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Custom home designs often need team approach

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The idea of design professionals working together is not new, but the benefits to all involved have increased. Planning in parallel, coordinating architecture, site planning, landscaping, interior design results in a better, more cohesive result. It is all about relationships: between owner and design professionals; among the different designers; and between the house and the property itself.

Certainly parallel planning is more practical when dealing with custom homes. Typically the people who build a custom home are the ones most likely to hire architects and interior and landscape designers. And more often than not, it is the owner who initiates the arrangement. "People who call us in early in the process are those who are thinking far enough ahead," says John Mariani of Mariani Landscapes in Lake Bluff. "It usually starts with the homeowner rather than the architect," which he sees as an unfortunate missed opportunity.

The typical situation, as Mariani sees it, is that a client hires an architect to design a home. The house is designed specifically to meet the client's needs for space usage and style, but it is not always designed to fit the site. "They find a site and just plop it down. It's frustrating for us because somehow we're stuck dealing with difficult slopes....and we have to come up with some kind of naturalistic-looking solution." The problems the landscape designer inherits can also include awkward views, uncomfortable circulation patterns, and steps and walks that are the wrong proportions for outdoors.

When the landscape design firm is called in early enough, they can help with these items. Mariani recalls a particular project, "a rather large home on 14 acres with a number of large sugar maples and oaks....The homeowner called us in early and the architect asked our opinion regarding these trees. There was one spectacular white oak that the owner wanted to use as a focal point for views out of the house. So we helped set the orientation of the house to take advantage of that view." Also, because of the way the lot is laid out, "one could easily have set the house near the street," thus making it the first thing a visitor sees when driving up. "But, because we were involved early enough in the process, the drive was designed to get you to the front door a certain way." Using a design technique called "progressive realization, Mariani designed the drive to wind through some of the existing trees. During the approach, a sense of mystery or anticipation is achieved by temporarily obscuring views of the house.

Mariani's project was uncommonly large, so there was considerable flexibility in the placement of the house, and the cooperation among design professionals was equally uncommon. But on more traditionally sized suburban properties, cooperation among builder/architect and landscape designer can be even more critical. For example, a trend in building is to make maximum use of the building envelope; that is, to build the house from building line to building line in all directions. Often this leaves no room for landscape features, or even a driveway. With many homes designed with side-loading garages, often overlooked is how the garage is accessed. If there is not approximately 28 feet of driveway opposite the garage it is very difficult to navigate. And if there is to be any planting beyond the driveway, there has to be even more space allotted.

Architect Doug Reynolds of the Reynolds Group in Northfield is a big believer in parallel planning. A designer and builder of custom homes on the north shore, Reynolds stresses, "It is important how my product looks," so he likes to have the landscape design firm in early in the process. He also suggests that the budgeting process is easier when costs for landscaping are known early in the process. Although architects have training in site planning, Reynolds recognizes that the efficiencies in having other design professionals involved early results in a much better experience for the client. Discussions about grading, paving, and other areas of mutual concern are "professional to professional, rather than filtered through the client," which keeps things efficient and reduces miscommunication. This extends to interiors as well. "I can design the interiors, choose finishes, etc., but it is easier for the owner to work with an interior designer."

Interior designer Sherri Stahnke of Interiors International in North Riverside works with architects frequently. Although most architects see a house as an overall aesthetic composition, "I see the space as a person living in it." She likes to be involved in the space planning and choosing materials such as tile, counter tops, window treatments, cabinets and lighting. Many beautifully designed rooms leave no place for furniture, so being called in early enough to consult on window and door locations is essential. She states that "Smarter people building a house hire both an architect and an interior designer."

Crossover

In the design and building of a custom home, there are areas of crossover among design professions. Open communication among them is essential for success. For example, every house is designed with steps, stoops and walks. Initially these are laid out by the architect, but a better transition to the landscape is attained if the landscape designer has some input. Outdoors, steps should have shorter risers and broader treads than those indoors. And outdoors, steps frequently consist of stone or brick veneered over concrete. If the concrete is poured without knowledge of the

veneer, then they are poured too high. It is not uncommon for brand new concrete stoops to be torn out because there was no thought about what the finished product will look like.

Of course there is the risk of duplication when multiple design professionals are involved, and there is the chance they will disagree about how a particular situation is best addressed, but as long as all involved have a mutual respect and understand that there is usually more than one “right” solution, things work out. As for duplication, Reynolds states, “Duplication is not always a bad thing. When you have more than one set of eyes looking at a given situation, often solutions come about by their collective skills.” Stahnke adds that it helps to have “different perspectives on the same things.”

Pitfalls

Sometimes it doesn’t work out as one would hope. “If one of the participants, particularly if it is the least experienced of them, tends to dominate, or has the ear of the owner, it can hurt the process,” points out Reynolds. Sometimes the owner will play design professionals off one another. Since there are always multiple ways to do something, and more than one opinion may be valid, each professional may have an equally valid opinion. If each is asked separately, it can get awkward. “The dominant party can hurt the situation by bad mouthing others on the team,” he adds.

It is important that all design professionals have mutual respect, stresses Stahnke. “Everyone has their job to do and it is best if everyone works together.” She, Mariani and Reynolds each pointed out that for the parallel planning team to work, “you can’t have too big an ego.”

Mariani point out that many years ago, before World War II, architects and landscape architects were “joined at the hip, and often worked out of the same office.” Most homes at that time were custom designed, but eventually the architects went out on their own. That is about the time that the modern “subdivision” was born. Production homes with production landscapes became the norm.

Many people building custom homes are rediscovering the benefits of coordinating design professionals. Usually initiated by forward-thinking owners, an opportunity exists for architects and builders to introduce the concept. It will make their jobs easier and make their projects look and function better. At the same time it creates a better experience for their clients.