

Finding the Plan that's Right for You

By John Gower & David Dobie

In my last article I discussed the steps involved in creating a Site Development Plan for your rural lot or acreage. Today I want to look in more depth at a subject I briefly touched on there: Now that you are ready to build a house or recreational retreat in the country, how do you go about finding a plan which best suits your needs?

Basically, when building a new home, cottage or cabin from the ground up, you have three choices: you can design it yourself, perhaps using books, other plans or the help of building professionals for guidance; you can select and order plans from one of the numerous sources available; or you can hire a professional building designer to prepare a design and drawings based on your site and personal specifications. Each option has its own advantages and limitations, as well as cost implications. In a moment we will look at them in turn.

Firstly though, we need to revisit an old debate, namely, which comes first - the property or the plan? As I suggested last time, if you ask me or any other architect or building designer the answer is invariably the same: purchase the lot first, then buy or develop a plan that fits it. There are many reasons for this but principally it is because, outside of dense urban and suburban tract developments, most sites are to a greater or lesser degree unique. This means that each site has both unique opportunities - such as views, special landscape features and vegetation - which the home should take advantage of and celebrate, and unique challenges or constraints - like issues of privacy, steep topography, or solar orientation - to be ameliorated by the design of the dwelling to be placed there.



The site and its surroundings have much to contribute to the creation of a design. Not only are there views to consider, but the site's topography can propose the best way to approach the house and where to locate outdoor living spaces, thus affecting the interior layout. The path of the sun through the day will suggest the optimal placement of rooms and windows. Slopes, landforms and climate can also influence the design of roof style and pitch as well as detailing and materials. In addition, there exists in most places an architectural legacy of other existing buildings that can provide many clues as to what will look "right" in that location. Conversely, home styles that are quite appropriate elsewhere in the country, often translate poorly into a new locale.

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If you do have a plan already picked out or drawn up that you are dying to build regardless of the site eventually chosen, at the very least you should be open to adjusting the orientation (perhaps by "flipping" or mirror imaging the plan) and reconsidering the rooflines, window treatment, and exterior finish materials and details in light of the architectural precedents you will find around you. Better still, do a careful evaluation of the things that appeal to you in your plan and then design a new home that integrates these features into their actual surroundings.

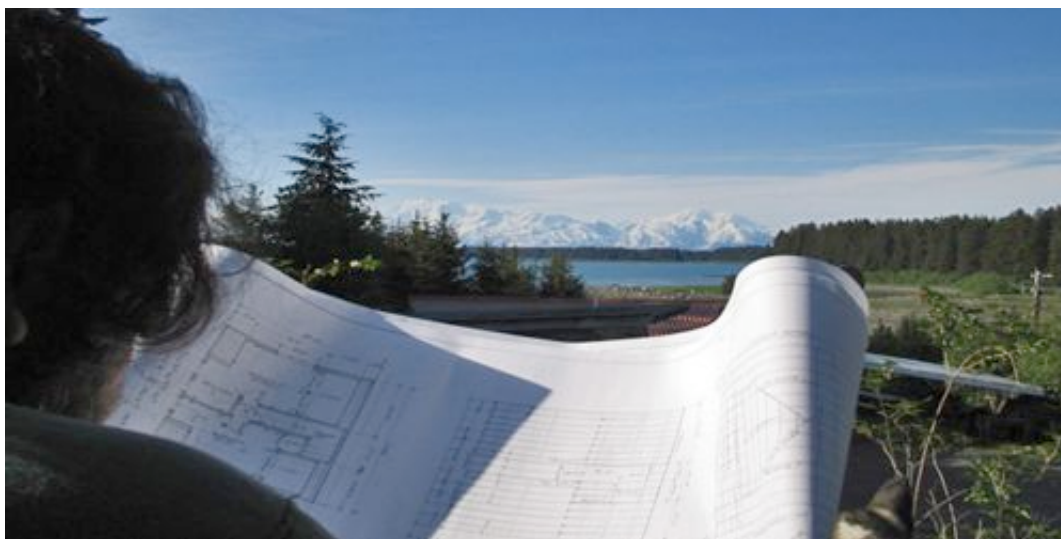
Doing it Yourself

For many people, designing one's own home is the fulfillment of a long-standing fantasy. It does seem so simple and natural, for who better knows what you want than you? When it all works out it is indeed deeply satisfying to look around and say, "We created this!" and know that a part of you lives in the walls and spaces around you. Then, if you subsequently go on to build the house yourself, you will (hopefully) know how it all goes together.

If you set out to design your own home, one of the first things you may notice is the overwhelming range of options you're confronted with for room layout, roof lines, window placements and finish details and so forth. How do you begin to evaluate what ideas work and what do not?

One way is to pay a designer or architect for an hour or two of their time for a good solid critique and suggestions on where it might be improved. You'll be surprised at how helpful a different perspective can be.

Another very good resource and a source of consistently practical and intelligible information on home design is "A Pattern Language" by the architect Christopher Alexander and colleagues. It lays out a series of concrete design suggestions for the function, flow and appearance of houses, which correspond well to the way we tend to experience and live in them and which can almost be a "how-to" guide for thoughtful home design.



When choosing the do-it-yourself route, be prepared to do lots of this kind of homework, for your level of knowledge and competence in construction and design - as well as your ability to translate your concepts into reality (your visualization and drawing skills) - will have a great bearing on your eventual success. Since it's something you may do only once in your life you don't get a lot of chance to practice.

You might also want to check your early design sketches with an experienced builder. There are many tricks of the trade that can dramatically simplify and reduce the cost of construction; without this sort of feedback you can wind up needlessly spending many thousands of dollars extra - far more than you would have paid for a custom design from an experienced professional.

Once the general design has been worked out, most people will take their completed sketch plan to a drafting service to have construction drawings prepared. This too will provide an invaluable opportunity for feedback and refinement of the design and indeed, many of the remaining problems do get worked out at this stage. Throughout the whole process it's good to try to cultivate humility and be willing to hear, and learn from, others.

Where resale is a concern, remember that one person's masterpiece is very often another's "handyman's special" and try to avoid those extravagantly personal (and expensive) flourishes that the next owner will probably want to remove immediately. Be aware of the pitfalls that can await couples that do it themselves; co-designing a home requires close cooperation and partnership so that both parties feel empowered in the decision-making process - or one of you may end up living in your dream house by yourself! Finally, you should keep in mind that you get what you pay for; while in monetary terms this may be a relatively inexpensive way to get your plans, they are only as good as you are, and the results are going to be around for many years to come.

Using a Stock Plan

If you find the do-it-yourself approach daunting, and are apprehensive about hiring a designer or architect, you may opt for the solution chosen by the vast majority of new homeowners: buying a stock plan. With the large number of house plan books, magazines and Internet web sites available, there is a wide range of options to suit your budget and taste, and stock plans, because they are mass-produced, can be quite inexpensive to purchase. Looking at plans can help you define what you want, and don't want, in a house. Also, these designs - the simpler ones anyway - often employ very basic construction techniques that are familiar to builders and building inspectors, and can be among the least expensive structures to put up.

Bear in mind though, the same qualities that make a house design popular can also have a down side - such homes are frequently geared to curb appeal, with more focus on flavour-of-the-moment features than on good space planning, interesting detailing or enduring lines. Think not only about how the home looks now but also how it will look in 50 years, when it reaches the middle of its life span. Is it going to be an asset to the landscape? Be aware too that plans ordered from out of your region frequently fail to meet local building code requirements and must be engineered or redesigned. Similarly, these homes tend to be designed for a "generic" flat site that is hard to find in many areas and to build them often requires extensive (and expensive) site modification.

Since they are designed for a generic client as well, stock home plans in most cases lack attention to detail and provide only rudimentary ideas for finishing interior spaces or exterior detailing. With this lack of references to local building styles or personal features, in most cases you have to fit into the house, the house doesn't fit you.

If you do decide to go this route there are a few things to look out for in a plan. If one is available, you may want to purchase a "study plan" (a simplified set of basic drawings) before committing to the full plan set. This will provide a much more accurate picture of the home than the tiny illustrations in the catalogue. Also, since few people are experienced enough in plan reading to be able to draw a fully formed three-dimensional mental image from the plans, many are surprised when they see the final product built. If at all possible, it is by far the best situation when you have an opportunity to actually visit the model you are thinking of purchasing before making the commitment.

Of course the plan you choose should meet your requirements for number and sizes of rooms, overall square footage and orientation to sun and views, and should fit with the way you will live in your new rural surroundings. Think about whether you'll need a mudroom, adequate storage for outdoor gear, outdoor living spaces, access to gardens and landscaping as well as privacy and security. Hopefully the style is appealing and harmonizes well with the surrounding area.



Good stock plans should provide a fair amount of detail, particularly important if you are planning to build the home yourself. Look for framing diagrams, numerous cross-sections and structural drawings, and make sure there are no areas of the home that are not well documented in the drawings.

Hiring a Designer

If you can't find a stock plan that works, haven't the time or the inclination to design your home yourself, or wish to celebrate your site with a truly exceptional and unique dwelling, you should consider the third option: the design professional. When you hire a designer or architect to create the plans for your new home or cottage, a different level of opportunity and insight becomes available.

In this process you express your needs, ideas and desires to someone who has the expertise to translate them into an attractive, practical and well-built structure, while keeping an eye to your budget, and personal style and taste. Most importantly for our discussion, designers are familiar with the nuances of fitting clients harmoniously into their sites, and for this reason it is worthwhile to bring them into the process early on, even before buying the land if possible.

Working with a design professional lets you the client participate in the development of concepts and the resolution of problems which can go further than what you may have originally thought possible. And there are other, practical advantages of this relationship too. Designers have more immediate access to building products and up-to-date technologies and are familiar with building permit and variance procedures to deal with the bureaucracy of obtaining approvals. The designer-client relationship allows for an open dialogue between all parties right through to the construction phase which can disarm volatile situations, with the designer being an advocate for the client.

Of course, not all architects and designers will have the right combination of skill, knowledge, and personality to fit compatibly with the requirements of a particular client. When interviewing one for your project you should therefore be as aware of their communication and people skills as their portfolio of finished work. Also, since the development of a custom home does involve a lot of work, the process may take more time and cost more money than the other options.



As a client, you will be required to commit fully to the project. This means participating in decision-making and being willing to consider different and potentially challenging alternatives. Hiring a design professional can provide a dramatic new perspective but it does not absolve you of some responsibilities - you will still be expected to communicate your wishes and feelings clearly, make a lot of decisions, and have fun in the unique experience of creating your home.



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