

The homes that Jim Built

It's worth using an architect for your precious places

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Some architects design houses, others create homes. My friend Jim Ireland, of Stark Ireland Architects, is a "homemaker" in the best sense. His houses are stylish and could be in the pages of decor magazines, but they also have a more elusive quality -- they are great places to live. They're comfortable, with a warmth such that people never want to sell but hold on to them for their children.

I was in architecture school with Jim and regrettably haven't seen him too much since. I was pleased when I saw a few of his recently completed projects because it reminded me of what remarkable residential instincts he had as a student.

In school, we were all were designing monumental buildings and spouting grandiose rhetoric commensurate with geniuses who were about to remake the world. Jim did all this, of course, but on the weekends he was also successfully designing small residential projects for his parents' neighbours and others. I was amazed he knew how houses were built -- all sorts of practical stuff about wiring, plumbing and how proper drywalling should look. Meanwhile, I could barely read plans, let alone tell you which side of the insulation the vapour barrier went on.

Recently, I asked Jim why more people aren't working with architects.

"I don't think people know what to expect when they work with architects," he says. "Most have no direct experience with one. Perhaps they're worried their project isn't of interest or what they want is not what the architect?." I butted in with, "Yeah, the architect just wants to do what he or she wants."

What should a person look for when hiring an architect?

"Hire someone you like, as well as someone whose work you admire," Jim says. "You'll be spending a lot of time with him or her and you have to be confident your architect will understand your interests. And an architect should be a good listener." Good listener? What an interesting idea. In school, we assumed architects did the talking and clients, as per The Fountainhead, sat in rapture and soaked it all in.

Jim continues: "You're making a big investment when you build a new home.

Money and time. You have to have a team you can trust, and this includes a builder. There are going to be many decisions to make and you have to have complete confidence your architect has your best interests in mind."

What should clients do before they begin a project? I would have said making up their minds about what they want, the worst examples being couples who can't agree on anything and blame it on the architect.

Here's Jim's more considered approach:

"It helps if people have thought about what matters to them, what their priorities are. For instance, it could be how they want a house sited, or how the main room should be. Not everything is possible in one house. Having a budget is important, a real budget, not just what they think it should be or where they want to start. If they have details they admire, it's good to identify them upfront because they often can't be added on later."

I asked him what the biggest challenges are for an architect.

"It's easy to keep making a house bigger. Each new idea adds up and houses get too big and the basic concept can be lost. I like to stay within a definite square footage and make the plan work. And this helps stay in budget, too." Good advice, as most new houses are too big but under-designed.

"Often people don't budget for the whole project. They have an appropriate amount to build the house, but nothing for landscaping or essential new furniture to make the house work as planned."

I've seen houses like this -- the house is stranded on a bleak, muddy lot, no blinds on the windows. People get the square footage they want but an empty feeling.

"Scheduling can be a problem when [the timeline's] too aggressive," Jim says. "Decisions take time. Not everything happens just when it should even when everyone involved is totally committed. You have to enjoy the process and accept realistic timing."

Owners create horrendous deadlines, and projects become hell? "We must be in by Christmas, May 24 or July 1 or else." Or else. This is where clients literally starting screaming -- as if that helps.

I ask if technology is changing the design of houses.

"We certainly incorporate all the newest technology into our plans, but the houses people are happiest with don't make this their best feature. There are other qualities a house must have, the sort of intrinsic comfort found in houses built decades ago, that are the reasons people love their houses -- not technology."

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