

Advice from Architects:

Architects, Architecture, and You

By Eugene W. Brown, AIA

Architects and many others are complaining that the American landscape is becoming increasingly cluttered and despoiled by poorly conceived planning efforts and insufferably bad residential development, proliferated by builder/developers who, for the most part, seem to know or care little about architectural propriety and quality. While architects themselves are usually the group best equipped to improve upon this situation, they have been largely frozen out of the process by builders who do not see good design as an important and marketable commodity, and by the homebuilding public who do not seem to understand the role of the architect in residential design.

Building or remodeling a house with an architect should be fun. It can be one of life's most creative, exciting and rewarding experiences. But it can only be so if the client and the architect can achieve that special rapport that comes from each understanding and appreciating the other's respective role in the process. It is very important for clients to realize that this is, indeed, a process. Many seem to look upon the architect simply as someone who "draws plans" and then charges high fees for them. Architects must share a large part of the blame for this unfortunate misunderstanding because we have not done enough to educate the public as to who we are, what we do, and how we do it.

The architect's most important role is that of creative problem solver. Architects are trained to size up a problem in a very holistic sense, gather a great deal of information about clients' needs and wants, building site, budget and lifestyle, and then to bring their considerable creative powers to bear upon achieving a solution that looks good and works well for the clients.

The work of the architect typically goes through several distinct stages during the course of a project. The first stage involves initial client contacts to examine the building site and to discover what the clients hope to accomplish as well as what their particular lifestyle might be. When the relevant information is collected, the architect will assemble this into a detailed program for design and will then begin the highly creative schematic and preliminary design stage.

This can involve both drawings and models as necessary to adequately explain the proposed solution to the clients. Once the clients approve the preliminary design, the architect will then proceed with preparing construction documents, or plans and specifications that include everything necessary for a builder to determine a price for the work and from which the building will be constructed. The architect maintains a close contact and collaboration with the clients throughout this process. In many cases, a builder can be involved in the early stages, which is an important plus for both clients and architect because it contributes to maintaining a realistic budget.

Helping clients find the right builder is often an important part of the architect's services because a good builder is critical to the kind of teamwork necessary in achieving a good final result. Good communication between all parties involved will go a long way toward circumventing the sometimes adversarial relationships that can occur. The proper role of the architect during the construction phase of a project is not to "supervise" but to "observe" the builder's work in order to ascertain that things are being done in a workmanlike manner and according to the architect's intentions, as well as to determine that the client's money is being spent in scale with the amount of work done.

When a project is substantially complete, the architect usually prepares a "punch list" of items needing completion or correction. When these items are satisfactorily completed, the clients are advised that final payments to the builder are appropriate.

Architects are sometimes looked upon as invariably extravagant and impractical, which is a myth unfortunately perpetrated by isolated examples. A client might imagine that the architect wants to make a house as expensive as possible because the architect's fees are based upon a

percentage of the construction cost. Actually, architects would find it difficult to maintain a very good professional reputation if this were so. It is very much in the architect's best interest to provide his or her clients with the highest possible value for their money.

Typically, architects' fees for this comprehensive range of professional services will be from 10 to 15 percent of construction costs for a custom house and 15 to 20% for remodeling. While some may consider such a fee excessive, it is instructive to consider the value of such services compared to the so-called life cycle cost of a house over a 25-year period because the actual expenditure may be more than 2-1/2 times the initial price tag. For example, the following is a hypothetical situation:

Cost of building site:	\$ 40,000
House construction cost:	250,000
Architect's 10% fee:	25,000
Broker, closing, title fees:	11,000
Landscaping and paving:	10,000
7.5% interest on \$187,500 mortgage:	228,182
Taxes at \$3,000 per year:	75,000
Total:	\$ 639,182

Accordingly, it is obvious that the architect's fee, which is an up-front, once only expense, is just under 4% of this total cost. It is also important to point out that even with excellent plans and specifications, the cost spread in a competitive bidding situation can vary by more than the architect's fee. Further, it often happens that a good, efficient design by an architect can save the clients more money than they will pay the architect in fees while also giving them a much better house.

It is time for the American public to begin taking a closer, more critical look at all those overblown, huge, impractical, impersonal, ticky-tacky "starter castles" that are being thrown up in our new suburban developments and to start asking, "Why can we not have houses that are better and not just bigger?" By diverting money spent on superfluous space and applying it to better, more efficient space and higher quality materials and details, one can achieve a more livable and attractive home. This is an idea which has been unfortunately too long in coming and which is best exemplified in a couple of recent books called, respectively, "The Not So Big House" and "Creating the Not So Big House," both by architect Sarah Susanka and published by Taunton Press, which also publishes "Fine Homebuilding" magazine.

Profile:

Eugene W. Brown, AIA, has been a registered architect in Raleigh, North Carolina since 1969 and in private practice since 1981, specializing mostly in custom residential design and remodeling.

(Taken from Improvenet.com)