

No Doubt Homes

3 STEPS TO THE PERFECT FLOOR PLAN

FINDING THE RIGHT FLOOR PLAN

By Kelly Daigle





Introduction

Does it bother you that your home no longer meets your family's needs?

Do you dream of something better?

Have you shopped for a house, and you just get frustrated because:

- All the plans look the same,
- None of the plans seem to fit your family's needs,
- You feel like you're wasting time looking at countless plans, or
- None of the plans seem worth the time, money, and pain of moving.

If any of this sounds familiar, this guide will help you navigate the critical process of designing your custom house plan from scratch. You really can get the house of your dreams, provided you're willing to put in the work up front and really think through your wants and needs.

The key to the whole thing is following a process that will keep you focused on your family's needs and wants and keep you from designing a house plan you can't afford. It will also help you find the right person to work with so you can keep your dream alive and not fall prey to outside influences that can derail you.

I've seen it countless times: someone like you has collected photos, floor plans, and ideas, and just wants someone who can translate all that into a buildable, affordable custom floor plan.

But every house designer, architect, or builder wants to put his or her own stamp on it, telling you what you should and shouldn't do.

So you walk away feeling the same way you do every time you walk through a house for sale that doesn't fit your needs. Seems like nobody is listening.

When you're finished reading this guide, you'll be able to:

- Clearly share your vision with a house designer, architect, or builder
- Confidently decide whether that person can, and will, do what you want, and do it within your budget.

(Speaking of budget, get a free copy of this [new home budget worksheet here](#))

I want to share with you a 3-step process to make sure you find the right person to work with, and how to make sure that person creates the house plan of your dreams:

- 1. Gather**
- 2. Organize**
- 3. Find and match**

The process is simple, and will help take the stress and anxiety out of the process. It will still take work, but it will be a labor of love rather than a labor of fear, anger, and frustration.



Gather your thoughts

If you already have that binder of printouts, collection of photos and floor plans saved on a hard drive, or a Pinterest account full of ideas, that's great! This is your starting point.

If you don't, then when you start that collection, you can follow this process to keep it organized and productive. And remember, there are no bad ideas at this point!

How do you work best? On paper? Electronically? A combination of both?

It doesn't matter. Gather and save all your ideas in a way that works best for you. File folders, three-ring binders, Pinterest, Houzz, pictures and ideas saved on a phone or computer—I've seen it all, and I've seen it all work well. It's going to come down to focus and organization, but for now, just gather anything of interest.

Utility: square feet and room arrangement. How will you live?

First, let's separate what I call utility (how you'll use, or live in, your house), from looks and finishes (how your new home looks and what kinds of finish materials you'll use).

For the first part of the "gathering" exercise, you're going to focus on utility and worry about looks and finishes later. Here's how to do it.

Think in terms of how you're going to use, or live in, your new home.

What bothers you about your current home? What floor plan problems are there? How would you solve them in a new house?

Think about these questions:

- Do I need more space? Where? Living areas, bigger kitchen, more bedrooms, bigger bedrooms, etc.?
- Do I need a different arrangement of rooms? Do I want better access to an outdoor kitchen? Better access to the garage? Am I tired of hearing the kids in the living room when I'm trying to sleep? Do I need more closets or an attic?

Write down everything you can think of about the following two big picture questions:

- What do I not like about the layout of my current house? (Remember, right now we're just talking about the arrangement, number, and size of the rooms.)
- How would I solve the above problems in a new house?



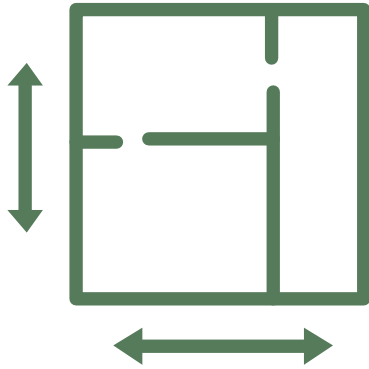
Visualize yourself living in a new home.

- How does your day start? What does everyone do when they wake up?
- What happens when your family members leave the house? When they come home? Where do they drop their stuff?
- Do you work from home? Do you homeschool? How would a new house make those things easier, more efficient, or more enjoyable?
- How do you and your family spend your evenings? Weekends? How would a new house support or enhance your family's evenings and weekends?
- How would your new house feel?

The above vision will start to shape the design layout.

This visualization is critical because it's what you'll move toward as you shape your ideal house, and this vision will keep you from getting derailed when you start talking to house designers and/or builders.

With the above vision in mind, it's time to start writing down some specifics.



Room Sizes & Numbers

How many bedrooms, bathrooms, living areas, dining areas, garage spaces, etc., will you need? How big do you need each of the above rooms to be?

Note that it says “need,” not “want.”

Later, there will be some compromising going on (unless you have an unlimited budget, and I haven't yet run into anyone like that) so you don't want to get emotionally tied to room sizes at this point.

Some things to think about:

Bedrooms

If you have children, think about how they use their rooms now, and how you'd like them to be able to use them. Are the rooms just for sleeping, or would you like them to have room for toys, so you're not tripping on them in the living room? Are you an empty nester?

Kitchen

Do you work in the kitchen a lot? Do you need big areas of open counter tops, or would a smaller kitchen do just fine? Do you need lots of floor space because there's more than one person working in the kitchen?

Dining areas

Do you need more than one, or is a breakfast area next to the kitchen enough? Do you have lots of family and / or friends over frequently, and if so, do you host sit-down dinner where you need a big dining table and chairs?

If you only host groups every once in awhile, could you just expand the family kitchen / dinner table into the adjacent room for the event, saving space?

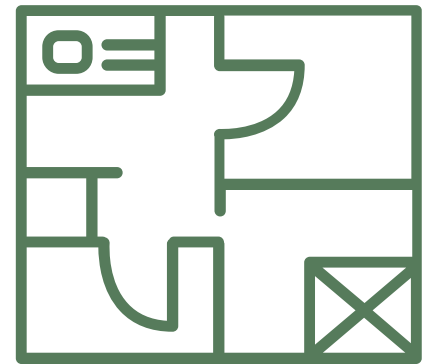
Family / living room

Do you and your family (or guests) frequently hang out in the family room, or is the room not really used that much?

Room Layout

Where should the rooms be in relation to each other?

Think in terms of how you will live in the house, which will dictate how the rooms should be laid out (and what rooms you even need).



Here are some examples.

- Should the living room be on the back of the house or the front? Do you want to have a view to the back from the living room so you can see the kids playing in the yard?
- Is it important to be able to access the back patio from the living room? From the kitchen or dining room?
- Do you or the kids come in and out from the back yard needing easy access to a bathroom?
- Should all the bedrooms be on one side of the house or separate? If the kids are small and you want them close to you now, is that going to change when they're teenagers?
- Do you want to be able to unload groceries from the car in the garage and walk straight into the kitchen?
- Does someone in your family routinely come in from outside tracking in dirt and mud? Do you need a mudroom or a drop zone where kids (or anyone) can drop shoes, backpacks, purses, phones, etc.?

Tour Houses

Pick a day when you can spend several hours going to look at open houses that are

in, or below, your [budget](#). Pretend you're going to buy one of them (and heck, if you happen to finally find that perfect one, buy it before someone else does).

Take your list from above, and take a notebook and pen so you can write stuff down as you look.

It's important to write stuff down—if you've ever shopped for houses, you know what I'm talking about.

After a while, they all start to run together, and you won't remember what you liked and didn't.

You also want to be able to revisit a house later after you've learned something new and want to confirm it.



Here are some steps you should take as you tour the houses:

- Visualize yourself living in each house you tour. Think about how you'd live—bringing in groceries, hanging out on the back patio, coming home from work, kids coming home from school, etc.
- Take a tape measure with you and don't be shy about using it. Trying to eyeball and estimate dimensions will fool you. I've been building new homes for 18 years, and I still get fooled. Do you really know how wide your bed and nightstands are together? Do you have a feel for how much space you need between the corner of a bed and the wall?
- How closely does the house you're looking at match your list? How would you change it?
- What are your likes and dislikes?
- How are the rooms laid out? How would that layout work for you and your family? How could it be better?
- How are the room sizes? Big enough? Too big, like space is wasted? (Remember that space does cost money—big enough is best.)
- What tricks did the house designer use to make smaller spaces work? For example, no wall between the dining area and adjacent space, so you could expand a table when needed but not have wasted space the rest of the time.

Before, during, or after touring all those homes, do your online or magazine research on house plans.

Find ones that have elements you really like, save them, and mark them up to identify and help you remember why it is you liked certain designs.



You aren't likely to find that perfect plan (but it's awesome if you do!), so that's not what you're looking for.

You're looking for visual aids you can refer to later when painting your picture for the house designer, architect, or builder. It's so much easier to work from pictures than from a blank sheet of paper.

Be sure to include new houses in your shopping, for a few reasons.

- They'll be more representative of what you can expect to get within your budget.
- You're going to be looking for someone to draw your plans later—you might be able to hire the person who designed one of the new homes with a plan you liked.
- You'll be looking for specific design elements that I'll talk about in the next few paragraphs.



See if you can get a copy of the floor plan for reference. It'll give you good perspective when you're designing your house.

If you can't, ask for the name of the designer or architect who designed the home.

If the builder created the design in-house, and that builder doesn't build on land outside his own communities, that's OK. You can re-create the elements you like from your notes.

That's how you'd do it for an older home anyway.

Specific Features

Why are you looking for specific design elements in new houses? You want indicators of the house designer's philosophy, or approach, to creating floor plans. You'll see these indicators in finished homes and in floor plans a particular designer will show you as examples of his or her work.

Here are a few of the items I'm talking about, and what they mean to you.

Overall Shape

In addition to the overall size, the overall SHAPE of the house has a big impact on cost as well as how the finished home looks.

Walk around the outside. The front of the house probably has some offsets, or jogs, or corners, where there are different roof lines, gables, porches, etc. The front of the house usually needs those things for aesthetics—if the front is just a straight line, it'll look pretty plain.



Now walk around the sides and back of the house. Are the sides and back straight, do they have just a few jogs, or do they have about as many jogs as the front?

Look at every corner where the outside wall changes direction: notice that the roof gets more complicated right there as it follows along. Every time the outside wall turns a corner, some material gets wasted, such as lumber, drywall, insulation, brick, concrete, shingles, etc.

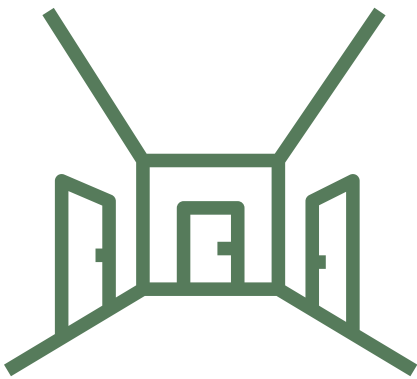
If a wall jogs in and then back out, such as with an inset patio, you add to the amount of outside wall you need without adding any square footage. It's like paying for square footage but not getting it.

Are there lots of angles (other than 90-degree angles) inside or outside? Many times a house designer or architect will design walls at 30- or 45-degree angles for the visual effect.

If you value that sort of thing, make sure you add it to your list. Those types of angles are a design feature, and they cost money for two reasons:

- First, they result in some material waste, and
- Second, they create some wasted square footage that must be added back in somewhere to make the house function.

Hallways, closets, wasted space



Hallways are necessary, of course, in order to get from one room to another without having to walk through a room to get to another one.

The mark of good design is minimizing them through clever room arrangement.

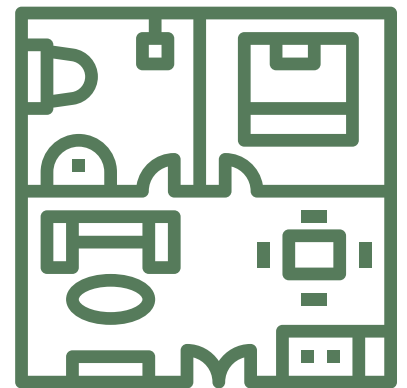
Closets—we all want lots of closets, right? I’ve never heard anyone say, “I really like this house, but it has too much storage and the closets are all too big.”

While ample storage is a good thing, many times small linen closets and storage closets are a result of poor design—they represent “dead space” that a designer couldn’t figure out how to get rid of.

Closets are great as long as they’re part of the plan from the beginning.

Most of the time, **other wasted space** takes the form of traffic areas. For example, we love “open concept,” because it makes the house feel bigger than it is.

But once you’ve arranged the furniture, you realize you have to move the couch three feet forward so there’s room to walk behind it. That three-foot space might as well be a hallway for all the good it does in the living room.



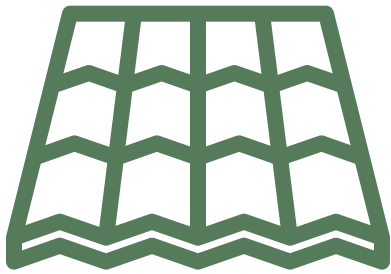
Keep furniture and traffic in mind as you’re looking at homes, and you’ll start to get a feel for wasted space.

Design elements that are integrated vs. elements that seem like an afterthought

Have you ever seen an outside closet that houses a furnace or hot water tank, and it looks like it was just scabbed on the side of the plan? It probably was. That little scab-on is the result of not incorporating mechanical systems into the original design process.

Look for rooms, closets, or patios whose roof line seems odd compared to the rest of the house. Designing a roof for a complex floor plan can be tricky, and if a designer tries to add something later that wasn't part of the original design, he or she might have to start over with some part of it.

But some designers will just try to cram the extra element on the outside, and if the roof doesn't exactly work, he or she will have to draw some ugly workaround.



Roof lines

This one is pretty important. The biggest red flag I see (and it's more common than it ought to be) is what is called a "dead valley." That's where two parallel but opposite roof slopes join at the bottom in a horizontal line.

Water drains into the valley, but since the valley is horizontal, when it rains hard enough, water will build up to the point where it flows behind the upper edge of the bottom shingles and causes a leak.

Make notes on the above items! This will be part of your search criteria when you're looking for a designer, architect, or builder later.

With your online and magazine research, you're also looking for elements that remind you of some of the homes you toured. It's great to find design elements on a screen or paper, but being able to bring those elements to life in three dimensions helps you visualize the reality.

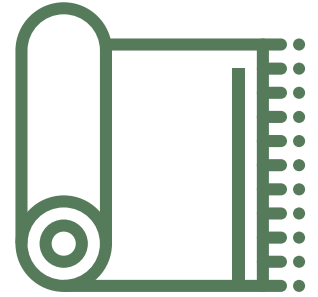
For example, that enclosed 11-foot by 12-foot formal dining room looks great in the pretty magazine picture, but try putting a table in that room surrounded by chairs with family members sitting in them, and you'll see why it won't work in real life.

Looks and finishes: tastes, features, and eye candy

In the above paragraphs, we talked about gathering thoughts only on the layout of house plans: square footage, number and types of rooms, and room arrangements.

So far we've ignored the green shag carpet and purple wall paint.

Now it's time to apply the same techniques to the look and feel of houses (either in real life, online, or in magazines) to gather thoughts and ideas on the kinds of finishes and materials you'll want to choose for your new house.



We haven't really talked that much about budget yet, but to keep things realistic, remember to look at houses that are on the market in your price range or a little under. Why a little under?

To give yourself a buffer. Somewhere lurking in the back of your mind is a "must-have" item that you probably haven't seen anywhere yet, which is one of the reasons you haven't just bought an existing house.

Leave some room in your list of desires for that item so you don't mentally spend your "must-have" money on some shiny object of distraction.

Here's what you want to do next.

Think about how you want your new home to look and feel not just when it's new, but also when you've lived in it for five years or so. Here are some questions to think about.

- How important to you is the look of your home?
- What kind of style do you want? Traditional? Contemporary? Transitional (kind of the best of traditional and contemporary)? Do you want a "modern farmhouse" look or "Dallas style"?
- Do you want the latest styles in granite, quartz, and floor tile, or is something more modest closer to your taste?

Look in magazines and/or online (Pinterest, Houzz, etc.) for styles and materials you like. Save the photos.

- As you tour homes for sale, look for the above items in use—how do they translate in real life? How will they look five years from now? Will they hold up? Will they look dated?

At this point, you have gathered a lot of data.



Organize the stuff you gathered, but don't make decisions yet

By this time you have put a great deal of thought into your new home: the size, the number and types of rooms, the room arrangement, and how you want to live in your home.

Now it's time to organize those thoughts into lists you can use to guide and focus your thinking to produce the right home, with the right features, that fits realistically into your budget.

As before, you're going to separate the utility of the house (size, rooms, layout) from the looks and finishes. Why do this? One word: flexibility.

Ultimately, you know you're going to make compromises. I've said it before—everyone has a budget constraint, and everyone wants more than she or he can afford. That's human nature.

I've seen people give up on their dreams because they couldn't figure out how to fit everything they thought they had to have into their budget, so they just didn't do it at all. Don't let that happen to you.

No house will be perfect, and if you don't prioritize your needs and wants before the emotional letdown of budget reality sets in, you'll get discouraged and quit because the dream will seem out of reach.

Remind yourself why you're embarking on this journey. Think about how it's going to feel when your new home is complete, and you're living the way you want, and deserve, to live. Don't lose that.

Make your list, get real about what you can and can't live without, and you'll get your dream.

Here's what to do next:

- Get out your lists, photos, and the other data you have collected.
- Start organizing all of this in your head by priority.
- Take a few deep breaths.

Take a minute to reflect on the real reasons you decided you wanted to build a new home. **Write them down.**

Why? You're about to put your lists of needs and wants in priority order. Staying focused on the real purpose will help keep you from getting distracted and missing the whole point.



Focusing on your real reasons, start with the items you gathered during the **utility** part of the research you did above. What's the number one, most important, can't live without item on that list?

Here are some questions to think about.

- If you had to give everything else up to get **one item**, what would it be?
- What is the **one thing** that if you had to give it up, you'd rather just stay in the house you're in?
- When you think about the months of anxiety and waiting for your new home to be built, and all the work that you'll have to do to pack up your stuff, move it to the new house, unpack it, etc., what's the **one thing** that reminds you it will all be worth it?

OK, you now have identified the most important element of your new home! That's the hardest part (and you really knew it all along).

Now, go through the rest of the lists you gathered and do the same thing for every other item you need and want (needs first, wants second).

Once you've completed the **utility** section, move on to the **looks and finishes** section and do the same exercise.

You now have two lists in priority order. Congratulations! Believe me, if you've come this far, you've done more than 99% of the people I work with, and you'll be 99% less stressed out for the whole rest of the process.

The next big task, and this is an emotional one, is to categorize your lists by thinking about every item on the list and assigning it to one of two categories:

1. Must-have items
2. Like-to-have items

Why do this? As before, you're protecting yourself from making decisions emotionally later by making them rationally now. Right now, this is a very academic process. You aren't making any irreversible decisions, so the emotional impact of seeing your decisions come to life in sticks and brick hasn't hit you yet.

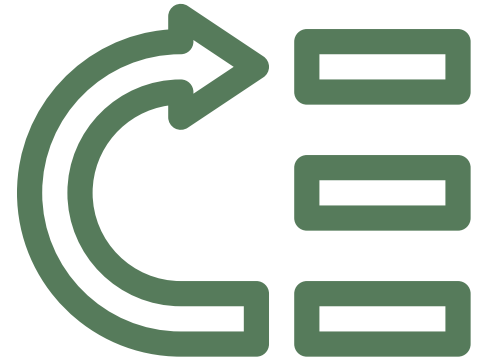
When you reach the point of approving a set of plans, writing a large check, and watching walls go up, there will be lots of emotions churning around.

This process will ensure those emotions are positive ones, because you'll be confident you've made the right choices in line with your values and your family's needs.

One important point: when categorizing the items on your list, start at the bottom.

By definition, the last item on the list is the least important to you.

You're going to be making tough decisions about whether you could live without certain items on your list, so start off with the easier ones and work your way up. It'll be easier to make that decision about one of the least important items on your list than about an item that's near the top.



This exercise is also a review of your priorities. If you find yourself marking item 10 as a “like to have” and item 15 as “must have,” then those two items are probably in the wrong order.

Set the lists aside and live with them for a few days.

You'll find yourself thinking about many of the items as you live your normal life in your current house. You'll rethink some of them.

With the new perspective of having thought through many of your everyday tasks (stuff you normally do on autopilot), you'll realize some of your “must-haves” aren't really. You might even scratch some stuff off the list entirely. You might find yourself putting things in a different sequence based on your new perspective.

Overall, you'll gain clarity, which is crucial—it helps you clearly define what you want, so you'll be more likely to get it. And it takes the edge off the stressful emotions associated with big decisions.

When you're done, you'll have two lists in priority order and each item will be marked "must-have" or "like-to-have." Wow. You have described, in words, your dream house.

When you're meeting with designers, architects, and/or builders, you can speak with confidence about the vision you have for your new home. That will make the process go so much smoother than it would have otherwise. Congratulations!



Find and match: Who is going to craft this house plan, and how do we find the right match?

You've come a long way. It's time to find the home designer, architect, or builder who you trust to translate your vision (lists, photos, and descriptions) into a house plan a builder can build.

This is obviously a critical step, and it presents a unique challenge in our world of high-technology and manufactured products: you don't get to see the finished product before you buy. Think about that for a moment.

You're not going to buy a "house plan," you're going to buy into an individual. You can't tell a prospective designer to draw the plans and then you'll decide if you're going to buy them—you have to trust that the relationship is going to work and that you'll end up with the plans you envisioned. Sounds a little like getting married.

Yikes.

There's a way to do this. A process. Commit to a process, just like before, when your rational brain is in charge and before the emotional decision-making time comes.

I'm going to start by sharing some thoughts, based on hard-won experience, on home designers vs. architects vs. home builders as it applies to having the plans drawn for your new home.

First of all, I'm going to assume you have a budget you need to stay within. I'm also going to assume that your core values DO NOT include being able to brag to your friends at cocktail parties about which architect you hired to design your new home or about how much you had to pay him/her for your house plans.



If I'm wrong about that, then my advice is to find out who's designing the biggest, flashiest, showiest multimillion dollar homes in your town and go hire that guy. Done.

How do you find house designers to interview?

You've read a lot about design and finding a designer up to this point, and I'm going to throw you a little bit of a curve at this point.

The best way to do this whole thing is to find a builder first, before you get your home design. I know that sounds out of sequence, and if you don't feel that's the right way to go about it, that's OK. If you finish reading this guide, you'll be well equipped to create a great home-building experience.

On the other hand, a builder you trust will guide you through this whole difficult process, including finding land, designing a house, getting a construction loan, etc.

To find the "house designer" who designs efficient-to-build plans, think back to some of the newly constructed homes you walked through when you were making your list. Look at some of the designs and the notes you made.

Were there some homes that had some of the indicators of inefficient or

less-than-thoughtful design? If you got copies of the floor plans and the designer's name is on them, strike that one off your list. If you don't know who designed them, don't worry—you'll be able to see it in the designer's work as you interview them.

If you didn't ask or didn't get the answer when you asked about who designed some of the new homes you toured, call the builder and ask. Call multiple builders and ask who designs their homes. Maybe you haven't toured any of their designs, but that's OK. You have enough experience with design elements from your home tours that you'll be able to spot the good ones through the work examples they show when you meet with them.

If you can't come up with any designer names from the new homes you toured or from calling builders, that's OK. We have other ways.



Two words: Google Maps. Search the following words or phrases:

- House designers
- Home designers
- Architects (I know, but sometimes the person you're looking for doesn't know what terms you'll use, so they use this term to show up in Google searches.)
- House designs
- Home designs
- House plans

Most of the results that turn up will be designers in the “interior designer” sense, like the people who help with colors, textures, lighting, furniture, and so on. Just ignore those. If you're not seeing any results for people who design house plans, keep zooming out the map until you find some.

Find the ones that design house plans and call them. Avoid big architect and engineer (A&E) firms that have names that sound like attorney partnerships (like “Smith, Jones, and Edwards,” etc.). Set up appointments to visit them face-to-face. Remember, we're talking about building a relationship on trust, because you're going to have to trust someone to design your house plans. This is worthy of a face-to-face, maybe more than one.

Another worthy source: call the local chapter of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). Home designers join local NAHB chapters to associate with their main clientele, home builders.

One more suggestion, which might seem weird and out of sequence, but look for a home builder that does design in-house or works with one designer exclusively. If you can find that, and the interview process below goes well, you've saved lots and lots of work and have tremendously upped your chances of getting more of your list within your budget. Why?

Because a builder knows building costs, and the designer who works that closely with a builder will design with a knowledgeable eye toward building efficiency. This is really what you're after, when it's all said and done.

You're after a house plan that gets you the most of what you want for your money, and a builder/designer combination can understand how lines on paper affect your wallet.

Interviewing house plan designers: what to look for

I always like to start with the disqualifiers—look for ways to cross someone off the list. It's easier if there are some obvious deal-killers up front. Here are two.

- Plan mills or shops that have one person's name on the door, but there are lots and lots of people sitting behind computer screens churning out plans for plan books. It's a great business model where the designer creates designs and prints books, then sells the books, but that business model doesn't match what you're looking for. Don't bother with these.
- The designer that won't meet with you in person for the first meeting but wants you to meet with an underling. That's fine if the underling is the brains of the operation, the creative force. If that's the case, though, the person will be able to show you his/her own work as opposed to work that's under the boss' name.

When you do sit down with the designer (and if you're married or have a significant other who shares decision-making with you, you both need to be there), ask these questions with the included purpose in mind.

Question: How do you start the process?

Purpose: You want to find out if there's a systematic method to draw out your needs and desires. If the beginning is a blank sheet of paper where you're just expected to spill your guts, or if the beginning seems random, it's not a good sign.

Follow-up question: Will we be starting with one of your existing designs?

Purpose: You just want to find out if this designer is accustomed to designing one-off custom plans, or if he/she has a "comfort zone" and wants to stay in it. There's absolutely nothing wrong with starting from an existing plan, but that should be your choice, not the designer's.

Question: How many iterations will it take?

Purpose: You want to know if the designer is going to cut you off after a certain number of revisions, or if the designer is confident enough in his or her process to know that if he/she hasn't developed a plan that works within a certain time, it's his/her issue, not yours.

Having said that, you have to be reasonable. Don't expect the process to go on forever—it isn't fair to the designer.

Question: What if I hate it?

Purpose: This is a legitimate question. If the answer is, "You won't," then the designer is unrealistic and might try to "sell" you on his creation if he comes up with something you really don't like.

Further, it's not uncommon for the first draft of a design to be something the client doesn't like, simply because there was an unspoken element nobody knew to bring up until it was put on paper. Finding out what you don't like in this manner is actually a good starting point. Better to find out now than later.

You want the designer to answer with something like, "It's totally OK if you hate the first draft. We'll learn a great deal about what you do want from that exercise. It's just part of the process."

Question: How do you keep the design efficient to build? Or, how do I know I'll be able to build this plan within my budget?

Purpose: This is a tough question for many designers to answer. Many have no experience building, so they really don't have a feel for how much it costs to build what (to them) are simply lines on paper.

The more conscientious designers get feedback from their clients (builders and individuals) to find out how the building of their plans actually went, and they use that information to adjust their design practices.

On the other hand, some designers will tell you they don't worry about designing for building efficiency, and that it's up to the builder to worry about that. That is a half-truth: it is up to the builder to operate efficiently, but if he/she is building a design he/she didn't create, then that part is out of the builder's hands.

Question: How do I pay?

Purpose: This is really a logistical question, and the designer will have no problem answering.

Most of the time, the designer's fee is based on the square footage of the design, and the fee is due upon the completion of the design (meaning your approval). There has to be some limit on the scope, otherwise the designer risks wasting valuable time with someone who wants endless changes. (But that's not you, because you did your homework up front).

Part of the reason for your question is so you can compare prices, of course, but you're not looking for the cheapest, unless saving a few dollars is worth the risk of getting a crappy house plan. You're simply making sure the fee is somewhere in the range of market rate.

Be careful to understand what square footage number the designer is talking about though. There are several possibilities.

- Under roof (or under beam): This is the total area covered by the roof, including first floor, second floor, porches, patios, garages, etc.

- Heated and cooled (frame footage): This is the total area that's just living space on every floor. It doesn't include porches, patios, and garages. If the designer uses this number, the fee per square foot will be higher just because this area is smaller than "under roof."
- Heated and cooled (vener footage): If a house is covered by a brick veneer, the total plan area that's heated and cooled but measured to the outside of the brick rather than the outside of the wood framing is called veneer footage. It's the same as frame footage (above), except the plan area of brick is added in. This one seems weird, but it's useful for comparing to completed houses because you can measure the outside of a house pretty easily. This is the area Realtors and appraisers use, because you can measure a finished house this way.

Question: May I see some of your work?

Purpose: The designer expects this question, of course, and you're looking for design elements like we talked about above. **Watch out!**

The designer will show you elevations or even artist renderings (the front of the house) first. Why? So you'll fall in love with a look. The rendering might be in color, it will have great big trees in the background, the landscaping will be mature and impeccably groomed, and the season will be perpetually spring.

Don't be fooled by your emotional reaction to the pretty picture.

Look at the plan first—then you can look at the elevation or rendering. Look for efficiency, aesthetics, and attention to detail. Have the designer tell the story of a few of the designs you like and listen for clues about his/her approach to design.

Is he/she a stickler for certain details (like making sure you can't see a toilet from the entry)? Does the designer seem to just scab on elements later (like external mechanical closets), or does he/she work hard to stay within square footage and shape constraints?

You want to get a feel that the designer will work hard to stay within your guidelines.

The above questions are all intellectual in nature, and you're asking for intellectual answers, but you're really looking for more than that. You're trying to get an emotional feel for whether you want to work with this person or not.

Remember my analogy of marriage? Yeah, you want to come away with a good feeling, but a good feeling that's based on something tangible, not just a head rush that comes from "hitting it off." That rush will fade if it isn't based on something substantial.

Interview several designers, as many as you feel you need to get the hang of the process, then go home and talk it over with your significant other.

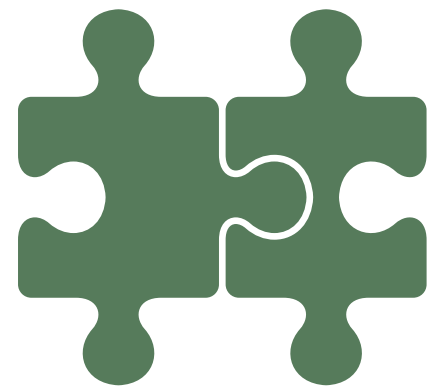
Talk about the answers to the questions, and talk about the feeling you get from those answers. Strike the ones that don't give you a good feeling off the list, then continue to narrow the list until you feel you have the right one. If you can't narrow it to one, go talk to the ones you like again.

If you have it narrowed to two, flip a coin, and the feeling you get right when you find out whether it's heads or tails will tell you which one to choose.

So you've found a match...

Congratulations! Time to start designing your dream home.

For your first appointment, take your prioritized, categorized lists with you. The designer will love you for it.



Stay flexible. Do a preliminary design first with just a floor plan (drawn to scale) and a front elevation (view from the front). Take it home and live with it for a week. Don't ask the designer to complete the working drawings just yet.

If you haven't already done so, it's time to [find a builder](#).

No Doubt Homes

Contact Information

I hope the information in this ebook will be helpful to you. Without a conversation, of course, I can't know if this information or any of our knowledge or experience would be helpful to you in your journey toward your forever home.

I've lived through this experience alongside my clients more times than I can count. Each time I learn something new, but the most critical lesson is this: there is an enormous number of details and moving parts. That's not just in the actual construction, but in the whole process from buying land, to financing, to building, to warranty service.

Where I see the most strife, stress, and anguish in my clients is when they choose to take the route of "lowest price," "best deal," or "lowest rate." Without fail, those options end up being the most expensive in the end.

Don't fall into that trap. Whatever lender, builder, and home designer you choose, make sure each one is someone you can trust. Don't be fooled by the "best deal," because there are so many details and so many ways that "deal" can come back and bite you, you'll never see it coming.

Please read through this guide, and call us with any questions you have—I'll be happy to guide you through this journey in any way I can.

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