

Steps to a Successful Design

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The design process is the most important part of building your new home. No matter how good your blueprints are, no matter how competent your builder, if the your plan isn't well-thought out and logically developed you will not have a good home. You may have a home that is well-constructed and you may even have a pretty home, but you will not have a great home, one that meets your needs, your lifestyle and your unique characteristics. A great home is one that feels great to wake up in every day, that is efficient in its layout and usage, that is interesting yet practical, that brings joy into the very basics of living.

Whether you are designing a simple renovation or addition, a luxury estate, or for that matter, a car, a boat, or a feature film, the process is much the same. It is a process that involves all the faculties of your mind. It includes left brain analytical thinking and right brain creativity and visualization. It involves looking at the origin of your likes and dislikes and it involves honest communication with others: your spouse and/or children, your designer and builders, and your banker. On the creative side, it means learning and taking the time to visualize your finished home from the inside out, the feel of each room, corner and hallway--in short, what it will be like to live in.

You must start at the beginning: a simple statement, but one that is often forgotten. You don't get the home that is perfect for you by leafing through glossy magazines or plan books. They may play an important role but they are not the starting point. So where is the beginning?

Step One is what I call Data Acquisition. This includes four basic areas: regulatory, financial, technical and, of course, your wish list. Often there are many regulatory requirements that affect your project, from zoning to allowable setbacks, build-able area, height restrictions, sewage disposal, water and utilities. The second area is your budget. Too many people travel far down the road to their dream home only to find out that they can't afford it, many times after construction is finished. Not only is it important to be perfectly clear about the overall cost of the home you wish to build, but of course, the amount of the monthly mortgage payment (factoring in for times of higher interest rates) and the effect on your overall life cash flow. And it is important not to only include construction costs. There are additional 'soft' costs such as design and engineering fees, surveying, driveway and landscaping, septic fields, and building permit fees or development charges.

The third area to review is technical constraints offered by the building site: access, wind and sun exposure and, if you are simply renovating, items such as existing electrical panel size and septic field capacity. Finally, spend lots of time developing your wish list and prioritize it: what you feel is necessary for your home to proceed, what can perhaps be done later, and what items might be considered luxury. Be sure to look critically, not simply at what looks good in the magazines but what suits your lifestyle. You may love the look of an open kitchen plan but not accept the intrusion of dishwasher noise or counters with dirty dishes. And be sure that your wish list coincides with that of your spouse. Take the time to discuss compromises and other options.

The Second Step in the overall design process is what I refer to as Evaluation. Here you take your wish list, assign floor areas to each, look at access and circulation, and begin assigning budget numbers to various components or the overall floor area and undertake the difficult but extremely important step of matching your dream with the reality of your financial situation. It is important to build in a contingency for unforeseen costs, extra spending for special features, and

perhaps a little vacation at the end of the often-exhausting construction process. It may be necessary at this stage, to modify your wish list, double up the function of a couple of rooms, eliminate some rooms entirely, finish the basement at a later date, tighten up the entire floor plan, do whatever it takes to match your wish list to your budget. The importance of this step cannot be over-emphasized. These are the critical decisions that still allow you to have the well-designed and beautiful home you want at a price you can afford. At this point you may not have even looked at floor plans nor put pencil to paper. But you are well on the road to having an exceptional home.

The Third Step in the design process is the Drawing Process. Because this is initially a creative process, a lot of the best designing may go on without pencil and paper in hand, but while laying on your couch or in bed or walking through a park. Technically, there are roughly three stages in moving from the creative ideas to blueprints. The first is referred to as the schematic phase and is the most important. It need not be to scale, nor look professional. But it establishes the relationships between the various rooms, the circulation patterns, the primary orientation, the general feel of the home. This can initially be done with simple bubble diagrams, progressing to sketches and sometimes crude models or three-dimensional representations. I normally produce a set of rough schematics, then review it with my clients, make changes, review it again while adding more detail, and keep doing it until we have it exactly right. Once the schematic drawings are finalized, it becomes much more costly to make changes so it is wise to spend extra time getting it right at the schematic stage. It may involve many nights sitting around the kitchen table going over the schematics in detail but this is definitely the most exciting and rewarding part of the design process. It is the skill of the Designer at this stage that separates an average home from a truly exceptional home.

The next stage, Design Development brings in the technical side, attaching exact dimensions to each room, calculating wall heights, roof pitches and stair details, construction methods, etc. There is still room to make changes but your home is definitely beginning to take shape. Here the client's input becomes minimal though the impact of various technical components often requires review.

In the final stage, Working Drawings, the client has little impact and changes to plans at this point become more expensive, but of course, less expensive than changes during construction. The drawings may include detailed specifications for materials and construction and schedules for doors, windows, and finishes. I outline these in more detail on a separate page entitled, [Working Drawings](#).