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THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 9

Chapter 9: The Matchmaker

There is a moment in nearly every project, somewhere between the completion of the design and the breaking of ground, when I find myself doing something that has nothing to do with architecture and everything to do with human nature.

I am making a match.

The relationship between a homeowner and their builder is one of the most consequential relationships they will enter into. It will last the better part of a year, sometimes longer. It will involve daily communication, significant sums of money, moments of stress and moments of genuine shared pride. It will be tested by weather delays and material shortages and the thousand small decisions that arise when a design meets the physical world. Whether it ends with a handshake and a standing invitation to the housewarming, or with attorneys exchanging letters, depends in no small part on whether the right two parties were brought together in the first place.

This is not something I leave to chance.

What I Read

By the time I am ready to recommend a builder, I have spent months with my clients. I know how they communicate. I know how they handle uncertainty. I know whether they are the kind of people who need frequent reassurance and detailed reporting, or whether they are comfortable with a weekly check-in and a builder they trust to handle the rest. I know whether they are working with a comfortable budget or a tight one. I know whether one of them has a professional background that will make them a particularly exacting presence on a jobsite.

All of that shapes the recommendation I make.

Budget is often the first filter. A client with a genuinely constrained budget is best served by a smaller builder, someone with lower overhead, a leaner operation, and the flexibility that comes from not carrying a large staff. That savings is real and it passes directly to the client. But a smaller builder comes with trade-offs. They typically have less administrative infrastructure, fewer people to manage the details, and less capacity for the kind of formal reporting and project management that some clients require.

For clients who need more hand-holding, and there is no judgment in that phrase; building a custom home is an unfamiliar and emotionally charged process, and some people simply need more contact and reassurance than others, I lean toward larger, more established firms. These companies have project managers whose entire job is client communication. They have the personnel to answer questions promptly, manage selections, and provide the structured oversight that makes a complex project feel controlled rather than chaotic. That infrastructure costs money. For the right client, it is worth every dollar.

Then there is the client who is simply difficult to please, not through any fault of character, but because trust does not come easily to them, because they have been burned before, or because the stakes of this project feel extraordinarily high. For that client, I want a builder with depth. Multiple people for them to engage with. Redundancy in the relationship so that if one personality doesn't click, another is available. A difficult client paired with a one-man operation is a recipe for tension that serves no one.

When the Match Goes Wrong

I have made good matches and I have made imperfect ones, and the difference is usually visible within the first few weeks of construction.

One pairing comes to mind that taught me something I have not forgotten. The client was an engineer, detail-oriented, analytically rigorous, someone accustomed to working in a professional environment where everything is documented, scheduled, and reported with precision. In the interest of keeping his budget manageable, I paired him with a smaller builder, a genuinely skilled craftsman with years of excellent work behind him, but a relaxed operational style that ran on relationships and intuition rather than formal, rigid systems.

The builder knew how to build a beautiful house. What he did not have was the infrastructure to produce the bar-chart schedules, the written weekly reports, and the documented decision trails that my engineer client considered baseline expectations. Neither man was wrong in what he needed. They were simply mismatched in how they understood professionalism to look.

It was frustrating for the client for longer than it needed to be. The house, ultimately, was well built. But the journey had more turbulence than it should have, and the responsibility for that lands, at least in part, on my recommendation.

What I learned is that technical competence, while necessary, is not sufficient. The way a builder operates, how they communicate, how they document, how they manage the daily rhythm of a project, must align with how the client needs to receive that information. A great builder in the wrong context is still the wrong builder.

What to Look For, and What to Watch

By the time I recommend a builder to a client, I have usually worked with that builder before. My referral carries the weight of that history. Clients understand this, and they trust it, though I always encourage them to do their own due diligence as well.

We still ask for references from previous clients, and we call those references. Not to ask whether they were satisfied, people rarely say no to that question, but to ask how the builder handled challenges. Every project has problems. What separates a great builder from a mediocre one is not whether difficulties arose but how they were managed when they did. Did the builder communicate proactively when something went wrong? Did they take responsibility or deflect it? Did the final product reflect the quality and integrity of what was promised at the start?

I also tell clients to ask a question that surprises them at first: how does the builder handle money?

Specifically, are client funds held in a separate account, or are they commingled with the builder's general operating funds? This is an essential question. A financially stable, professionally run construction company maintains clear separation between client funds and business operations. What you never want to discover, midway through your project, is that your deposit has been used to cover costs on someone else's job, that Peter is being robbed to pay Paul, as the expression goes, and that your project's momentum depends on the financial health of projects you have nothing to do with.

I have seen this happen. It is deeply unpleasant for everyone involved and genuinely dangerous to the project. Asking the question early costs nothing. Not asking it can cost a great deal.

The Relationship That Outlasts the Project

Here is something worth understanding about the builder relationship: by the time your house is finished, you will likely know your builder better than you know your architect.

This is simply a function of time and proximity. My involvement is intensive during the design phase and present but periodic during construction. The builder is there every day. They are the ones calling when a question needs an answer. They are the ones walking the site when you stop by on a Saturday morning. They are the ones who will hand you the keys.

A good builder becomes something close to a trusted friend. Clients often stay in touch with their builders long after the project is complete, calling them for advice on maintenance, referring them to neighbors, inviting them to the parties held in the house they built together. That relationship is real, and it is valuable, and it begins with a good match.

My job is to make sure that when you sit across from a builder for the first time, you are sitting across from the right one, someone whose skill, temperament, and way of working aligns with who you are and what this project needs. The design I give them will be the best I can produce. The work they do with it will shape the next chapter of your life. That introduction matters. I take it seriously.