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*J. Dishner*

LET'S CREATE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

# THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

by Jeffrey L. Dishner, AIA, NCARB

Guidebook: Chapter 5

## Chapter 5: Practical vs. Ideal

There was a Roman architect named Marcus Vitruvius Pollio who died roughly two thousand years ago and has not stopped influencing the way buildings are designed since. His surviving treatise on architecture, written in the first century BC, proposed that every great building must satisfy three conditions simultaneously: *firmitas*, *utilitas*, and *venustas*, firmness, commodity, and delight. Structural soundness. Functional usefulness. Beauty.

His influence did not stop with antiquity. Through the Renaissance, through the great classical revivals of Europe, and into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Vitruvian principles found their way into the architectural pattern books that shaped American residential building at every level of the market. Pattern books, those widely distributed volumes of house designs, building details, and proportional guidance published by architects and builders alike, brought the classical tradition into the hands of carpenters and contractors across the country, embedding its proportions and its logic into the vernacular of the American home. The well-proportioned farmhouse, the dignified colonial, the graceful craftsman bungalow, all of them carry Vitruvian genetics, whether their builders knew his name or not.

Two millennia of architectural history have not produced a more concise or more accurate description of what a well-designed building is supposed to be. I return to it constantly, not as an academic exercise but as a practical checklist. Every house I design is measured against all three. A house that is beautiful but leaks is a failure of firmness. A house that is structurally sound but difficult to live in is a failure of commodity. A house that works perfectly well but gives its owners no pleasure to inhabit is a failure of delight. The goal, always, is all three at once.

That balance is harder to achieve than it sounds.

### Firmness, The House That Stands

Firmness is the least glamorous of the three virtues but the most fundamental. A house must be structurally sound. It must be detailed to shed water, resist wind, and endure the specific demands of its climate and site. It must be built of materials appropriate to their context, not merely because it will look better, but because a material used outside its proper application will eventually fail, and when it does, the failure will be expensive and sometimes dangerous. This is where my background in the construction trades, jobsites and weekend projects, earns its keep in ways that purely academic training cannot replicate. I understand how buildings are assembled from the inside out. I know what happens at a roof-to-wall connection when flashing is detailed incorrectly. I know which materials perform and which ones photograph beautifully and then deteriorate within a decade. When I specify something, I specify it with that knowledge behind it.

Clients rarely think about firmness until something goes wrong. My job is to think about it constantly so that nothing does.

### Commodity, The House That Works

Commodity is where the Exploration Meeting earns its full return. A house is commodious, useful, functional, genuinely livable, when it is designed around the unique patterns of the people who will inhabit it. Not around an idealized notion of how people live in houses, but around the routines, habits, and rhythms of this family, on this site, in this chapter of their lives.

The practical challenges of commodity are often expressed in the language of square footage and budget, and they are real. There is a direct and non-negotiable relationship between the size of a house and what it costs to build. Clients who want more bedrooms, larger rooms, additional bathrooms, and expanded living spaces are not wrong to want those things, but they must understand that each element carries a cost, and that the physical area available within a given budget is not infinitely elastic.

I have this conversation early and I have it plainly. If a client's program, their list of spaces and sizes, does not fit within the budget or area restraints they have described, we resolve that tension before a single line is drawn. Adding square footage after the design is underway is far more disruptive and expensive than establishing the right size at the beginning. The most functional house is not necessarily the largest one. It is the one whose spaces are scaled correctly for their purpose and arranged in relationship to each other with intelligence, logic, and care.

Room adjacency, the question of which spaces are next to which, is one of the most consequential design decisions in any floor plan, and one of the most visible once the house is built. A kitchen that opens naturally to the living area creates a kind of daily ease that its owners will appreciate for decades, never consciously attributing the feel to design. A primary bedroom on the main level, accessible without stairs, serves a couple well today and serves them even better twenty years from now. A pantry positioned between the kitchen and the garage makes the simple, weekly ritual of unloading groceries easy. These are not dramatic gestures. They are the quiet crafting of a plan that works.

### Delight, The House That Moves You

And then there is delight. This is the territory I find most difficult to explain and most impossible to abandon.

I want to be careful here about what I mean by high design, because I do not think of my work in those terms, at least not in the way the phrase is sometimes used to suggest a kind of rarefied aesthetic that exists in tension with practical living.

What I practice is something closer to what the great traditional architects understood: that beauty in a building is not decoration applied to a functional object, but an expression of proportion, material, and composition that emerges from the practical design itself when it is done with knowledge and discipline.

The principles I design from are not novel. They are documented and tested across centuries of architectural history. The proportional mathematics of Andrea Palladio, the sixteenth century Venetian architect whose influence on residential design in the western world is so pervasive that most people absorb it without knowing his name, but remain as useful and as visually satisfying

today as they were when he codified them. The golden ratio, that mathematical relationship found throughout nature and embedded in the great buildings of antiquity, governs the proportions of windows, doors, rooms, and facades in ways that the eye registers as correct even when the mind cannot explain why.

These are not lofty abstractions. They are practical tools. When a window is proportioned correctly relative to the wall that contains it, the room feels right and the exterior is balanced. When a roofline is proportional to the massing of the house and in proper relationship, the exterior has a quiet gravity that no amount of decorative or applied detail can manufacture in its absence.

My architectural education introduced me to these principles formally, but it was travel that made them instinctive. Sketching the massing of an English country house by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the great English architect of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or examining the material and craft of C.F.A. Voysey, the Arts and Crafts master whose work is experiencing a well-deserved resurgence of interest, I understood in a way that no textbook could convey why certain buildings feel inevitable. Not fashionable. Not impressive. Predestined, as though they could not have been any other way.

That quality of inevitability is what I am reaching for in every house I design. It has nothing to do with trends and everything to do with getting the fundamentals right.

#### When Clients Don't Know What They're Asking For

There is a particular challenge that arises when a client asks for a specific architectural style without fully understanding what that style requires. It happens regularly, and I have learned to navigate it with care and patience.

A client who asks for a Craftsman style house, or a traditional Georgian, or something in the manner of the English Arts and Crafts, is expressing a genuine aesthetic preference. They have seen something they love and they want to live in it. What they may not understand is that the style they admire is the product of a specific set of proportional rules, material relationships, geographic context, and detailing conventions that have been developed and refined over generations. Simplifying those conventions, or applying them inconsistently, does not produce a more affordable version of the style. It produces something that looks like a copy of a copy, familiar in outline but a blurry shadow of the original.

When I design within a particular architectural tradition, my intent is to offer its best modern expression, one that is grounded in authentic precedent and carried through with disciplined scale, proportion, and the use of durable, appropriate materials. It is not a menu of stylistic options so much as a clear point of view. I do not dilute the language of the style or offer watered-down variations at the outset.

Occasionally, clients realize that what they were initially drawn to was a lighter interpretation, something inspired by the style rather than a fully committed expression of it. That's a perfectly valid preference. But my responsibility is to first present the truest, most resolved version of that

architecture, so that any decision to move toward a looser interpretation is made with clarity and intention, not as a default or compromise.

I will not condescend a style. If a client asks for traditional architecture, I give them traditional architecture, proportioned correctly, detailed honestly, rooted in the history that makes it worth doing. We have the conversation about what that means, and what they want to live in.

That conversation, in my experience, is one of the most educational and ultimately rewarding moments in the entire design process. It is where clients move from consumers of images to participants in tradition. It is where a house stops being a performance and becomes a place of belonging.

Firmness. Commodity. Delight. Two thousand years on, Vitruvius was right.