

Architects take time to consider all aspects of designing house

By Kelly de la Rocha

Home wasn't built in a day



Don and Sue Davis sit on the steps in front of a home they redesigned on Hermance Road in Galway.

SARATOGA SPRINGS

A fabulous house can be designed and built in a week, if you believe everything you see on television. Unfortunately, reality TV and reality don't have all that much in common. In the real world, it takes more time to develop a quality set of architectural plans than it does to complete an entire Extreme Makeover home building project, says architect Susan Davis.

"You could, at very best, probably get through a design within a month and get final drawings together within another month to a month and a half," she estimates. "But that's sort of the bare minimum in terms of time that I would plan."

Susan and her husband, Don Davis, Jr., both architects, have gone through that planning process plenty of times. Since 1996, their company, SD Atelier Architecture, has provided custom design services for remodeling projects, additions, and new homes and businesses in and around Saratoga County.

Working with an architect is a process most people don't know much about, Susan says. "They don't realize the complexity involved with saying, 'Here's a floor plan. Can you draw it up?'"

Often overlooked considerations include things like windows, the exterior, roof lines and framing. "We have to first get to a point where we're happy with the aesthetics of it and the function of it and then take that and do a coordinated full set of construction drawings," she explains.

FULL SET OF DRAWINGS

A set of architectural plans includes page after page of detailed drawings, each devoted to a different aspect of the project, including the foundation; the floor plan; the windows; framing for each floor; roof plans; mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems, and building elevations.

"There are various degrees of construction drawings," Susan explains. "You can do just a very limited 'permit' set of drawings, which are bare bones, all the building department needs to see type of drawings, but we usually take it a step beyond." Her company's plans, she says, include more comprehensive information for use by the builder. Even the smallest details are carefully considered and put down on paper, to avoid questions at the job site.

Creating such plans, she stresses, takes a lot of time. "There's one set of drawings to develop which are the nice, aesthetic, pretty drawings, and then there's the final drawings, which are more technical and detailed," she says. It takes about twice as long to develop the final drawings, she notes.

PET PROJECTS

Susan's favorite projects are the custom residential ones, but her company's handiwork can also be seen in the Burnt Hills Veterinary Clinic, the theater rehearsal hall for the Seagle Music Colony in Schroon Lake, the Malta

Ambulance Facility and the Adirondack League Club in Old Forge. “I like to focus on very custom, individual types of projects,” she says. “We love doing projects in the Adirondacks, we love doing renovations to camps.” One recent design project was a complete renovation and transformation of a camp on Galway Lake, completed by contractor Mike Champagne of Saratoga Springs. The exterior was re-designed to have an Adirondack style, with natural materials and colors. “The existing camp did not have any inviting entry, and the design involved creating a new entry and wraparound porch to help integrate the front of the camp to the lake side of the camp,” Susan explains. The Galway Lake project had all the ingredients for success: it was well planned and was not rushed. “It was just a happy project all the way around,” she says.

DON'T RUSH

Happy projects need ample planning time. “If you know you want to start a project in the spring, then the time to be working on the planning is in the fall,” she instructs. Final drawings can then be created during the winter. Once they're done, the job can go out to bid, so the contractor can schedule for a spring start. “The person who comes to us in September and says, ‘I want to break ground before the snow falls,’ is either super optimistic or not really concerned about all that's involved in the process,” she says. Ready-made home plans, often featured in magazines, can be a quick and easy fix, but might not provide the perfect fit. “If you're designing a home, you've really got to think about how you function in the home, how you're going to use the house, how it's best suited for the site,” she says. Susan and Don both did architectural work abroad, she in Switzerland and he in Germany. Both returned with a respect for history and an eye for fresh, new styles, and have incorporated the skills and awareness they gained into their work in America. People Susan met overseas often joked about Americans and their “fast food architecture.” But she's more from the “slow food” school. “When they design buildings over there, it's really for a long time. They really are there for a sense of permanence,” she explains. “And I find that I try to do that here, design with really natural materials that are going to be long lasting.”

COLLABORATION IS KEY

When Susan and Don work with a client, it's a collaborative effort. “We don't carry big egos around, so we're not there to impose our design philosophy on somebody,” she says. Usually design plans evolve into a combination of their ideas and those the client brings to the table. “A lot of times, they're coming with a general floor plan or concept, but they need someone to help pull it all together,” she says. The design is first sketched on paper then computerized renderings, and sometimes 3-D models, are created to help the client visualize the finished product. Finally, construction documents are created. The more prepared a client is before he or she walks into an architect's office, the better, says Susan. “I think the more educated people are, the more they come in with their own ideas. It helps move the process along quickly. I don't expect everyone to know the whole process coming in, but to go in with their eyes open, knowing that it's not Extreme Makeover all the time.” Part of that education, she says, is to gain a basic understanding of current building costs, which can help avoid the disappointment that often follows unrealistic expectations. “You can't design a building anymore for \$100 a square foot. It's just not possible,” she says. “We can try to design within their budget to a certain extent, but the reality is building costs what it costs and the labor is what it is and I can't control that.” SD Atelier generally does architectural work for construction jobs that cost no less than \$50,000 to complete, Susan notes. “But it's not always about the size,” she says. “If there's an interesting reason why I'd want to take a project on, I would look at doing it.”

IT'S AN ART

Susan likens architecture to flower arranging. “Given a project, you have to come up with a solution, be creative about it and present it,” she explains. She relishes the artistic process involved with her job and says clients should enjoy the opportunity to have a part in it as well. In order to have fun with the designing and building process, however, people need to understand its components, and the players who take part in it. “There are a lot of people involved with this whole process.” Susan says. “The client needs to be respectful of all the different parties and what their roles are.” Her company, she notes, can work as a liaison between customer and contractor to help ensure everything proceeds according to plan.

Susan likes to give her clients a copy of the book “House,” by Tracy Kidder, a true story of the construction of a home in Massachusetts, which explains the different perspectives and aspirations of a homeowner, contractor and architect. There’s a lesson between the lines that Susan hopes future clients will take to heart: “The success stories,” she says, “are the ones where everyone works together.”