is not an aesthetic preference. It is a strategic invitation, one that says the design belongs to both of us, and that we are not done making it yet.

The relationship between the exterior and the interior of a building is one of the deepest preoccupations of my work. A floor plan and an elevation are not two separate documents. They are two views of the same idea, and they must be developed together, in conversation with each other, or the house will feel like a box with decoration applied to the outside. When clients see the exterior rendering alongside the plans, they begin to understand that relationship for the first time. The rooms make sense because the house makes sense.

Most of the time, I get the design right for the initial Reveal presentation. The first presentation requires only minor adjustments, a room shifted, a roofline reconsidered, a question about the entry. Occasionally I do not get it right, and we regroup. Clients sometimes do not know what they want until they see what they asked for, and that is not a criticism, it is simply the nature of designing something that has never existed before. When the first scheme misses, we have a much richer conversation about why, and the second scheme is always stronger for it.

The 3D Virtual Model

Once the floor plans and exterior elevation are settled and approved, not roughly agreed upon, but genuinely resolved, I start work on the 3D virtual model.

I want to be specific about the sequence. The 3D model is not something I develop in parallel with the floor plans, or as a preliminary exploration tool. I have been visualizing the roof and a myriad of other aspects of the house beyond the plans all along. The model comes after the fundamental decisions have been made and confirmed. A detailed three-dimensional model takes significant time to create, and building one before the plan is settled is an investment that the design may not survive. I have learned not to waste that work, but to take decisions one step at a time.

Once the foundation is solid, the model becomes one of the most powerful things I offer.
I place the house on the contours of the actual site, the real topography, the real orientation, the real relationship to the land my clients walked with me at the very beginning of the project. Then I take them through it. We enter through the front door. We move through the entry sequence into the main living space. We look toward the view. We step onto the terrace. We

walk the bedroom wing and understand how the primary suite relates to the rest of the house. We go downstairs, if there is a lower level, and see how it connects to grade.
The reaction is almost always the same. Quiet, at first. Then something that looks like recognition.

What clients are experiencing in that moment is the echo of their own Exploration Meeting, their answers to questions about how they live, what they love, what they have always wanted a home to be, returned to them in a tangible form. When the model reflects what was heard in that first conversation, trust does not just grow. It solidifies into something that carries the project through every difficult decision ahead.

This is also the moment when clients see things that no floor plan alone could have revealed for them. A sight line that opens unexpectedly toward the view. A room whose proportions feel even better in three dimensions than they did on paper. A connection between two spaces that suddenly reads as exactly right. The model makes these discoveries possible at the ideal moment, while every decision is still easy to refine, still open to the imagination, still part of a design that belongs to both of us. This is the power of seeing the house before it is built. Every informed adjustment made here pays dividends for decades.

The Design Development Phase
After the model is approved, we move into Design Development and then into construction documentation, the full set of drawings from which the house will be built. This phase is longer and less visually dramatic than the Reveal, but it is where the house becomes real in ways that go well beyond what most clients realize is happening.

Construction Documentation Phase
After Design Development, we move into what is often the longest phase of the design effort and, from the outside, the quietest. Construction Documentation typically runs a few months, during which the design is translated into the complete technical set of drawings that a builder will use to price the project and that the trades will use to build it.

The drawings change character at this stage. The schematic plans and the three-dimensional model were produced in a visual language, one meant to help the client see and understand the design. The construction documents are produced in a different language entirely, the technical language of the contractor and the trades. Every dimension called out, every assembly detailed, every material specified with the kind of precision that allows a framer, a roofer, a tile installer, or a cabinetmaker to build what I have drawn without ambiguity, and without the questions that slow a jobsite or introduce a surprise at bidding. The goal is a set of documents so clear that the final estimate comes back firm, the subcontractors have a true road map for what they are expected to produce, and the standard I am holding them to is visible on every sheet.
Clients sometimes expect this to be a silent period on their side. That is not how I run it. We meet weekly or biweekly during CD, reviewing the progress of the drawings together and working through the specific details that require client input. I do not leave clients alone for weeks at a time. They are constantly being pulled back into the process, because the documentation phase generates hundreds of small decisions, and those decisions are made best when the people who will live in the house stay engaged in making them.

In each of these meetings, we work through a specific layer of the design, decorative ceiling treatments, interior architectural features, exterior materials and colors, door and window details, finish selections. One decision builds on another. I will not move forward to the next layer until the current one is resolved to my satisfaction and the clients', not because I am inflexible, but because a house whose decisions are not made in the right order will eventually contradict itself in ways that are expensive and disheartening to unravel.

When the documents are complete, I review them one last time, sign and seal them, and release them. They go out for final pricing, for permitting, and for review by the Architectural Review Board. For most clients, this is the moment the project starts to feel real in a new way. The long, careful process of design is behind us. Everyone is ready to see dirt being moved and framing going up.

My work, though, is far from finished. The completion of construction documents is not a finish line. It is a gateway, a threshold into the next part of the process, the construction phase, where I stay engaged from the groundbreaking meeting through the final punch list. That is the subject of Chapter 12. For now, it is enough to say that the sealed set is not a farewell. The drawings go to the builder. I go with them.

There is something I want to be honest about, because I think it is widely misunderstood about the design process. An architect does not proceed into the design phase with a fully formed image of the finished house already in their mind. The idea that a designer sees the complete building in a single flash of inspiration, that the work of documentation is merely the recording of a vision already realized, is a romantic notion that has very little to do with how design really works. What I have at the beginning is a direction, a set of principles, a strong intuition about what this house wants to be. The house reveals itself gradually, through the act of making it. Every decision teaches me something about the next decision. Every detail, once resolved, illuminates the detail adjacent to it.

The clients are part of that (revelational) journey. Their reactions, their questions, their growing understanding of the project all inform how the design develops. By the time we reach the final construction documents, the house that emerges is not exactly the one I imagined at the beginning. It is better, shaped by two sets of minds working in the same direction, refined by the practical realities of site and structure and budget, made specific by the particular lives it has been designed to hold.

That evolution is not a failure of vision. It is the process working exactly as it should.