(Screenshot of LEGO Digital Designer)

Houses Designed by Kids

Summer is well under way, school a distant memory for kids spending their days at camps, playdates and team sports. However for parents, workloads increase as summer projects are squeezed between vacation travels and weekend barbecues. As an architect, this time of year is peak season, homeowners looking to complete construction on their house before snow starts falling later in the year.

When designing a home, most architects will ask homeowners for a wish list, categorized into 'wants', 'needs', and 'maybe some day'. Frequently, homeowners have compiled several years of hand sketches, home magazine clippings and maybe few photos from a recent vacation house with a particular kitchen they like or a luxurious bathroom shower. All of these things are helpful, but I have learned to tap a far more useful resource, often overlooked by other architects - kids.

Kids have the best insight into their family and the way they use their home. They are keen observers, at an age still soaking up everything going on around them. Noticing daily routines and patterns adults simply dismiss. Children clue me into defining characteristics that make each family unique. Those nuances, when attended to, make a house a home.

In addition to their refreshing perspective, children also speak bluntly and to the point. Parents on the other hand, are conditioned to speak in a coded 'grown-up' language, with proper etiquette and veiled innuendos. Yet, the most successful projects, the ones with the fewest regrets, always result from direct and honest dialog between homeowners and architect. Which is why I seek out the children to lead the way.

Children also have one other thing in abundance - creativity. An energy found in greater concentrations within the body of a child, overflowing. Endless silly talk, singing, laughing. Children are experts at play, something many of us adults have forgotten how to do. This change starts to set in about the same age kids stop drawing, fifth or sixth grade. As an adult that makes a living drawing, I never stopped speaking their language.

With younger children, I typical begin by asking them to draw a picture of their home. Then a second picture, if they could change anything they want about their current home. I ask them to point out their favorite parts, the funniest parts, the coolest parts. With older kids that have lost their passion to draw, they may be into making things, like with Legos. The perfect toy, possibilities as limitless as a child's imagination. Kids love these colorful plastic blocks, to build their dream home.

For kids old enough to use computers, I often recommend Lego Digital Designer. It is a free software download that can be used to create a house virtually from all the Lego pieces they are familiar with. I have found it to be a great tool for introducing kids to the power of computing, while developing a sense of spatial relationships, manipulating geometric volumes, strengthening abstract visualization. The program is very intuitive and kids pick it up immediately, designing away in a matter of minutes.

For older kids wanting to move away from Legos (although I can't imagine why), I tell them about a program I use with my own architectural practice - SketchUp. This is also a free download (from Google), which can create three dimensional structures, using lines, planes and geometric solids. It too is very intuitive, with most kids figuring it out in less than an hour. But, unlike Legos where you build from predetermined parts, SketchUp is a true CAD program where you make everything from scratch, to extract images straight from inside their head.

So, if you have been thinking about changes to your home lately, consider checking with your kids. Get out the box of crayons and draw a few pictures with them. Or if you want a more educational experience that feels like fun to them, show them a design program or two. You might find they have ideas you never considered. Playful ideas. And, what house couldn't use a little more fun?

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