

Getting started on your home with an architect



We are beginning a new column on architecture and what it means to the homeowner. The columnist is registered architect Steve Sivak. Sivak has been an adjunct professor of architecture at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield since 1991.

So you are contemplating a modification to your home? An addition, a renovation a facelift or perhaps even the grand prize - a new home. Once the decision to do something has been made - and that is no easy task, the next decision is critical: who?

There are two basic routes to follow: The first is to go directly to a builder and the other is to call up your local architect. In going to a builder, you will be in the majority, and there will be certain advantages in doing so. On the other hand the call to the architect brings the potential of greatness. The call to the architect means that you may get exactly what you want and sometimes even more.

Involving a good architect in the process gives a client access to design skills, spatial thinking and material-detailing talents that he or she would not normally have. These talents are an integral part of the training and education of architects but they are not part of the skills that builders/general contractors are taught or tested for in their licensing.

On the other hand, you might be "house proud" and using an architect may be a waste of time and money. You might also be in a rush and not want to go through the extra steps that working with an architect entails.

Finally, you might have the opinion that working with an architect is too costly. More costly? Perhaps or maybe even probably. Would grocery shopping with a chef be more

costly than doing the same with someone who regularly eats fast food or TV dinners? Probably yes but but the final product, for those who like to eat, is infinitely better.

Personally it has been my experience that builders can build with less detail, less spatial interest, less-interesting materials - all of which add up to less and certainly cost. Some where there is a distinction that has to be made between building and architecture. In general, in order to make architecture one needs an architect. Architecture is, unfortunately, not for everyone, but it need not and should not be reserved for the rich.

One engages the advice and skills of an architect out of a desire to have something special (not necessarily unusual) to solve problems that builders simply can not solve. On a recent project in which the homeowner wanted a second floor built on top of a Birmingham ranch house, two builders told the homeowner that the new stair to the future upper floor would need to be placed over the stair to the basement - which is the typical location for stairs in most homes.

Unfortunately, that forced the new stair to be accessed through the dining room. This location never made sense to me - stairs are typically in the foyer area. In the end I worked very hard to get a small "J-shaped" stair to be fitted into the foyer by removing a small closet. Sure it was more work in terms of design and construction, but the final result allows the stair to be in the "correct" location. In retrospect this project well illustrates the benefits of using an architect and the differences between the approach that builders and architects take to solve an identical problem.

Steve Sivak is a licensed architect in private practice and an adjunct professor of architecture at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield. He specializes in well-crafted residential and commercial architecture and can be contacted at (313) 769-8502.

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