



## The Newsletter for Profit-minded Builders and Contractors

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# Back to Basics: **Improve the Product** by Al Trellis and Paul Sharp

**G**ood residential design is the single most visible aspect of a builder's success, the thing that sets his product apart from those of his competitors. While people talk about quality of construction, and the professionalism of the builder, it's the design of the house itself that people tend to fall in love with.

In attracting buyers and generating excitement, how good are your house plans? Do you offer a portfolio of existing plans, which you modify to particular needs, or are you solely a custom builder, who creates a plan from scratch for each and every buyer? How easy is the design process for you and your clients? And do you use design effectively as part of your marketing program to increase sales and customer loyalty?

A well designed house will be easier to build, easier to maintain, and more cost-effective, as well as more beautiful. It is a sad fact that a poorly designed home, with lots of chopped up living spaces, poorly proportioned rooms, inadequate light and ventilation, can cost as much or more to build than a comparable home that is well thought through.

### Fatal flaws

Fatal flaws are the kiss of death for any residential design – the kinds of things that develop an emphatic “NO” reaction

*Use good design to increase curb appeal and create value. Why build boring, bland, cookie-cutter houses? There's already a glut of them on the market. However, don't simplify construction to the point where you take out all the things that make a home beautiful and desirable, even if they're not structurally necessary.*

from the buyer. Some of the common fatal flaws in today's homes are listed below.

**Lack of specific areas** – If the family needs four bedrooms, and your home only has three, you're out. If they want a three car garage, and you only have two bays, you're out. In some areas and lifestyles, lack of a formal dining room is fatal, in others, they'd prefer to combine it into the great room. Go through your homes and ask – does this home meet all the minimum expectations?

**Room sizes too small** – The right size of the room depends on the overall scale of a home. A family room that's too small in a move-up mansion, may be more than adequate in a starter home. The fourth bedroom in a 3,500 sq. ft. house shouldn't be 10'x10'. In a 2,100 sq. ft. house this is probably what you're going to get.

**Poor circulation** – Homes with long narrow hallways and poor access to major social areas are neither friendly nor

efficient. Sometimes by shifting a few feet from one space to another, you can turn wasted circulation space into useful mini-rooms for sitting, reading, libraries, etc.

**Not enough closets** – Nothing pleases buyers more than realizing they could have significantly more closet space than in their current

home. For move up homes, two large walk-in closets is becoming the norm.

**Not enough storage** – Along with closets comes a need for bulk storage for seldom used items. Built-in pantries and storage rooms are becoming increasingly popular. One of the reasons three-car garages have become so commonplace is that people need the extra space for their stuff, not merely for their cars.

**Not enough light** – There is probably no other aspect of a home that has such a direct effect on our psyche as the light that streams into it. Spaces that are well-lit with soft even light are cheerful. Everyone gravitates to such spaces, and everyone avoids the dark, poorly lit areas of the home.

**Plain vanilla interiors** – It doesn't take much (some crown molding, a touch of color) to turn a public area from bland to grand. In search of saving a few dollars,

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**Back to Basics** – Continued from page 1

many builders reduce their interior spaces to a boring numbness. Numb is dumb.

**Out-of-date kitchens** – So many kitchens are still stuck in the past with the “work triangle” dominating design. Today’s kitchens often incorporate islands with

eating areas and double triangles so more than one person can work simultaneously. The kitchen is becoming more of a social and entertainment center, and less of a purely functional area.

**Lack of work/study space** – With more two professional families, having a place to work at home is increasingly important.

Many new homes have separate offices, (one a work/home management center near the kitchen) plus a place for kids to work/study near the bedrooms.

**Minimal baths** –The master bath has undergone a revolution in luxury and opulence. Double sinks, separate showers, and segmented toilet areas are often minimal expectations.

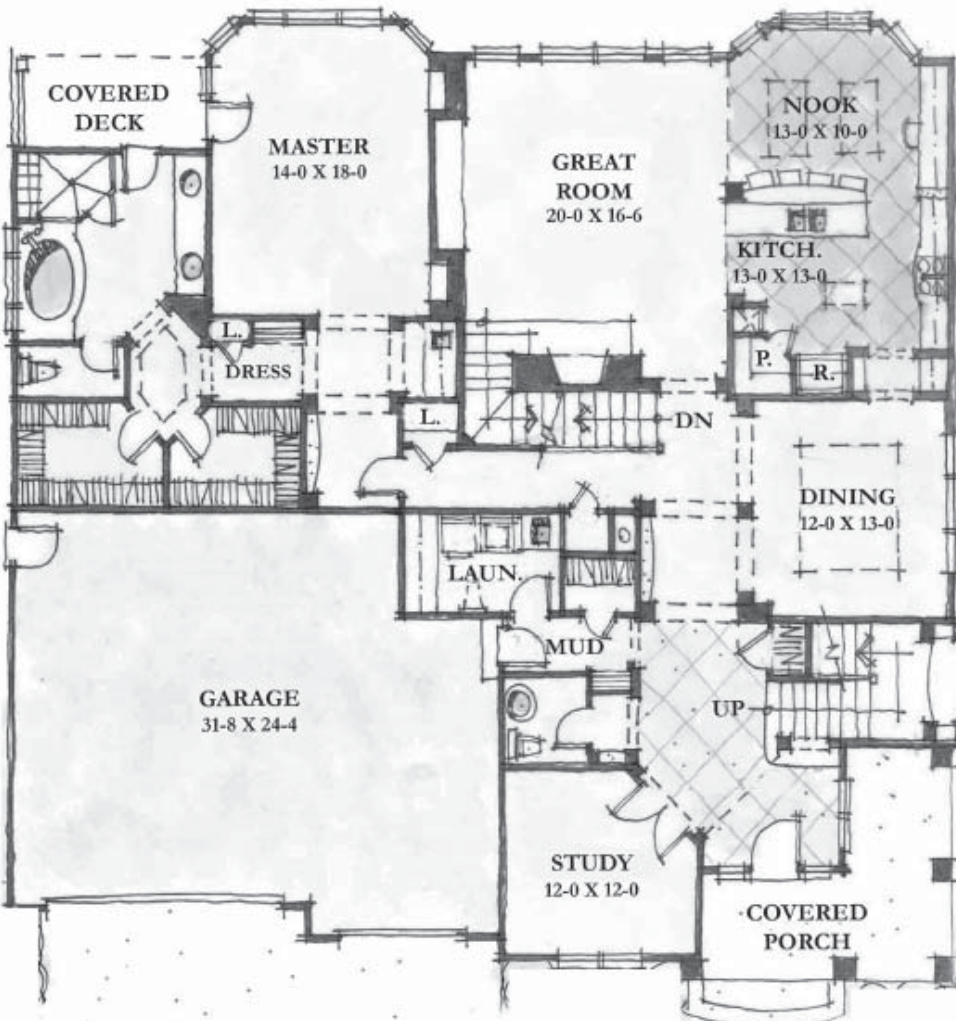
**Lack of good zoning** – Zoning is the placing of appropriate areas conveniently near (or away from) other areas. For example, when children are small, the most appropriate space for their areas may be next to the parent’s areas. However, as they become larger (especially as teenagers) it’s more appropriate to separate the parent’s zone from the children’s zone in order to give everyone a greater sense of privacy and autonomy.

**Exterior review**

People are willing to pay a premium for exterior styling that can set their home apart from their neighbors, such as Craftsman, Country French, Shingle, or Southwest, etc. While you aren’t trying to create a reproduction home, you want to give your buyers a sense of identity, a feeling that their home is a cut above the average, with a sense of grace and charm.

Look at the massing of the home. The home should have an interesting shape and size, without too many ins and outs that can complicate construction. This also affects the roof structure. You want a simple but interesting roof pattern.

Exterior materials should be chosen for their texture, maintainability, and visual interest. A variety of exterior materials is more interesting than a single material. A brick or stone water table, with fiber-



*The main floor plan shown on the left incorporates many of the design ideas discussed in the article. Notice the island kitchen with eating bar and morning nook, the butler's pantry between the kitchen and dining room, the sitting area on the stairway landing, and the double walk-in closet in the owner's suite. The children's area is on the second floor. Floor plan by David Court.*

cement sheathing above can be more interesting and less expensive than an all brick exterior, for example. Artificial stone used sparingly and judiciously can add impact to entrances and exterior focal points.

### Give them a reason to move up

Most home buyers today already live in a home. Unless they're relocating, they usually don't have to buy a new home. The function of the design makeover is to give them a reason to buy, something that their old house doesn't have that the new house does – whether it's more space, a greater sense of interior drama, a more prestigious neighborhood, a more functional or comfortable home, greater luxury, or all of the above.

## Creating the "Value Box"

Improving your product isn't just about creating larger and more luxurious houses. Many buyers are finding that the home they want is no longer affordable. One obvious solution, of course, is to build a smaller or less luxurious home, but a better one is to maximize the value of the home through efficient design and construction.

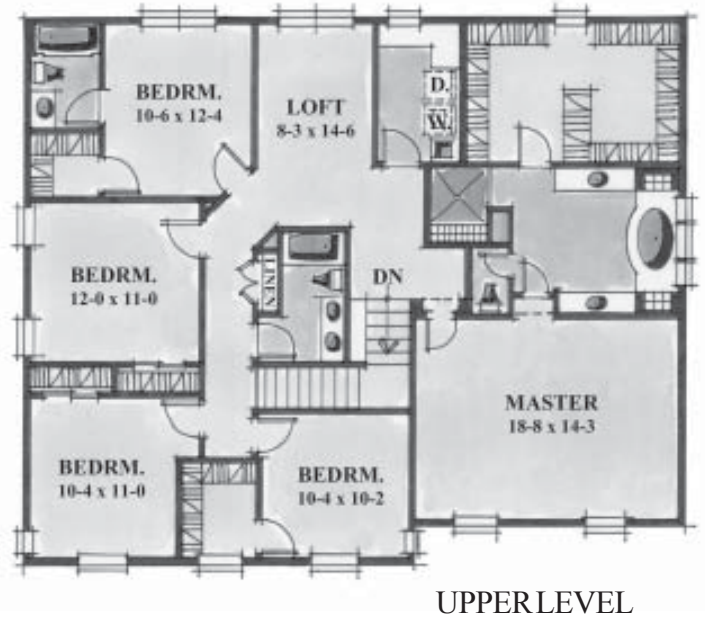
Homes that are designed for value share several characteristics. They are designed efficiently with a minimum of corners in the foundation. The garage is integrated into the footprint of the house, and second story space is built over the entire footprint, including the garage. The roofline is simplified. The trick is doing this without creating a boring "box". Part

of the value of the home is its curb appeal, and "value homes" still must feature interesting exteriors and livable, inviting interiors.

### The solution

If you look at the floor plan below, you will notice that the box is only broken in the front, where the garage is set back (a six corner house). This creates visual interest, while minimizing construction difficulty. By building out above the garage, there is more living space on the second level for four good sized bedrooms, laundry area, "brain space" and loft.

The home shown is from the Design Basics "Value Collection" created by HBN. Floor plan by David Court.



ELEVATION A



ELEVATION B

## Ask AI by AI Trellis

### Enforcing the Contract

**Q**: My employer is a custom builder. He's a very nice man but he despises confrontation. In the past three years we have had four homeowners move in and refuse to pay for their extras after closing. How do I get him to enforce the terms of the contract?

**A**: Your contract should clearly state the expectations for performance and payment by both parties. It should provide for change order payments as construction progresses. If that's the case, why aren't you collecting for these change orders as the job moves along?

All good contracts make provisions for change orders to be paid in advance, immediately upon completion, or at the time of the next draw. If you are not collecting money right away, you are sending several dangerous messages: You do not necessarily need to be paid when entitled; and it's okay for clients to withhold money if they wish.

It is extremely important to establish early in the relationship that both sides must live up to their contractual obligations. Under no circumstances should you surrender control to the client.

The secret is to learn how to solicit money that you are entitled to while minimizing confrontation. Collecting money from clients is a function of several aspects of your business. These include: the contract, which explains when and how you obtain your funds; whether you have clearly explained to the client up-front what his obligations are under the contract and what your expectations are regarding prompt payment; and the enforcement of the agreed-upon conditions. Establish early that you are unwilling to concede on contractual payment arrangements.

None of us likes to fight with clients; however, sometimes it's unavoidable.

## A Pattern Language by Paul Sharp

### Staircase as a Stage

Christopher Alexander wrote *A Pattern Language*, outlining over 250 rules of thumb that affect home design. In this series of articles, we've highlighted some of our favorite patterns.

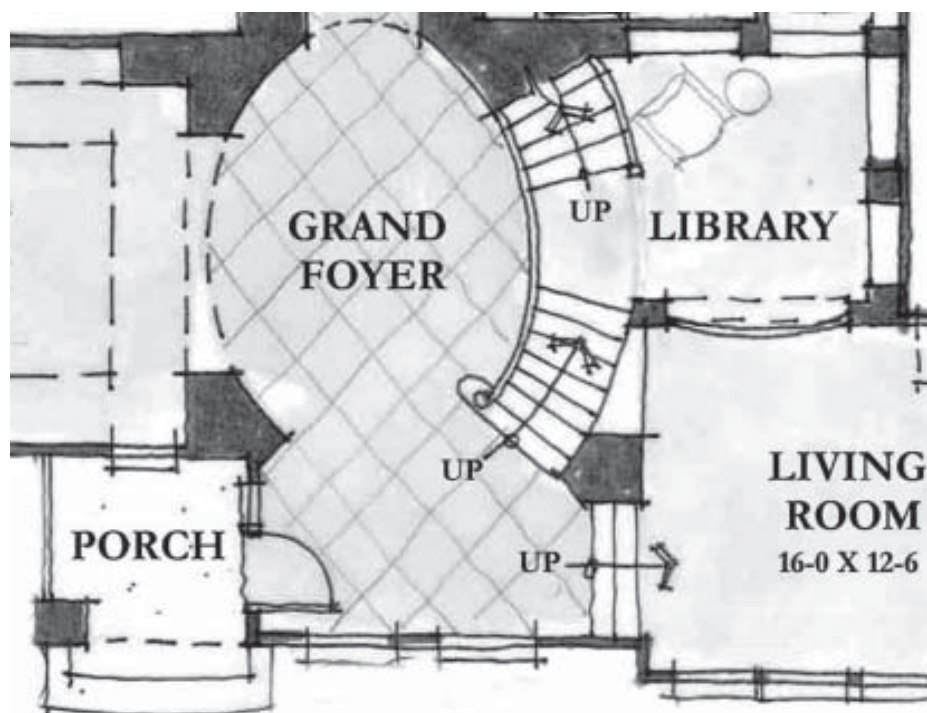
#### 133. Staircase as a Stage

"A staircase is not just a way of getting from one floor to another. The stair is itself a space, a volume, a part of the building; and unless this space is made to live, it will be a dead spot, and work to disconnect the building and to tear its processes apart.

Therefore: Place the main stair in a key position, central and visible. Treat the whole staircase as a room...with the stair coming down around one or two walls of the room."

In the example shown below, the library is up half a level for added interest. Curved stairways are very dramatic, but expensive. A U-shaped stair can be almost as dramatic, at a fraction of the cost.

Floor plan by David Court.



**On the Level** is distributed monthly by your local lumber dealer or supplier.

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#### Quote of the Month

"Firmness is that admirable quality in ourselves that is merely stubbornness in others."

– Gideon Wurdz

**Next Month: Back to Basics: Streamline Selections.** In custom or semi-custom construction, getting the clients to make all their selections in a timely manner can be a major hassle. You can minimize that problem by organizing their selections and presenting all the information they need to make the right choices.