

Practicing Residential Architecture

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Program Description:

There is a firmly held belief amongst architects that it is hard to make a living designing houses because there's so little money to be made, and client expectations are so high. So how do you explain the success of the few residentially oriented firms whose work load is steadily increasing, and whose financial status is robust? Why aren't they starving, as the myth would suggest?

There ARE answers to these questions, and such success is not simply attributable to luck.

Topics will include:

- *Changing our thinking about the residential market
- *Understanding the Process
- *Achieving an agreement on Services
- *Working with the Client and fulfilling their expectations

Learning Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

- *Learn the ground rules for developing a residential clientele
- *Learn how to serve and delight such clients
- *Identify what this market is looking for in professional services and how to effectively deliver such services

Innovation:

There is little information in the marketplace about how to serve a residential clientele, and as a profession we have lost touch with this market. This course will provide participants with thorough and practical know-how on how to serve the residential market with skill.

The seminar is designed for anyone in the profession interested in developing a residential clientele, or simply interested in looking at creative ways to market themselves and/or their firms in an increasingly competitive marketplace. The seminar would be appropriate for anyone from recent architectural graduates to firm principals.

Introduction

Why am I training my own competition?

- my belief that the more people that are out there doing good residential architecture, the more work there will be for all of us.
- this is a largely untapped market

Changing our thinking about the residential market

- perception that this is a segment of the market that is hard to serve
- everyone is interested in houses
- we simply have to serve them differently

Where are the clients and how do you find them?

- they're everywhere
- simply have to be creative about marketing
- stand on a soap box and there are the clients
- lecturing, publishing, market, market, market

What is a remodeling client looking for?

- often trying to evaluate whether to add on or move, so need help understanding costs
- often have very specific concepts of how to add on that really don't meet their needs well
- looking for someone with lots of ideas who sees their problem as interesting
- often hasn't thought about how to reuse existing spaces creatively
- anecdote about the client with the empty living room
- often these are people who would never think of using an architect to design a new house but have some particularly difficult spatial problem.

What is a new house client looking for?

- may have a difficult lot on which to build
- may have read about architects and how to find a good one
- may think that you also do the building
- may be totally confused about what architects do
- may be very well prepared with lots of pictures collected and program written down
- may be quite unprepared and need a lot of guidance to define their goals

Getting the Word Out

Marketing your services

- figure out what you do well that will serve to promote yourself, and pursue this avenue
- could be by belonging to social clubs, working with neighborhood organizations, getting published, speaking in public
- when approaching publication, remember that all editors are looking for stories, but they aren't going to call you because they don't know what you are doing. So **CALL THEM!**
- advertising
- reprints
- postcards

What vehicles exist and how well do they work?

- newspapers--attract local interest
- magazines--attract national interest
- public speaking--attract local interest, usefulness depends on your ability to connect with audience and size of audience
- remember that what you talk about is what you will attract more of
- don't be too bashful. You have to toot your own horn

Understanding the Process

What happens when an architect is NOT involved?

- most people don't know that architects are an option.
- we are perceived as only offering services for the above \$500,000 construction cost client
- so client contacts a house designer, or a builder
- often people believe that their design is "done" with a sketch they made on a piece of graph paper.
- they just need someone to draw it up they think
- common question is "How much will it cost me for you guys to draw up a set of blueprints.
- this is the typical process when an architect is NOT involved
- builder does a design which is usually free, or for a nominal fee which doesn't cover his costs
- he is using the design service as a way to secure a project

or

- a client may have a set of plans from a magazine, purchased for \$400--\$500, and they

just want to make a few changes

--these are often made by the selected builder

--so construction usually starts very quickly after a project is conceived

--in these situations the builder is in charge of the process, and he is used to a fair amount of autonomy

--in either case the builder and client are used to a very simple set of drawings, with minimal information about the third dimension

--contractual relationships between client and builder are often minimal

--there's a lot of trust involved

Understanding the residential builder's needs and expectations

--there are different types of builder in the market place

--it's important to understand the type of builder who will be building the project

--the client may also need advice as to the type of builder to be looking for

--this depends to a significant degree on the level of detail and control that the client desires

--many residential builders are not used to highly detailed drawings.

--they think of drawings as guidelines rather than the way things must be built

--there are also many builders who resent the architect's intrusion into their relationship with the client

--there are also builders who work only with architects and for whom a detailed set of drawings is very desirable.

--it's important to develop a "meeting of the minds" about communication during construction, and about the responsibilities of each party.

--in our office we try to form as positive a relationship with the builder as possible, recognizing that a good builder has a lot of experience and know how to contribute

Achieving an Agreement of Services

Learning to listen to the client who is not conversant with the architectural process

--it's important to listen between the lines to find out what the client's expectations are

--it's also important to explain to them what options an architect can offer them

--frequently they aren't aware of the variety of services available

--they also rarely understand who they need to participate in their project. Do they need an interior designer, a kitchen designer, a landscape architect, etc.?

--your role to start with is to educate

--our process is mumbo jumbo to the average new client.

--stay away from jargon when describing the process

--use tangible end points to explain the ends of each phase of the work, to avoid

ambiguity

- be realistic about describing how long the process takes and what the costs are
- the most frustrated clients are those have been promised something unachievable. People almost always eventually appreciate an honest assessment of what they need, even if initially this doesn't coincide with their expectations.
- remember that you want an end result that delights the client, and of which you are proud

Educating the client about the variety of services an architect can offer

Determining the Spectrum of services that you feel comfortable offering

- every architect is different in this respect
- if you are a conceptual thinker and don't really enjoy getting into minutia of people's lives, you will want to offer different services than if you are a very detail oriented person who wants to be involved in everything, down to grout joint alignments and lighting control systems.
- remember that you will attract people who respond to the message you are sending out in your literature, so if you tell people that you can help save them money, you will attract people for whom this is important.
- get something in writing so that the prospective client can take it home to review

Working with the Client through Construction

Fulfilling the client's expectations

- one key aspect of fulfilling expectations is to let them know what to expect
- communication is of the essence
- let them know that money is always the most difficult part of the process
- let them know what kinds of drawings will be produced when
- let them know when you need their input and what sort of input you need
- check throughout the process of design that their expectations are being met. How? Just ask them. This gives them the opportunity to tell you when all is not well, and gives you the opportunity to learn what it feels like to be a client
- take criticism gracefully, and tell your client how you are going to put to use what they have told you, or how you are going to modify your process in the future. It's always better to let them feel that they have helped you, rather than get defensive and angry

Preparing the client for the inevitable frustrations associated with the construction process

- prepare them ahead of time for the hard parts about the construction process, especially

with remodeling, where the builder is IN their house ten hours a day

--discuss things such as:

- *how a house seems to change scale as the construction proceeds the purpose of a contingency budget;

- *how a house changes in light quality--sheathing absorbs light, while sheet rock reflects it. (Many people get worried that they don't have enough windows during the sheathing phase);

- *the discomfort and messiness of the sheetrock taping and sanding phase, when living in the house during the construction process

--explain why your services are important during construction if the house is to be built as shown in the drawings

--make sure that it is understood if a change is planned by either client or builder, that you need to be informed. Most clients do not realize that an apparently simple change can affect a lot of as yet invisible details that will affect the overall integrity of the finished project

Playing the Role of Trusted Navigator

Steering the project from start to finish

--recognize that most clients have hired you because they want your expertise to help guide the process as smoothly as possible

--if you feel they are making a mistake, tell them--as diplomatically as possible of course.

--they need to be given the opportunity to learn from your previous experiences.

--talk about the costs involved at every meeting. Don't ever assume that there is an understanding that the budget has been increased. Get it in writing!!!!

--if the project is getting bigger, due to client requests, attach approximate dollar costs and associated fees to these increases, so that they always have current information of the approximate scale. This is ALWAYS the hardest part of what we do, and we need to take this role very, very seriously.

--recognize that through the process of design you are dealing with both treasured dreams and the hard realities of dollars and cents. They seldom coincide, and it is your job to help bring the two together.

--try always to spin things in a positive direction. Your client wants to know that you like their ideas, you like their site, you like their tastes, etc.

--the true sign of a happy client is one who refers their friends to you. You steered them successfully through their construction project, and now they want to help make you a success.

--because architects specializing in residential construction have a large volume of clients to survive, the more referrals you get, the better off you'll be, so make sure every client is a happy client.

What everyone is looking for:

--someone that listens well, is willing to work flexibly, brings a positive spirit to a project, and illustrates a command of their discipline.