



Tailored Houses

As we are entering the last month of summer, preparations are beginning for the transition into autumn, the season of reflection on the past year. For a homeowner living in a house they've built, reflections are often focused on regretful decisions made during the construction process, maybe a window that was left out or a finish material selected to save on cost. As an architect, I feel my primary job is to avoid those regrets, to design a house filled only with satisfactions.

Last night while visiting with a former client, he made a comment about the house he used to live in compared to his current house, the one I helped him create. He said his first house was from the builder's stock plans, with modifications by their draftsman. He didn't use an architect, because at the time he thought he couldn't afford to. But, now that he is living in a house designed by an architect, he realizes what the draftsman couldn't offer.

Most of the people that contact me looking for a set of floor plans don't understand the difference between an architect and draftsman. The American Institute of Architects (AIA), the primary professional organization for the trade, goes to great lengths protecting the term 'architect' from use by those not registered with a state license. But, I feel they do not go far enough to educate the public on what the profession does. Quite often, new clients are surprised by all of the services an architect offers beyond the actual drawings.

Services that can include (but not limited to) material finish selections, bidding negotiations with contractors, construction oversight, zoning board hearings or community planning approvals. Aside from these, on the drawings themselves, architects can offer a great deal of benefit beyond a draftsman. At the hand of a draftsman working for a builder, square footage is of primary concern. The size of a house determines its cost to construct and at the same time, its marketability. And for the typical homebuyer, bigger is better.

But, I always point out to my clients the analogy of a tailor, who tailors clothes to your personal body dimensions. Oversized only occurs on clothes purchased off the rack, when a tailor is not used. Yet, there is no comparison to how a suit or dress feels when it is made just for you. And that feeling you get is not something tangible you can hold, but it can change your self-confidence and enjoyment on the days you wear that tailored suit or dress.

This is the same intangible quality that defines a space designed by an architect. When the rooms of a house are carefully crafted to fit a particular family, not super-sized like a fast food value meal, it will inspire confidence at the start of the day and be a welcoming retreat at the end. Most people do not recognize the importance of this characteristic, but they perceive it immediately in a space well fitted. It is the reason why certain spaces are found with smiling faces and others are not.

Since the perception of a room is subjective, different for each person, I have a technique I use with my clients to size rooms appropriate for them. First, I measure the rooms in their existing house. Then, I ask them about each of their rooms, if it feels too small, too large, or just right - the Goldilocks test. With the measurements as a reference for their responses, I know what dimension to make the new rooms I am designing.

The sense of a room as too tight or too open is not merely a factor of dimensions. Lighting, natural daylight in particular, can dramatically affect how a room feels. Likewise, sight lines framing a view beyond or maintaining a visual connection to a significant feature can render a space with metaphoric overtones that will also influence perceptions. The airiness from a gentle breeze passing through, the lightness or weight of finish materials and their transitions from one to another contributes as well. All of these things and many others are the toolset of an architect when crafting a space.

Above all else, the better an architect knows their client, the more nuanced the space can be created to uniquely fit every personality trait and preference of those people living within that space. As an architect, I find the most satisfaction from a homeowner whose daily life has been enriched by the new environment that has been created. And that is best done by a tailoring, being mindful of every design decision contributing to the feel as a whole.

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