

# DESIGNING

*Your*

# PERFECT

# HOUSE

LESSONS

FROM

AN

ARCHITECT

WILLIAM J. HIRSCH JR. AIA

Best Book, USA Book News • Gold Medal Indie Book Awards  
Silver Medal ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year • Bronze Medal IPPY Book Awards

# DESIGNING *Your* PERFECT HOUSE

A series of twelve "lessons" from a master architect, this book will show you how to move from wonderful concepts to a finished dream home. It begins with an exploration of the philosophy of design, the grammar of architecture, the creation of space, and discussions of how to make spaces be appropriate and gratifying for the people living in them. Subsequent discussions address such issues as symmetry and composition, flow, light, zoning, and orientation. The final sections follow the process through site analysis and selection, programming, schematic design, style, room relationships, controlling the budget, and methods of contracting for the construction. Throughout, color photos and drawings illustrate the book's major points.

If you are considering a custom home, then *Designing Your Perfect House: Lessons from an Architect* will be an invaluable tool for helping you think through and participate in the whole design and building process. It will ensure that your expectations are realistic and that you understand how to work with an architect to achieve your perfect home.

**William J. Hirsch, Jr. AIA, NCARB**, is a Registered Architect with thirty years of experience. He has extensive experience in custom residential design, as well as in the design of commercial, office, religious, recreational, and industrial buildings. He is a member of the American Institute of Architects and past president of the Delaware Society of Architects. He received his Master of Architecture from the University of Virginia. Hirsch believes residential design is a very personal and emotional process that has to express the personality and needs of the owner, not the architect. His practice is located in Cary, North Carolina, where he lives with his wife Maureen. They have four grown-up children.



Dalsimer Press, Inc.

[www.designingyourperfecthouse.com](http://www.designingyourperfecthouse.com)

***“This book is an excellent guide for anyone wanting to design the house of their dreams.”***

Sarah Susanka, FAIA, architect and author of *The Not So Big House* series, *Home by Design*, and *The Not So Big Life*

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***“I just finished reading your book, and I loved it! Very helpful, very well written, and very smart. Sadly, I am one of those people who cannot afford to hire an architect, so I very much appreciated your tips for helping my home feel right. Thank you!”***

Trish T., Minnesota

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***“Mr. Hirsch, I love your book. It puts into words all the things I couldn’t when viewing houses! Your book and your advice have helped me immensely...you should have a TV show...you really hit the mark!”***

Cathy Beville

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***“Hirsch explains in a friendly, conversational tone many critical design components that may not be obvious to most people—for example, what it means to make a space comfortable for humans or the importance of scale in room design. It becomes clear that we intuitively understand these concepts but never had them articulated before.***

***Designing Your Perfect House consists of twelve chapters or ‘lessons’ covering topics such as choosing a home site, finding an architect, and figuring out a budget, but this really isn’t a ‘how to’ formula. Hirsch delves into many fine points of building not just a great house but a house that’s perfect for its occupants. His experience working with first-timers and sensitivity to both architectural concepts and the emotions involved in home design make this an excellent read for those in the trade and would-be home owners.”***

Luise Bolleber, *ForeWord Magazine*

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***“I recently read your excellent book, *Designing Your Perfect House*. I have read numerous books on house design and building, but not found any that so effectively integrates design philosophy and practical considerations. The discussions of spatial relationships provide very good guidance. Your sidebar checklists are also very helpful. You have done an exceptionally good job. I thoroughly enjoyed the book. Good work.”***

E.J. Ritchie, Houston

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***“Your book has helped me so much; it was the best investment I ever made! Your advice has been invaluable, and I just want to thank you for sharing your design knowledge with us.”***

Luci S., New Jersey

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***“I like the first sentence of the Preface. Hirsch says ‘This book is for people who care enough to create a house that is uniquely their own.’ The important words are ‘care’ and ‘uniquely their own,’ and throughout the book he focuses on ways for homeowners to do just that—create a home that not only suits their lifestyles but one that is magical yet comfortable and livable.***

***This is such a good book! I’ve seen many, but not one as detailed and user-friendly as *Designing Your Perfect House*. Hirsch certainly is providing a guide on creating a house that becomes a home.”***

Irene Watson, *Reader Views*

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***“It was a real pleasure reading your book in preparation of building our own house (in Switzerland). I loved your photos, clear examples, and easy flowing writing style.”***

RLS, Switzerland

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***“I am enjoying this book a lot. I go back and forth to it. After which I had the privilege to know you Bill. Thank you for such a good book.”***

Mohamed A., UAE

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***“This is a definite must-read for anyone building a house. It opened up a lot of dialogue between the two of us regarding our lifestyle and how we envision the house...the flow, the individual rooms, the light/sun, the terrace, and pool area...and the thousand other details mentioned in the book.”***

Rochelle and Steve Prystowsky

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***“This book is a must-have for everyone who plans to build a home. [Hirsh’s] book is an invaluable tool to guide the way.”***

Tracy Gibson

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DESIGNING  
*Your*  
PERFECT  
HOUSE

LESSONS FROM AN ARCHITECT

WILLIAM J. HIRSCH JR. AIA

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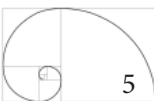
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*Envision a House*

*Built to stand the test of time*

*Meant to be the home*

—Matt Hirsch





## *Acknowledgements*

Endless thanks go to my wife, Maureen, for her unwavering support and valuable suggestions. I also thank our children, Kristi, Dan, Ben, and Matt, for patiently listening to me tell them how this project was actually going to be a book some day.

I could never have written a book like this without having the chance to gain knowledge and experience. For that knowledge, I thank the former Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, the late J. Norwood Bosserman. He stood by me when few others did. For my experience, I thank each and every one of my wonderful clients. None of the projects you see and read about in this book would have ever become a reality without them. They taught me much.



*The large mirror is a treasure from the owners' years when they lived in Holland. The mantel is newly made with details and materials to match the mirror, making a unique and dramatic statement in the great room.*



*Anything is possible for Your Perfect House. In this example, a roofline reminiscent of French Second Empire style is combined with a southern front veranda to create a compelling and unique style all its own.*



## *Preface*

This book is for people who care enough to create a house that is uniquely their own.

For most people, designing and building a new house or remodeling an existing house is both a very exciting and a very scary endeavor. The thrill of creating your dream house is fantastic. But the fear of the enormity of the task and the trepidation that comes when you consider all the potential pitfalls that lie ahead often send a chill through even the most stout-hearted souls. The purpose of this book is to open your eyes to the world of architecture and to provide you with the guidance and knowledge you need so as to minimize the possibilities of anything going wrong. With some foresight and preparation, the process of designing and building your dream home can be one of the most gratifying and exhilarating experiences in your life.

Over the years, I have designed many houses of all sizes and styles for all kinds of people. In spite of the diversity of personalities, budgets, objectives, and expectations among my clients, their questions were often the same: “How do we turn our ideas into our dream house?” “How do I keep control over a process with which I have no experience?” “What do I need to watch out for?” “How do I make my dream house unique to me and not just another house?”

I had often thought I should write out these questions along with the answers, make photocopies, and pass them out to my new clients as a sort of “primer.” My booklet was to be a sort of “House Design 101,” meant to provide the essential background knowledge, encouragement, and warnings I think everyone should have before spending



such large amounts of time and resources. What was initially going to be that small handout has turned into this book. My original plan was also to include information about the “nuts and bolts” of the actual construction, but because the topic is so large and complex, the manuscript quickly became overwhelming in size. That “nuts and bolts” material may be the topic of a future book. This book, *Designing Your Perfect House: Lessons from an Architect*, focuses on the process and philosophy of residential architectural design, plus advice about how to turn all of your ideas, dreams, and needs into the ideal house for you and your family.

The first part of this book deals primarily with what architects call architectural theory. These are concepts and principles that we work with and worry about but that often go unnoticed or at least not openly discussed or understood by the average person. Chances are you have experienced houses that “get it right” or “get it wrong.” You might have wondered what makes the difference. Let me suggest that it’s not just about the appointments, finishes, and features that a house might have. It’s about the intangibles of good design.

These concepts aren’t difficult to understand, but they are often not obvious to most people. My hope is that by identifying and discussing these topics, you will gain an awareness and appreciation for them. They are the heart of every architectural design that feels right and pleases our senses. I believe that after reading through these ideas and concepts your senses will be stimulated and you will start to see buildings in a different and clearer way.

The second part of this book deals with the pragmatic aspect of residential design. We will discuss how to take the architectural concepts, your desires, needs, and tastes and meld them together into a house that uniquely suits you and your family. We’ll try to work through a process that maintains a level of control over the design and how you and your architect will work together.

As you read through these pages, I hope you will find information to bookmark, underline, and highlight that you will refer back to again and again as you go through the design process. This is not meant to be a story that you read from front to back and then hand to a friend. It is meant to be a ready reference, full of sticky notes and handwritten reminders. This book is meant to be an important tool used to get the job of designing *Your Perfect House* done right.

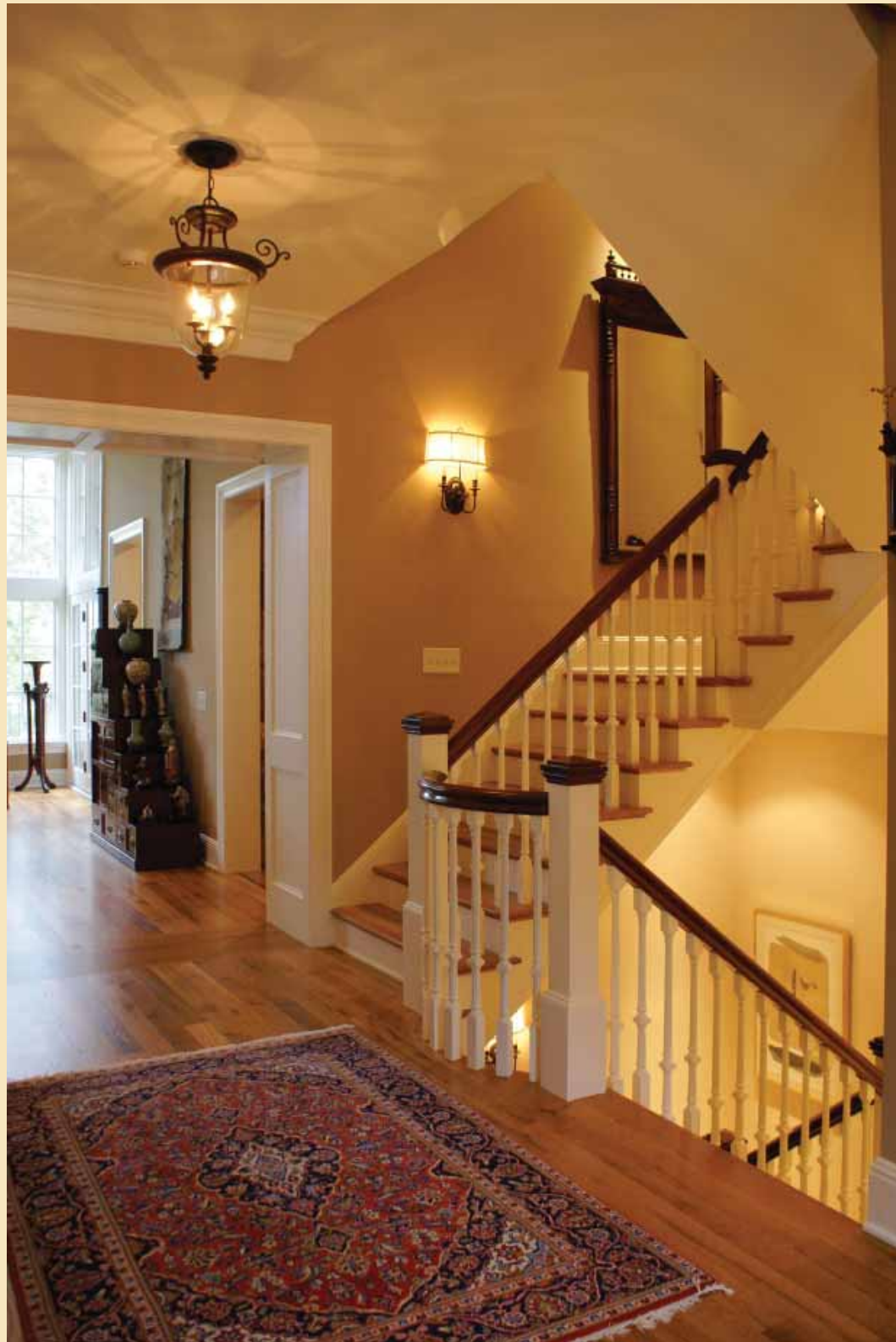
Throughout the book, I refer to your architect. Since I am an architect, I naturally feel that no house should be designed without one. But I realize the majority of houses built today are designed by non-architects, such as home designers, builders, or even the homeowners themselves. In such cases, this book can be even more valuable. Think of this as your “Architect in a Book.”

You will see that I also refer to the architect and builder in masculine terms. I am doing this simply as a stylistic convenience. I think it goes without saying that many fine architects and builders are women. No editorial or gender-related comment is intended.



I wish you great success. Please visit my website, [www.designingyourperfecthouse.com](http://www.designingyourperfecthouse.com), to ask questions, post comments, or find out what's new. Also, please visit my other website, [www.williamhirsch.com](http://www.williamhirsch.com), to see some of my past projects.

Thanks for becoming a part of the *Your Perfect House* family.





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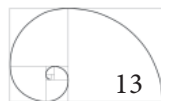
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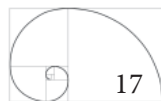
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*This European-style home makes use of a symmetrical central mass to create formality. The cast limestone front door surround announces the central axis of the house. The cast limestone is repeated in the windowsills, jambs, and heads on some windows, but as we move farther from the formal center of the façade, the windows are more simply framed with natural fieldstone.*



## *Lesson One*

# BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

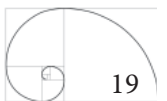
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*“Architecture is frozen music.”*

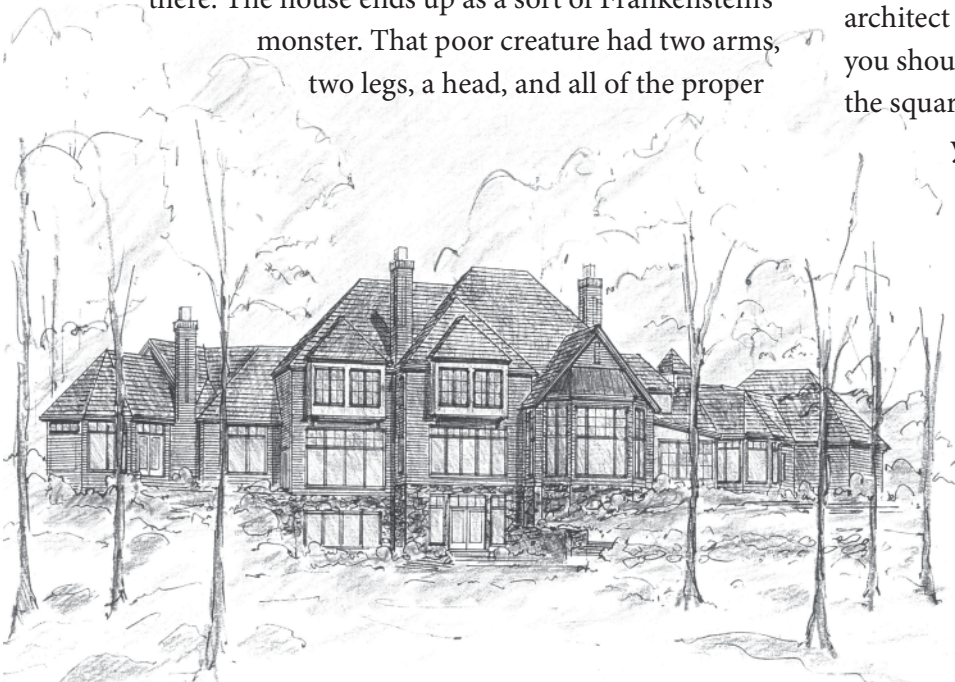
–JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Recently, a new client said to me, “Bill, I want the house you design for me to be the best house you’ve ever designed!”

That’s a natural way for people to think about their “dream” houses, and I hope all of my clients feel their house is the best house I’ve ever designed. But in reality, I think there is no such thing as “an architect’s best house.” The needs and desires of every client are unique, so it follows that each house should necessarily be unique. Your house must be responsive to your individual desires and needs, and it must be a reflection of your personality and lifestyle. Your architect’s goal should not be to design *his* best house but to design the best house for *you*.



I was driving through a very high-end development of custom-designed homes with a client just the other day. She pointed out a house two doors down the street from her building lot. “I hope my new house won’t be like that,” she said. The house was nicely built, but it sat in an uninspiring position on the land, and the design was like something you might pull from a magazine of “1,000 House Plans.” There was nothing actually wrong with the house, but there was nothing right about it either—just like so many houses that are being built today. I assured her that her house was not going to have this bland, plain-vanilla look. Her house would be something more. So, why is it that you can design a house, put all of the right parts together, and still not end up with a house that “feels right”? Something intangible, some mystical attributes and characteristics are not there. The house ends up as a sort of Frankenstein’s monster. That poor creature had two arms, two legs, a head, and all of the proper



organs, but it didn’t come alive until it was jolted with a bolt of lightning. And even then, there was still something wrong with the creation. It still lacked that “something.” The monster lacked a soul.

A house design can share that same perplexing shortcoming. I cannot give you a set of rules to use to make sure your new house has a soul. But I can expose you to concepts of design that will open your eyes to things that will improve the design. I can help you understand the ideas of space and place. We’ll look at a process to use, questions to ask yourself, and issues to consider that will help you make better choices for your house. Add all of this together, add a measure of yourself, add the abilities of an architect or house designer, and your house will certainly end up with the soul you seek.

In this book we will discuss how to select an architect and a builder. We will look at what rooms you should have in your new house, how to tally up the square footage, the pragmatic aspects of turning your wish list into the house of your dreams, the more detailed issues of planning and design, and even the budget. But instead of jumping right into that discussion of tangibles, I would like to start with the conceptual and theoretical aspects of design.

*An architect’s early pencil sketches help him communicate his ideas to his clients. Whether it’s by means of hand-drawn sketches, computer-drawn 3D sketches or models, or physical cardboard building models, it is easier and cheaper to try out a few ideas before actual construction starts.*

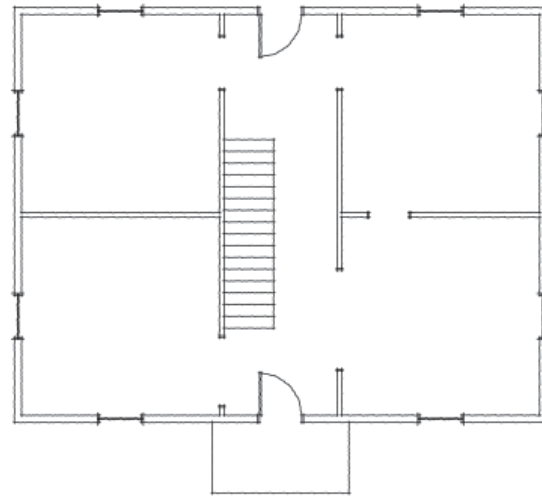
These topics are the subjective concepts of residential architectural design and are often intangible and theoretical. You may find yourself giving more weight to different issues than I might, and that's okay because the things that make a house feel right often have a lot to do with personal preferences and tastes. I jokingly tell my clients this is why Baskin-Robbins has 31 flavors. Not everyone likes pistachio. So please consider these topics in the context of your personal tastes and preferences.

### *The Magical, Mystical World of Feel*

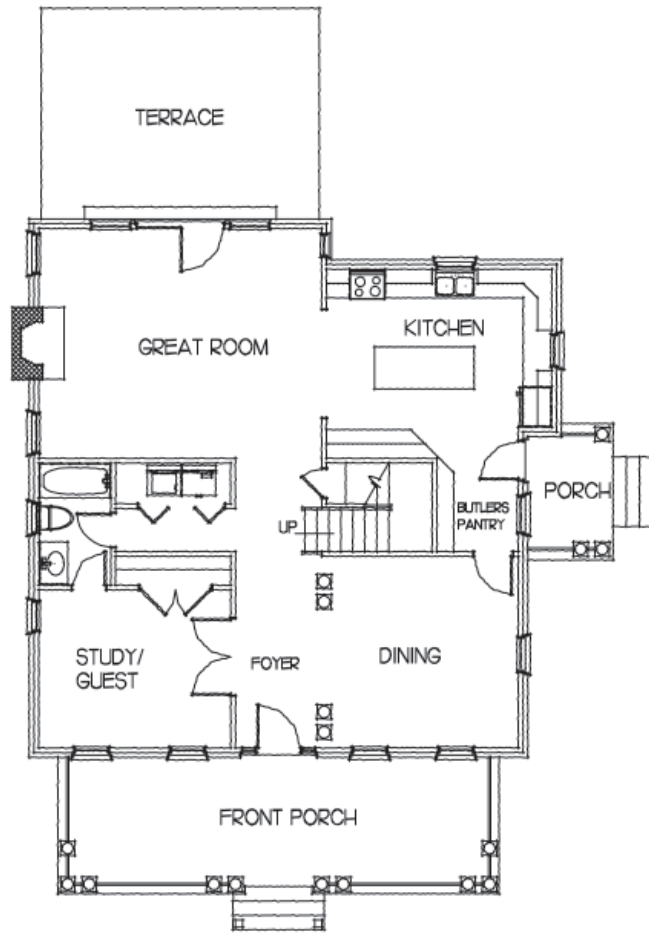
Psychologists tell us that our minds seek order out of chaos. We have an often-unspoken need to connect the things we experience with a system that orders our world. This is the root of our impulse to line things up and balance things, often symmetrically. A successful design must have a concept. It is the skeleton of the architecture. The design concept can be obvious or sublime. It can be classic or radically innovative. Design concepts can employ grid schemes, pinwheel schemes, linear schemes, or hybrids of these. One concept is not necessarily superior to another. What is important, however, is that there is a concept.

There must to be a “purposefulness” to the plan. Probably the most common of these organizing concepts in a house is the classic “four-square” plan. The primary rooms each occupy one of the four corners of a square plan. A central hallway and staircase provide the “connections” between the rooms and the upper and lower floors. Think of the classic Georgian-style house for an example. When you step through the front door of a house like this and stand in

the front hall, you immediately recognize the organizing concept. Because of this recognition, the house seems orderly and properly assembled. You feel things are in their proper place. Although Georgian may not be the style of house you prefer, there is no denying that a house like this often “feels right.”



*Typical Four-Square Plan. Each room occupies a corner of the house, allowing each one to have windows on two sides for better light and ventilation. Often, in the past, fireplaces were located in each room for heat, many times sharing chimneys on either side of the house. Unfortunately, many “development” homes do not have windows on the sides because neighbors are so close. In these cases residents must rely on electric lighting and air conditioning.*



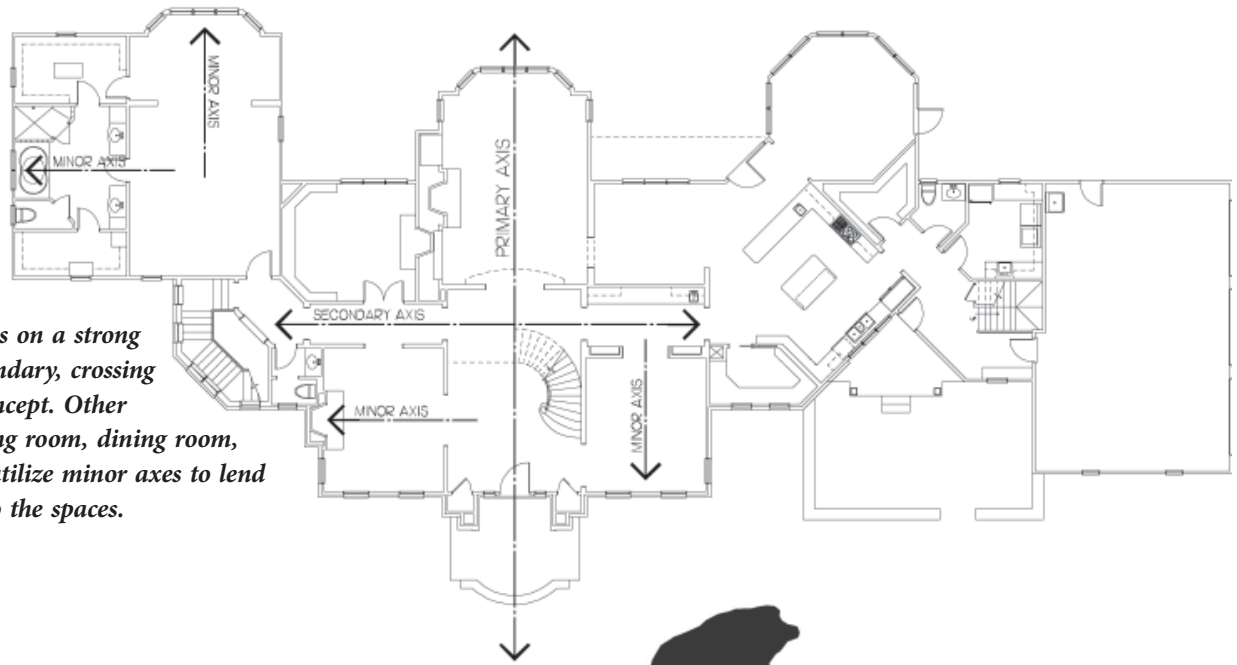
*This plan is derived from the classic four-square plan. Although modified to reflect today's open living preferences, the traditional center hall is preserved, and the rooms still have windows on two sides. This house was designed for a neo-traditional community, and the garages are detached and placed at the rear of the property. Each house was designed with a sizeable front porch facing community sidewalks that promote walking and neighborly interaction.*

A “spine” is an exceptionally strong organizer. We see it in a shopping mall. The main corridor is the spine, or backbone, with stores placed on either side. The same thing is true of a typical city street with buildings, stores, or houses along it and smaller side streets branching off from the main spine. Larger houses with more than four rooms on the main floor often employ a “spine” concept. A house like this might still have the center foyer, but another “crossing” hall that intersects the foyer at a right angle organizes the arrangement of the other spaces that do not connect directly with the foyer. This is a more complex organization than the “four-square” plan, but it is still readily understandable, and order prevails. Various rooms can then be placed on either side of the crossing hall.

It is best to avoid a “crazy-quilt” plan, in which spaces are plopped down almost randomly with no overriding concept of how they fit together. Our brains need to find a reason why things are where they are. More often than not, this is a subconscious realization. A house designed with an understandable concept offers clarity and comfort. You walk into the house and say to yourself, “Ah, I know what this house is all about.”

I am not suggesting you will actually utter these words, but your “inner self” will feel this way, and that is a good feeling. In a house without a logical plan—one with scattered and seemingly random spaces and chaotic relationships of one space to another—you could find yourself mentally wandering aimlessly, never quite able to make conceptual order out of what you are seeing and experiencing,

## LESSON 1: BEGINNING THE JOURNEY



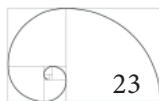
*This complex plan relies on a strong central axis and a secondary, crossing axis to organize the concept. Other rooms, such as the living room, dining room, and master bathroom utilize minor axes to lend a feeling of formality to the spaces.*

rather than moving purposefully from space to space. In a house like this, your inner self would be saying, “I can’t put my finger on it, but I’m uncomfortable in here.”

Our minds are always looking for cues that help us understand our world. We have all had the experience of looking at a photo that was an optical illusion and then, all of a sudden, the picture made sense. Our brains were seeking patterns in the chaos. At some point, the “aha!” phenomenon, as psychologists call it, kicks in: “Aha—here we go! Now I see it!” This sensation that the things we see make sense is also what you want to achieve in *Your Perfect House*. This is the most important aspect of what makes a house “feel right.”



*Can you see the woman’s face? Can you switch your mind around and see the man playing a saxophone? Try to “feel” your brain sorting the marks on the paper, trying to make sense of them and then perceiving either the woman’s face or the horn player. This is a simple illustration of the “Aha!” phenomenon. It happens when our minds seek order from chaos.*



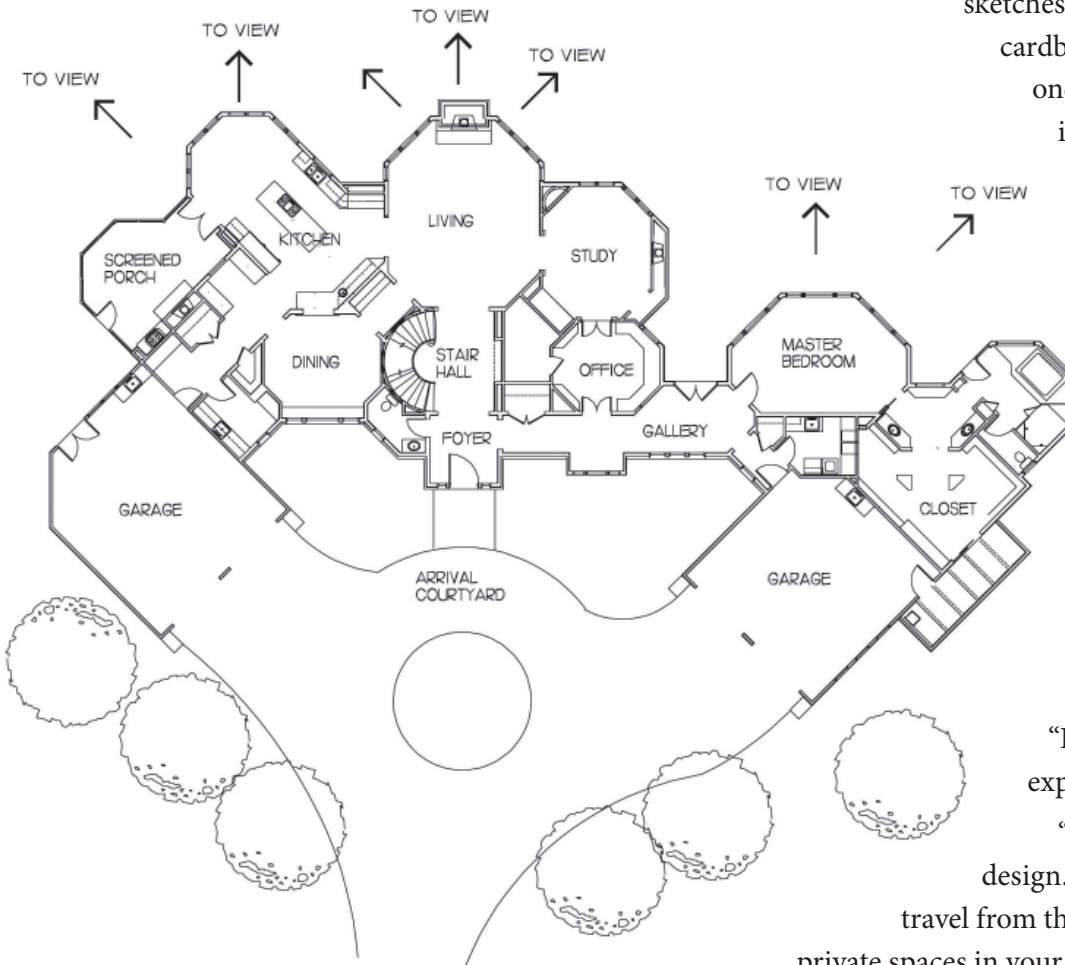
## Your Opinion Counts

When you look at the design that your architect creates, if it seems disjointed or possessed of two personalities, say so. Do your best to evaluate and critique the design as it develops. Discuss your concerns with your architect if things don't seem to be just right. Tell him if you don't understand parts of the design. He can

explain things again, draw additional sketches, and even build models, both cardboard and computer-generated ones. Do not let your silence be interpreted as approval unless you truly do approve. Remember, this is the subjective part. Trust your judgment. Trust your tastes.

Even the best architect's best idea may not fit with his other ideas or with all of your ideas. Don't tell yourself, "My architect drew it, so it must be right." Don't be intimidated. Don't be afraid to say, "I just don't get it. Please explain it to me."

"Live" your way through the design. Trace the way you would travel from the public spaces through the private spaces in your house. You can ask yourself, "Is this the appropriate next place, considering where I am right now?" Think about how you will use each room while looking at the plans and sketches. Try your best to imagine yourself living in the spaces that are only lines on paper.



*This unusual plan stems from the homeowner's fondness for octagonal-shaped rooms and the twenty-mile view from the rear of the house. Situated on a high, steep bluff, the octagonal room shapes give nearly every room a panoramic view as far as the eye can see.*

At the same time, you can always ask, “Do things have to be the way they have always been?” In other words, just because most houses are designed in a particular way doesn’t mean yours has to be designed that way, too. Don’t be afraid to be inventive. After all, we are talking about *Your Perfect House*.

It’s perfectly fine for you to say things like this. It may feel like you are making more work for your architect, but my bet is he will be happy to have your input. I find that I depend on client feedback. Many great ideas are born out of the interaction of an architect and the client. If your house design doesn’t work for you and you don’t say so, your architect will never know. He wants you to be happy with his work. His goal is to design a great house for you.

### *What Is Architecture?*

It might seem simple, but the precise definition of “architecture” has often been debated. During my days as an architectural student at the University of Virginia, we would often critique buildings and try to determine whether they rose to the level of being called “architecture.” The consensus was that Monticello easily qualified, but the standard tract house did not. This was certainly a lofty and esoteric definition of the term. Others might argue that any man-made structure should qualify as architecture, no matter how basic or mundane.

I like to define “architecture” based on what it does rather than what it is. Architecture carves out

individual spaces from the enormity of the universe. This is done by creating edges and points that define a space. What separates architecture from the mere act of enclosure is the purposefulness of the act. A random or accidental creation of space achieved by erecting walls and roof to keep the rain out fails to become architecture if it is done without willful planning and intent. The missing link in non-architecture is a thoughtfulness about the way a building is constructed and how it shapes and defines your life.

Architecture lays a special claim to parts of space, the “insides,” and separates and defines them apart from all of the rest, the “outsides.” Some of the “insides” might actually occur outside, or at least partially outside. A backyard terrace is obviously outside, but when delineated and defined by architectural features, such as stone paving and a low garden wall edging the perimeter, the terrace is separated and claimed from the rest of the yard. As such, it has had architecture applied to it, if you will, based on our definition. It is not simply a haphazard arrangement of furniture in the middle of the lawn. The quality and character of this space are influenced by the details of its surfaces, edges, and orientation. These are a few of the elements we manipulate when we design architecture, and the success of the architecture is dependent on the skillful use of these elements.



## *From Space to Place*

Space is a word architects toss around casually, but it deserves some clarification. There are three kinds of spaces.

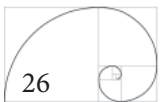
First, there is “boundless space.” This is all space that is undefined. It has no edges. It includes all space with edges too immense or distant to influence us. The sky is boundless space. The open ocean has edges, but we cannot “feel” them except one at a time. Because we cannot perceive its limits, we see it as endlessness.

The second kind of space is “defined space.” This is a space that has discernable edges and is separated from the rest of space. Caves, canyons, and valleys are examples of defined spaces that have been created by natural forces. I call these defined spaces because you know when you are in them and you know when you have left them. Vertical elements like trees define a space around them, as in a mountain glade. The dimensions of that space are proportionate to the height and breadth of the trees. The defined space extends beyond the reach of the branches but eventually yields to the boundless space around it. Think about when you walk through the woods and feel a strong sense of being “in” the space of the forest. That space has been defined by the trees. Cut down the trees, and the space disappears.

The third kind of space is “architectural space.” This is a space that has been purposefully defined by people. The edges of architectural spaces are defined by man-made or man-manipulated elements such as

columns, walls, floors, ceilings, or other material alterations of an area. Conscious, thoughtful design and planning determine the nature of these spaces. Most of our lives involve interactions with architectural space. They influence us in many significant ways, yet we take them for granted, and many people do not understand the impact architectural spaces have on how we feel, who we are, and how we live.

A space can take on a higher status. It can become a “place.” A place is a space that is memorable. Places are spaces you care about. These are spaces that stand apart from the rest. Architectural spaces become memorable through the architectural characteristics that define them. Qualities of scale, appropriateness for people, aesthetics, and visual impact are among the many components that give a place its character and feel. The purpose of a space can make it a place. The Oval Office in the White House is a good example of a place with enormous historic significance. The unique oval shape of this splendid room makes it memorable and gives it a special importance without being ostentatious. Incidentally, George Washington had two rooms at Mount Vernon altered to include bowed ends so he could greet guests while standing in the middle as they circled around him. Thomas Jefferson designed two oval meeting rooms in the main floor of the Rotunda at the University of Virginia. Oval rooms were seen as being democratic because no person could be placed at a more important position in the room than anyone else. It’s only fitting that the most well-known room in our democracy is defined by that very shape.



When we design a house, we manipulate spaces. We determine their shape, size, edges, lighting, and other details, and we design the connections between spaces, controlling how they interact. But the real truth of architecture is the actual perception of the physical form and what it says about the way we live. During design and construction, we attend to the individual parts of the building, such as walls, floors, and staircases, but when a building is finished, we actually respond to the spaces that the physical parts of the building define and create.

## *The Language of Architecture*

Language is a means of communication. One arrangement of a group of letters can mean something quite different from another arrangement of the same letters. Even adding a single letter to a word can change the meaning dramatically. Adding a single “r” to the word “fiend” changes it to “friend.” The letter “r” is innocent enough, but what power it possesses in this context. The assemblies of letters we call words have no meaning by themselves. Their meaning is derived from our experiences and the

An example of an architectural element that is “pregnant with meaning” is the mansard roof. This double-sloped roof, usually including ornate dormers and cornices, was used so extensively in the seventeenth century in France by the architect François Mansart that it was named for him, albeit with a corrupted spelling. In the mid-1800s, during the period known as the Second Empire, use of this majestic roof was revived as Paris was transformed into a city of grand boulevards and grand buildings. These roofs also served a practical purpose of enlarging the useful space of the attics while controlling the height of the cornice line above the street. Today, mansard roofs are frequently used to shield rooftop mechanical equipment on common, flat-roofed buildings. The use of the once-majestic mansard roof has unfortunately devolved to mean “fast food restaurant.”

*Here is a simple illustration of a mansard roof. Look around your community and notice how many bastardized examples of this elegant architectural form you can find. If you are lucky enough to find an example of a good mansard roof, you will have found something worth preserving.*



rich history of human existence, and therein lies their power. Ideas and emotions are conveyed through otherwise meaningless scratches on paper.

Architecture is a language, too. On the surface, the parts of a building must first serve a function, shielding us from the elements and keeping us safe. But as we look past necessary functionality, buildings frame our lives and even convey emotions. Architecture communicates moods. A building can be shy and restrained or it can be flamboyant and boisterous. Some architecture is whimsical, some is serious. Cathedrals are obvious examples of architecture that express devotion and inspire quiet contemplation. Over the history of our civilization, certain forms gain status and meaning. Arches define entrances and passageways. Spires reach up to the heavens. Pillars convey strength. Rhythms, patterns, and curves express the passage of time, energy, and excitement. A sheltering roof expresses protection and safety. Whether we are aware of it or not, architecture speaks to us in a very real way.

Eclectic architecture—that is, architecture derived from different styles—borrows details and elements laden with significance. A professor of mine would often refer to elements that are “pregnant with meaning.” This is a nicely poetic way of saying that past uses of an element have left it with the baggage of its history. Think of a French chateau or a woodland cottage and the architectural characteristics that distinguish these styles. Each is easily identified by certain stylistic trappings. Arched topped windows set in an aging stone or stucco wall and the heavy timber door with hand-wrought

hardware express the strength and security of the classic French chateau. Diamond-paned windows and steeply-pitched hip roofs remind us of paintings we have admired by French masters. By contrast, the steeply-pitched gable roof with the low eave line of the woodland cottage does not so much express strength but rather shelter and warmth.

Modern architecture, particularly the so-called International Style, sought to use elements that were free of meaning. The machine aesthetic was king. The Bauhaus, the influential German school of modern architecture, was trying to create a new language. Despite their purist efforts, it was not possible to create an architectural language totally free of past reference and any underlying meaning. Instead, the elements the modernists used spoke with a cold and inhuman voice to many people. Instead of connecting us to the people who had used these elements in the past and actually created the building parts, we were instead connected to the factories and machines that stamped and milled the steel and glass of modern architecture. I think the recent resurgence of the craftsman style is a clear indication that most of us prefer the warmth and human vocabulary of architectural elements that speak of the people who created them and do not glorify the machines our modern lives depend upon.

## *Architectural Grammar*

If architecture is a language, what, then, are the corresponding parts of speech?

Rooms are our nouns. They are the building blocks of the design. These are the places where



people linger and live their lives. We eat and sleep in rooms. We work in rooms. Each room must appropriately surround and respond to the activity it defines. Rooms for one or two people need to be proportioned to the individual. Rooms that serve larger groups must be scaled accordingly.

Doorways, windows, and passageways are the verbs. They define the action of moving about the house. Doorways connect one room to another just as verbs connect nouns in a sentence. Each house must complete an architectural sentence consisting of nouns and verbs, rooms and doorways and halls. Some doorways are wide and convey a lot of action between rooms. Others are subtle and smaller, expressing quiet movement.

The details of a space are the adjectives. They define and characterize the spaces. The style and details of doors and windows are the adverbs, modifying and enhancing the action between the rooms. Archways cut into a thick wall between rooms express the separateness of the rooms and the formality of the act of passage from one room to another. Sometimes doorways become so large they completely obliterate the edges of the room. When this happens, the verb expresses so much action that the two rooms, or nouns, merge and flow into one another. Full glass walls have the same effect in blurring the line between inside and outside, letting the definition of the space spill out to an outdoor space. Remember that your outdoor spaces are rooms, too.

Sometimes, there is a direct link between spoken language and the three-dimensional language of

architecture. Take, for example, the word “paradise.” It is derived from the Persian word for “walled garden.” In the hot and arid climate of Persia, now Iran, water is scarce, and the hot dry desert is brutal. A walled garden provides shelter and refuge from the wind and usually has a central water source with water flowing in all four directions of the compass. Flowers thrive in this oasis of space that has been carved out of the boundless space of the desert by protective walls. In this case, the language of architecture, the feeling of these gardens and the pleasant emotions they convey, has evolved to become a word in our English language that conveys the same concept.

Special features and accents are the interjections, the “ah!” or “oh!” as it were, of the architectural sentence. Highlights, such as windows that frame views and fireplaces, add this kind of liveliness. One of the most interesting things you can do is introduce something unexpected to the design. Turning a corner and finding a cascade of natural light falling across the floor or a Zen window that offers a peek out at a manicured garden can enliven our experience of a space and simply delight us.

Composed together into architectural sentences, the rooms (nouns), doors and windows (verbs), details (adjectives and adverbs), and the special features and accents (interjections) become the prose of the architecture. Unfortunately, just like in writing, some sentences are doomed to be pulp fiction. *Your Perfect House* can be better than that. It should be destined to become great literature.

