

sealed by a NJ licensed architect. All other uses would require that the plans be “redrawn” and sealed by a licensed architect. This presents a problem with respect to copyright infringement when dealing with magazine plans. Most homeplan books offer a warning to the consumer stating that the plans provided are copyright protected and that they may not be copied or redrawn without the permission from the copyright owner. Some allow you to redraw the plans after you purchase a reproducible set of plans from them, after which the original designer would still theoretically hold the copyright.

What usefulness do I see in magazine plans? Many times a client will enter into a design contract with us for a custom home that begins with a plan that is fairly common, for instance a “center hall colonial”. We ask that the client bring pictures, plans and articles of homes or details that they find appealing. Magazine plans then become valuable as a visual resource to quickly communicate a feeling or a general layout which can be expanded upon and redesigned without worry of copyright infringement.

Developers

While the best developers recognize the need for great designs having cost efficient plans and strong curb appeal, they don’t want to be the first guy that has to pay for them. An architect’s existing plan portfolio is a great place for them to start. Developers go to architects seeking plans that are time-tested and popular to a great many people. They want to build new homes that will sell quickly.

Architectural firms that specialize in residential design can point to their best selling plans to help determine which homes are most successful. When we work with developers we are able to assist in designing homes that meet their “price points” for the development of new subdivisions. We can show them a range of homes representing different square footages that meet their target market. These plans can later be easily modified to respond to the latest market changes.

Custom Homes

You may have exhausted the stock plan possibilities, and magazine plans may not reflect the way you want to live. Now what? It’s back to the drawing board. An architect is able to take all of your unique functional and aesthetic requirements and combine them into a home design that will suit your particular way of life. A good architect, experienced with construction costs, can do the same and help you stay on your budget as well.

If you decide that a custom home is for you- include enough money in your design budget to allow the architect time to prepare a quality set of drawings. It doesn’t make sense to ask an architect to come up with a fresh and unique design if there isn’t enough money in the budget to document the plans with sufficient detail to avoid cost overruns or expensive problems in the field. While fees differ from firm to firm, a general percentage may be 6% of construction costs for new construction and 8% for the more time consuming renovation work. These percentages compare favorably to those of the average Realtors’ commissions of 6% (*who also includes land costs!*). With their fees for good design, architects can add much value to your project through better construction, lower utility bills, more appealing aesthetics, and floorplans that add to the quality of your life.

Whatever your budget, before beginning new construction, consider using the services of an architect. Discuss ways in which the architect can best suit your needs, and be prepared to invest in the design before you begin construction. It is an investment that can pay dividends for the life of your home.

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ARCHITECTURE LITE

When You Can't (or Aren't Willing to) Afford Full Service Architectural Design

by

Michael Pagnotta AIA

As an architect who specializes in residential design, I have had the opportunity to work with a wide variety of people as they try to arrive at a home design for their particular lifestyle. While I hope to work with clients having unlimited time and resources, they are few and far between (honestly I've really never even met one). In fact many clients are either unable to afford typical custom design services, or have needs that don't require full service architectural design. Rather than pass on the opportunity to work with a skilled designer altogether, the following offers ways in which people can work with architects on a limited basis, from design counseling to stock plans.

Design Counseling

Perhaps the best and least expensive way to get professional design assistance is through Design Counseling, a service provided by many architects on an hourly basis. Architects are a great source of information about many construction related matters ranging from zoning issues to ballpark construction estimates. Contemplating buying a home that's in need of a renovation or addition? Ask your architect about the project's viability prior to going under contract. Many architects specialize in these areas and a few hours spent with a professional can save thousands of dollars later on in a project. Hourly rates vary from architect to architect.

Stock Plans

I have always gotten requests from people seeking inexpensive, "off the shelf" stock plans. When I started in the custom residential field fifteen years ago, I would have tried to dissuade people from such simple design solutions, and would express the many advantages in working through a complete design process with an architect. My speech would suddenly fall upon deaf ears when I got to the part about custom home design fees. I would explain that our modest fee would add value to their property, and that a custom designed home would enable them to live their lives to the fullest. Some clients would understand the benefits and have the ability to proceed with a truly custom home. Many of them however, had established budgets in mind and the first construction component to be sacrificed was the architectural design fee. Experience (and the desire to have a thriving business) has taught me to appreciate the need to have quality stock plans available to the people looking for less expensive solutions.

Some architects specialize in providing stock plans to the public. As in our office, clients may be able to peruse a portfolio or brochure of existing plans that have already been designed, built and hopefully "debugged". These plans typically cost a fraction of the cost of custom plans, and there is the benefit of the client being able to see the built project before investing in a plan. For many clients who cannot read plans well, they can see photos or possibly drive by and visit the built home before committing to a design. Stock plans can take some of the mystery out of the design process.

A secondary benefit to working with an architect's stock plans, is the ability to easily customize an existing plan. Such changes are completed on an hourly basis, and the savings from having to prepare a full set of custom plans may be substantial. This is especially true for firms that are computerized. We invested in our computer systems eight years ago, and have continually made upgrades to our equipment and software. We now have hundreds of easily modified computerized plans that clients can use as "base drawings". Clients can feel comfortable making personal changes to a plan that they already like without having to worry about exceeding their design budgets.

Magazine Plans

With the proliferation of home building and plan magazines, consumers have an unlimited supply of home designs to review and purchase. While there is variety and perceived cost-savings, plans from magazines may have serious limitations. According to New Jersey laws, only people building their own homes with the intention of living in it for more than a year, may elect to build with plans that are not