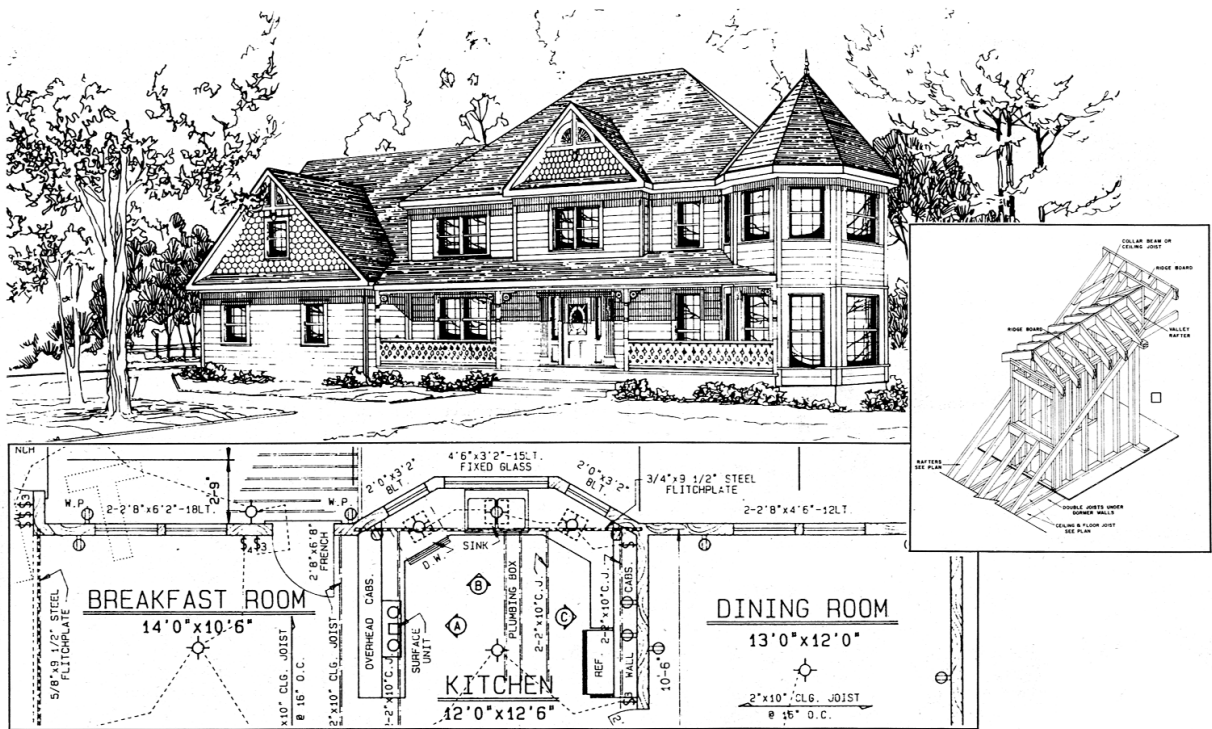




Stock House Plans

by John Wagner

The price is right and the quality generally good. But find out exactly what you get for your money.

Stock-house-plan services are everywhere, it seems. You see stock plans collected in books, sold on newsstands, and promoted in magazines where dozens of services offer mail-order selections. As of 1973, there were only about 25 plan companies, but today there are so many, we've lost count. In Atlanta, Ga., alone, where in 1973 there was one service, there are now 13. Though it has become big business, with about 30 large-scale companies offering nationwide service (some shipping as many as 13,000 sets of plans a year) the concept of stock plans is nothing new.

Before stock plans existed, builders worked with plans found in "pattern books." The first American pattern book, *The Country Builder's Assistant*, was published in 1797 by Asher Benjamin. Though the book contained no elevations or floorplans, it did compile detail drawings of stairs and doorways for builders to copy. In the 1840s, A.J. Downing, a landscape architect, published the first American stock house plans: two collections of elevations, perspective drawings, and floor plans.

Historically, planbooks flourished up until the 1870s, but their popularity declined after the early architectural magazines, such as *Pencil Points*, started to commission and publish house plans as a monthly feature. This continues today and companies as diverse as Sears & Roebuck and the American Plywood Association have tried their hand in the market. Today, the partnerships formed between plan services

and magazines or lumber companies is a tried and true method of sales.

Sales of house plans are split evenly between trade and consumer sales. No national association represents or controls the design plan companies, though some houseplan services staffed with architects are stamped with the AIA seal (American Institute of Architects), and some staffed with registered designers are stamped with the AIBD seal (American Institute of Builders and Designers).

What's For Sale?

For a fee ranging from ninety-five to several hundred dollars, house-plan services ship you a package of goods. What the package contains varies greatly. Beyond the standard required items (foundation plan, elevations, floorplans, and some sections), a plan service may or may not include such items as a materials list, insulation requirements, or three-dimensional construction details. For example, a package obtained from W.D. Farmer Residence Designers, in Atlanta, Ga., contains perspective drawings, elevation, foundation plans, and floorplans. It also includes stair sections, trim details, and wall section. The W.D. Farmer plan service inserts four pages of construction details for a wide range of situations. In these pages, the builder will find two-perspective drawings of everything from most foundation types, framing diagrams, and dormer designs to sundeck, sills, and wall section alternatives. There is a U.S. map that specs

insulation R-values by region, and scale furniture cutouts for arrangement studies.

The vast majority of service do not do electrical, mechanical, or plumbing details, because—the services claim—so much depends on local codes that it would have to be redone locally anyway (although outlet and light locations are often detailed).

Some areas, like Nantucket, Mass., are so heavily coded that builders rarely use stock home plans because of the cost to adapt. For a fee of about \$45, those who do supply heating layouts will locate ducts and vents, and size the heating system. A materials list may be available as well; the cost is between \$15 and \$150, depending on what it contains. Some materials lists, like

Northwest Home Designing's, are just for lumber. Others are more complete. But none can be trusted as a take off for bidding. So check them carefully.

The W.D. Farmer plans are typical of many services' offerings. The original set of drawings, without the materials list and heating layout, is \$140. (These plans are for a 4,700 square-foot home.) For additional sets—you may need as many as six sets, one each for the owner, building inspector, lender, and subs—you pay \$18 each. You may have to buy all the sets at once to get the extra sets at that low cost. (Some services allow a two- to three-month grace period.)

Some plan services have "mylar programs." You can purchase the mylar and the rights to reproduce the plans. For instance, the Garlinghouse Co. in Middletown, Conn., charges \$325 for the rights to three sets of drawing from the mylar, and \$475 for rights to reprint up to seven sets of drawings. The drawings are copyrighted.

Getting the Plans Stamped

A small number of states require a "wet signature" on the plans. An architect, designer, or engineer certified in the state where the plans will be used must put his stamp on them. For a fee, plan services will take care of all of this for you. Some companies, like Texas Home Design, have consulting engineers certified for all fifty states who will bring your plans up to local codes.

Whether you need the local stamp or not, most plans need some extra work to bring them up to code. There is a square-foot charge for the service. Fees vary, but Texas Home Design's consulting engineers charge 25 cents per square foot for structural engineering, and 20 cents a square foot for electrical and plumbing. Often, your own heating contractor will bring your heating and air conditioning into compliance with local codes.

If your plan service does not have a staff consulting engineer or if they cannot refer you directly to one locally, it will probably be difficult to find a local architect or engineer to stamp the plans. Many don't want the liability of stamping plans they did not draw. If your state requires a stamp, get the name of local architects who will stamp the plans. The plan service may refer you to your local HBA chapter; a few phone calls before you buy will save you a lot of trouble.

The Site

Perhaps the biggest problem with stock home plans is the site. As a rule, plan services don't do any site engineering. Those who do charge a fee. You can send in a topographic map and pay an hourly fee for the plan service to modify the foundation details and consult with you on how to position the house for light and view. If you are local, the plan service may offer to visit the site as well. It's not cheap to have site analysis or plan modification done, and many builders choose to build on a level lot for ease of construction. Northwest Home Designing, Inc., in Tacoma, Wash., does site analysis two ways. They'll visit the site before designing the foundation or analyze your topographic map and modify the stock foundation plan.

Troubleshooting

If you have a problem, most plan services offer free consulting over the

Home Plan Sampler

Below is a sampling of companies that offer home plans. All offer catalogues of the plans they sell, and some market their plans through magazines as well. Not all services give you to same items in their house-plan packages, and most offer extras at a cost. Contact the companies in the listing for further information. For a more complete list of home plan services compiled by *The Journal* staff, send an s.a.s.e. to *The Journal of Light Construction*, RR 2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.

W.D. Farmer
P.O. Box 450025
Atlanta, GA 30345
404/934-7380

Basic Package: \$110-\$140. Includes perspective drawing; elevations; floorplans; wall sections; trim details; construction details; foundation options; furniture cutouts; staff consultation.
Extras: materials list (\$35-\$45); heating layout (\$35-\$45).
Comments: Clear and complete construction details come with each package.

The Garlinghouse Co.
34 Industrial Park Pl.
Middletown, CT 06457
203/632-0500

Basic Package: \$125-\$200. Includes perspective drawing; elevations; floorplans; wall sections; trim details; foundation option; heating layout; staff consultations.
Extras: materials list (\$15); mylar program for multiple copies (\$325-\$475).
Comments: 83 years in the business

Home planners, Inc.
23761 Research Dr.
Farmington Hills, MI 48804
800/521-6796
Basic Package: \$125-\$200. Includes perspective drawing; elevations; floorplans; wall sections; trim details; staff consultation; some plans have foundation options.
Extras: materials list (\$125-\$200); electrical layout (\$30); mechanical engineering (\$30); construction details (\$30); mylar program for multiple copies (\$250-\$400); planning kit with furniture cut-outs (\$25).

phone with their staff designers and architects. (Some even fax back sketches to show you where you are going wrong.) Of the plan services surveyed for this article, none reported any area of predictable or consistent trouble for builders.

Barry Burney, an Atlanta, Ga. builder, builds spec homes with stock plans. He reports, "no problems with stock home plans. I work with a level site, so there is no modification needed for foundations."

But, he warns, "some stock plans are easier to work with than others. Look for plans that give you room dimensions, outside-to-outside and outside-to-inside measurements. Otherwise it can be hard to figure exactly where to put your interior walls up."

"Some plans," Burney continues, "give you *too many* measurements because they are trying to cover so many bases. I've used a number of stock

Comments: Construction details "geared toward novice builder" available for \$30.

Homestyles Plan Service
6800 France Ave. South
Minneapolis, MN 55435
612/927-6707
Basic Package: \$160-\$310. Includes perspective drawing; elevations; floorplans; wall sections; trim details.
Extras: materials list (\$30); rough electrical layout (\$10); plumbing layout (\$10); foundation conversion drawings (\$5); mylar program for multiple copies (\$225-\$310).
Comments: Claims the largest variety of home plans available.

Alan Mascord
1515 NW 23rd Ave.
Portland, OR 97210
503/225-9161
Basic Package: \$220-\$250. Includes perspective drawing; elevations; floorplans; foundation options; wall sections; trim details; staff consultation.
Extras: site analysis (\$40); mylar program for multiple copies (\$500).
Comments: Furniture cut-outs available soon.

NE Designs Ltd.
32 Norwich Ave.
Colchester, CT 06415
203/537-4385
Basic Package: \$250-\$450. Includes perspective drawing; elevation; floorplans; wall sections; foundation options; staff consultation.
Extras: heating layouts; site analysis; mylar program for multiple copies (prices vary).
Comments: Claim their blueprints are very crisp because of "Merlin Tape" thermofax printing systems.

Northwest Home Design
10901 Bridgeport Way
Tacoma, WA 98499
206/584-6309
Basic Package: \$175-\$500. Includes elevations; floorplans; construction details; wall sections; trim details; electrical layout; staff consultation.
Extras: site planning (\$40 by mail, \$500 a day on-site); lumber list (\$25); mylar program for multiple copies (\$75).

plans, and the cleaner the plans the better. It's always good to get plans that have three-dimension sketches, especially for framing details, like dormers. That way you can look at what the finished product is supposed to look like and go right for it. In all my years of using them, I have never had to call the staff engineers to ask questions."

George Bramlett, another Georgia builder, agrees. "Of all the houses I do each year, five or six will be spec houses from stock house plans, and I have not had any trouble with them. We never build them exactly as they are on the plans. We modify as we need to; we change the elevations, and we do lots of substitutions.

"The better plans—particularly the older plans that have been tried in the field—have the foundations worked out very well. Even so. I like to have plans that give you outside-to-outside measurements, and outside-to-center

Comments: Claims Washington state's standards are so high, their specs will meet most state codes without modification. Just starting "video walk-through" of houses built from their plans.

Sun Terra Homes, Inc.
2108 Broadwater Ave.
Billings, MT 59102
406/652-4300
Basic Package: \$100-\$530; priced by the square foot. Includes perspective drawings; elevations; floorplans; construction details; foundation options; wall sections; staff consultation..
Extras: electrical and heating layout; mechanical engineering; site analysis for custom work (prices vary).
Comments: Award for innovation from U.S. Dept. of Energy.

Suntel Home Designs
7000 SW Hampton #238
Tigard, OR 97223
503/624-0555
Basic Package: \$185-\$300. Includes perspective drawings; elevations; floorplans; construction details; roof plan; foundation options; wall sections; trim details; staff consultation.
Extras: materials list (\$30); local site analysis; vellums for multiple copies (prices vary).
Comments: 16 years in the business.

Mike Tecton's Custom Homes
1469 Spring Vale Ave.
Tigard, OR 97223
503/624-0555
Basic Package: \$150-\$350. Includes elevations; floorplans; wall sections; trim details.
Extras: foundation options, staff consultation (prices vary).
Comments: Claims to have originated "great room" concept in house design.

Texas Home Design Co.
Suite 160
2 Kingwood
Kingwood, TX 77339
713/358-0006
Basic Package: \$200-\$800. Includes perspective drawings; elevation; floorplans; wall sections; construction details; staff consultation.
Extras: electrical layout; mechanical layout; plumbing layout; materials list; structural engineering; site and soil analysis (prices vary).
Comments: Award-winning design featured on PBS "State of Architecture" program; high-end custom; high-end tract housing; limited retail.

girder measurements.

"You should get the room dimensions as well. Even then, you have to watch out. When we put up a wall, it will measure around 4-5/8 inches when you account for the Sheetrock and studs. But some of the plans will leave 5 inches for that wall, even 6. Obviously, this will throw off your measurements if you don't account for the difference.

"And with framing, sometimes you only get 13 feet, 8 inches out of your 14-foot spans, and you end up going to 16-foot joists and wasting wood.

"As for the materials list, I never use them. You just can't count on them. And I do my own electrical and mechanical layouts anyway, whether its spec or custom. But, no complaints. After all, the price is right." ■

John D. Wagner is features editor of The Journal of Light Construction.