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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 7

## Chapter 7: The Details That Define a Home

There is a quality that the best homes possess that is almost impossible to name in the moment you experience it. You walk through the front door and something registers, not loudly, not as a single impressive gesture, but as an accumulation of small things done exactly right. The weight of the door hardware in your hand. The way the intimate ceiling of the foyer draws your eye before releasing you into the vaulted living space. The sound your footsteps make on the stone floor. The quality of light coming through tall windows. Together, these elements produce a feeling that most people describe simply as: this house feels special.

That feeling is not an accident. It is the product of deliberate decisions made through hundreds of details, decisions about materials, proportions, craftsmanship, and the relationship between interior and exterior that give a house its character. It is also, I want to be clear, entirely distinct from the feeling produced by a house that simply looks expensive. Those are not the same thing, and confusing them is one of the most common and costly mistakes in residential design.

### Materials That Age Well

The single most reliable path to a home that feels special rather than merely costly is the use of natural materials, and specifically, materials whose character improves with time rather than deteriorating over it.

Cedar shake roofing weathers from its initial warm tone through silver-gray, developing a texture and depth that no manufactured material can replicate. Slate roofing is permanent. Installed correctly, it will outlast every other element of the house, by generations. Copper gutters and downspouts begin bright and metallic and patina over years into a soft verdigris that looks as though the house has always been exactly as it is. Natural stone, on floors, on exterior walls, at the base of a chimney, carries the weight and presence of something pulled from the earth and shaped carefully by hand of the mason.

Wood windows deserve mention. A wood window made of a durable species, mahogany, Douglas fir, teak, will outlast any aluminum or vinyl alternative, will accept paint and stain beautifully over decades of refinishing, and will maintain its proportional elegance in a way that extruded materials simply cannot. The initial cost is higher. The lifetime cost, when measured against the replacement cycles of lesser materials, is not.

These choices matter most in period style homes, where the integrity of the design depends on the authenticity of the materials. A traditional house clad in fiber cement siding and fitted with vinyl windows is a costume, not architecture. The materials are the style, as much as the proportions or the roofline. Substituting them undermines the entire project.

For clients who question the premium associated with natural materials, I ask them to think about what they are buying. A cedar shake roof is not merely a roofing system. It is a material that will grow more beautiful every year for the next thirty years, that will mark the passage of seasons on the exterior of their home, and that will signal to anyone who approaches the house that the people inside value quality and permanence. That is not a luxury. That is an investment in everything the house is meant to be.

### The Interior, Craft Over Cost

On the interior, the decisions that define a home's character are less about the price of individual elements and more about the coherence and quality of the craft applied to them.

Wood planked ceilings, boards laid with care, their joints resolved cleanly, their finish selected to complement the rooms below, bring warmth and human scale to a space in a way that smooth drywall simply cannot. Decorative wood beams, placed in a rational manner that suggests structural logic rather than decoration for its own sake, reinforce that quality while connecting the interior visually to the traditional building methods that inspired the design. The key word is rational. A beam that appears to carry something, that reads as part of the building's structural story, adds meaning. A beam applied arbitrarily is incongruent.

Door and window trim, base moldings, and the transitions between surfaces are where a house reveals whether it was designed with real attention or merely assembled. These elements can be custom milled for a specific home, cut to a profile that responds to the scale of the rooms and the character of the style, from poplar or other hardwoods that will endure years of contact, cleaning, and the ordinary abrasion of daily life. The difference between custom millwork and stock trim is visible to anyone who looks, and it is felt even by those who do not consciously examine it. It is part of what makes a room feel considered.

Hardware deserves more attention than it typically receives. Door hardware, window hardware, plumbing fixtures, and cabinet pulls are among the most frequently touched elements in any home, they are the points of physical contact between the architecture and the people living in it. Specifying quality hardware, pieces with genuine weight and finish durability, is one of the highest-return investments in the details of a house. It will be touched thousands of times a year for the life of the home.

I have a strong preference for decorative surface lighting over recessed can lights, particularly in period style homes. A recessed can light is a utilitarian solution, functional, unobtrusive, and almost entirely without character. A well-chosen ceiling fixture, a sconce, a picture light, these are elements that participate in the design of the room rather than merely illuminating it. In a traditional or classical interior, a grid of recessed cans reads as an anachronism. A decorative fixture reads as intention, emphasizing the style.

### The Primary Suite, A Place to Luxuriate

I have always said that there are two kinds of primary bedroom clients: those who use the bedroom to sleep, and those who use it to luxuriate. The latter have become considerably more prevalent over the course of my career, and the primary suites I design today reflect that shift completely.

The primary bedroom itself has grown in its expectations without necessarily growing in its dimensions. What clients want is not a large room but a considered one, a generous king bed with substantial nightstands on either side, places to sit and read, built-in cabinetry for books and personal mementos, and occasionally a fireplace that anchors the room and gives it a focal point beyond the bed or TV. The goal is a room that feels like a retreat from the rest of the house, private, quiet, unhurried in its atmosphere.

The dressing function has largely migrated out of the bedroom and into a transitional zone between the sleeping room and the bathroom, a dressing area with well-designed built-ins that allows the bedroom itself to remain furniture-light and serene. Two separate closets, one for each partner, have become the standard expectation at this level of the market. The days of the shared walk-in are largely behind us.

The primary bathroom has undergone perhaps the most dramatic evolution of any room in the residential program over the past fifteen years. The large, built-in jetted tub, that fixture that dominated luxury bathroom design through the nineties and into the early 2000's, has fallen decisively out of favor. Most clients who have owned one will tell you the same thing: they used it twice, found the maintenance burdensome, and watched it occupy a significant portion of their bathroom floor area for the remainder of their time in the house.

What has replaced it is considerably more interesting. The freestanding sculptural tub, a single piece, often of cast iron or stone, placed deliberately in the room as an object of beauty as much as a fixture of function, has become the standard of contemporary luxury bathroom design. It does not pretend to be a piece of equipment. It is an art piece within the bathroom, and it is chosen and positioned with the same care one would give to a significant piece of furniture. Some clients, particularly those who genuinely do not use a tub, choose to omit it entirely in favor of expanding the shower, a perfectly valid decision that I support when the lifestyle warrants it.

The shower itself has expanded in ambition. Large, multi-fixture showers, designed for two, fitted with body sprays, steam, and a rain head and a bench and abundant natural light, have become the centerpiece of the primary bathroom in the way that the jetted tub once was. Curbless entry is now both the aging in place standard and the design standard simultaneously. The two have converged.

Vanities have separated. His and hers, simply two generous individual vanities with their own mirrors, their own storage, their own zones of the bathroom, reflect the reality that two people sharing a bathroom have different needs and different routines, and that a well-designed bathroom respects both. Undermount sinks set into granite or marble countertops have become the expected finish at this level, their clean lines and ease of maintenance making the old drop-in sink feel dated by comparison. Cabinetry in the primary bathroom has risen to the standard of fine furniture, detailed, finished on all sides, hardware selected with the same care as the rest of the house.

A private water closet, a separate enclosed room for the toilet, within the larger bathroom, is another expectation I now treat as standard. It is a detail of genuine daily usefulness and a marker of the kind of thoughtful planning that clients feel even when they cannot articulate why.

#### What Luxury Actually Is

After many years of designing homes, I have arrived at a definition of luxury that has almost nothing to do with cost.

Luxury is scale that is comfortable without being voluminous. It is the feeling of a room that is exactly as large as it needs to be, no larger, because excess scale produces emptiness rather than grandeur, and no smaller, because constraint produces anxiety rather than intimacy. It is craftsmanship that rewards close examination, cabinetry whose joints are clean, whose finish is even, whose hardware operates with a satisfying precision. It is natural materials that carry their history visibly, that have been on the earth longer than the house and will continue to age gracefully long after its first owners are gone.

What luxury is not is the mere accumulation of expensive things. A house full of costly finishes, assembled without a governing design intelligence, does not feel luxurious. It feels like a showroom. The clients I've met who have lived in those houses, and I have met them, describe a persistent sense that something is missing, that the house impresses visitors without pleasing its owners.

What they are missing is the thing I have spent this chapter describing: the decisions made quietly, early, and with deep attention to craft and character, that give a house not just its appearance but its soul.

Those decisions are available to anyone willing to make them. That is the point.