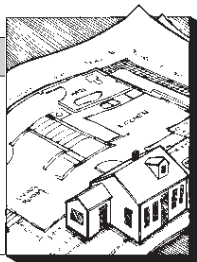


Renovations, Part II Nailing Down A Design

by Gordon Tully



Last month's article dealt with how builders and designers can help their renovation clients gather information and plan a project. Next the professionals must deal with a more difficult problem: How can we help clients define project limits in a reasonable way?

Helping clients with design is much harder than with matters of fact and logic. Design ideas are often based on feelings and are therefore hard to verbalize and change.

What's The Client Really Asking For?

A facetious definition of a "client" is someone who translates requirements, into a foreign language (namely architectural drawings and specifications) to maximize the possibility of being disappointed.

Unlocking their real requirements is often difficult, especially in the absence of a clearly written Master Plan (as described last month). The problem is compounded when the client presents requirements in the form of a specific plan. Not only does their plan obscure their real needs, it makes it difficult to consider alternatives. When presented with design "requirements" by clients, the designer must distinguish between features the clients really want and understand from those they don't fully comprehend or acknowledge.

For instance, don't necessarily accept a client's definition of required space. Suppose the client demands a mudroom. The client must define: What the heck is a mudroom? Who uses it? For what? Does everyone who comes in use it? If not, how do visitors get mud off their shoes? If so, how can you preserve the dignity of entry if visitors must wade through a sea of galoshes and skis?

Don't blindly accept a client's definition of room sizes. Some know exactly the size they want and need, while others are using rules of thumb, or are thinking of resale. By tightening up on other spaces, the designer or builder can sometimes help redefine requirements and improve an important area.

For example, why do people need big bedrooms? With a highly constrained budget, bedrooms are an obvious place to tighten up. With built-ins, drop-downs and bunk beds, everyone can have a neat, cozy place of their own, liberating money for better communal living spaces.

My partner designed a house in London many years ago with bedrooms that were 7x9-feet. Out of half of my own dining room, I made a marvelous guest room measuring 5'4" wide, 11-feet long... and 12-feet high. It has a big glazed clerestory and three huge windows to send light into the rest of the room, which is now a passageway.

Alternatives to Addition and Expansion

Adding to or modifying a space is only one way to solve a design problem.

For example, urban Victorian houses are hard to furnish. Large symmetrically-placed windows with

low sills, wide double doors and elaborate moldings sometimes make it impossible to place ordinary furniture in a room. Our first instinct is to enlarge the room or combine two rooms. Sometimes that is a good solution, but there are other ways to skin this particular cat.

One obvious way is to buy special furniture that fits the difficult room; or

to build seating into a bay window. Here a good decorator can be a real help. Getting rid of free-standing radiators can also liberate crucial space.

Another possibility is to reduce the amount of furniture in a room or change the room's function. Thus a parlor which is too small to work as a living room might revert to its original purpose, a place for small groups to talk. "Living" can then take place in the dining space, family room, or country kitchen.

One of my favorite anecdotes involves an architect friend who was asked to design a play/work room between two siblings' bedrooms. The kids could not agree on which bedroom should house the precious computer, so the main purpose of the new room was to provide a neutral

place to put it.

After a few sketches and a discouraging cost estimate, my friend observed that a second computer would be much cheaper than the renovation, thereby losing a job but gaining a good reference.

Using the Third Dimension

All contemporary designers are aware that height can help compensate for the confining feel of a small room; it is a useful tool in "humanizing" a small house.

Monotonous, flat-ceiling, "authentic" rooms are a result of our emotional attachment to old historic ideas, and are no longer appropriate. Whole towns are filled with center-entrance colonials in need of a thorough re-design to accommodate modern living patterns. These designs continue due to the owner's misguided sense of responsibility toward the past and fear of resale problems.

It is not easy to dissuade a client from insistence on shoebox rooms, especially during a time where historical "accuracy" is important to some. As Frank Lloyd Wright so eloquently demonstrated, the results of breaking down the boxes are well worth the effort.

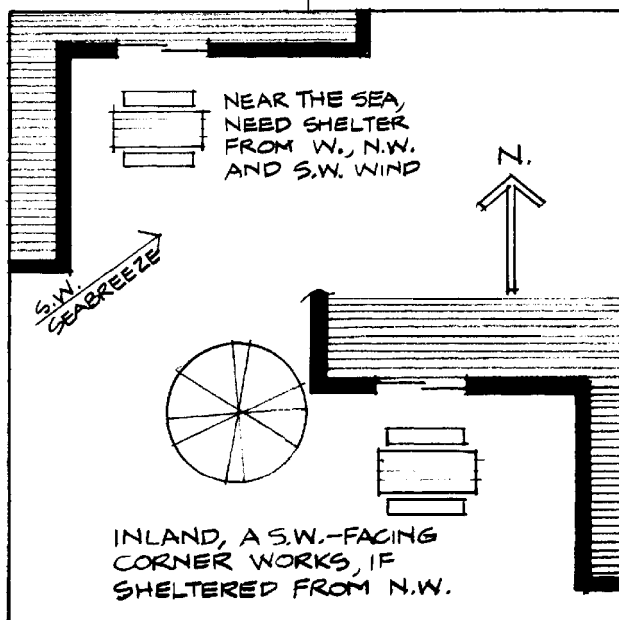
Has Everything Been Considered?

It is the job of a good designer to "look around corners," examine the broad picture, and be sure that nothing of importance has been left out through haste or ignorance.

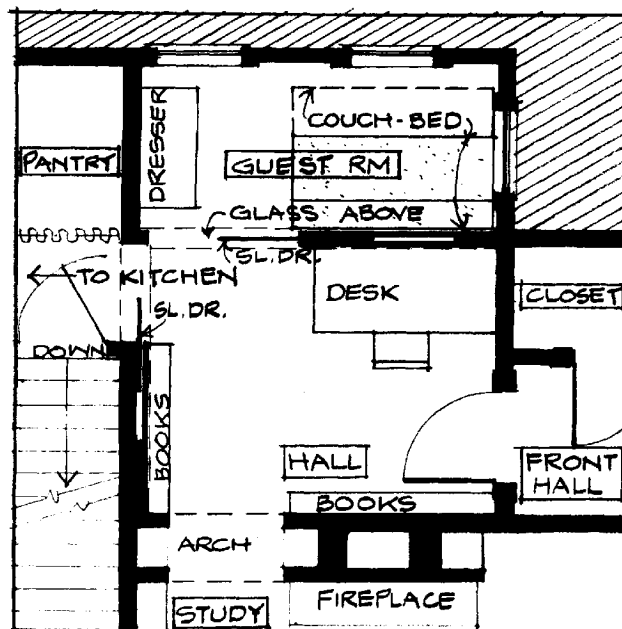
Climate is an example. Any New England resident understands the importance of the sun; newcomers from other climates might not. In my view, it is worth straining a plan to make sure the sun comes in.

In the class I teach at Harvard, we review design student's projects. One participant owned an old house in the suburbs that faced south, backing up to a wooded hillside.

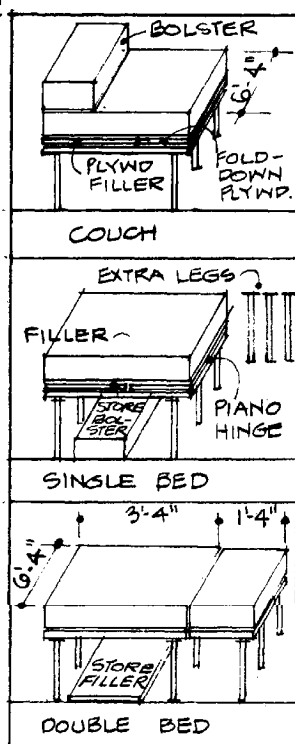
The house was very handsome and symmetrical. So ignoring climate, design, and budget considerations, one might suggest that the extra space be built behind the house. A rear



In many renovations, we create outdoor living space in a "sunpocket," sheltering it from the prevailing westerly wind (southwesterly near the ocean).



Bedrooms are a good place to save space. The dining room (above) became a small guest room, measuring only 5'4" by 11 feet. A convertible couch (right) gives the room flexibility. The foam bolster serves as a mattress extension when a double bed is needed.



addition could suit modern needs without compromising the overall appearance.

While this made *design* sense, the better option was to rebuild the kitchen and expand to the west. This created the needed living space beyond the end of the house, facing south. The wing had to be done carefully to harmonize with the historical details of the house and this solution was more expensive. But building against a north hillside simply didn't make sense to me.

Including a deck or terrace in a "sunpocket" protected from the prevailing wind is another design goal in renovations. With such a feature, one can be comfortable outdoors in the Boston area from late April through late November. Without wind protection, it is nearly impossible to eat outside except in July and August.

Renovation is a complex, ongoing process, in which everyone—designer, builder and client—are learning on the job. It is hard to learn all the facts, hard to imagine all the possibilities, and hard to abandon prejudice. A good way to get the most from the renovation dollar is to coordinate each step with the others and fit them into a Master Plan.

Builders and designers can help clients understand this procedure. Educating your client is a classic way to do well by doing good. By helping your clients clarify their renovation goals, you protect both yourself and them from the consequences of fuzzy thinking. ■

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