

INTERIOR MOTIVES

Points to Ponder

Making the best design decisions

By Anthony F. Zaya

Most of us do not take well to opinions of others that don't align with our own. Such resistance is particularly strong when the opinions are unsolicited. Opinions are generally subjective—a matter of taste and inclination. Bias is a given. Advice, to my mind, tends to be objective—there is evidence to support it or data to back it up. Facts are hard to argue. Opinions almost invite argument. That said, I'm going to offer up some advice and opinions on designing and building your timber home.

This practice of designing and crafting living spaces involves the objective and the subjective equally. After 20 years of teaching residential design and 18 years practicing timber framing, I'd like to address what are, in my opinion, mistakes some clients want to make. You may not want to hear it, but some of it may hit home and give you thoughts to mull over.

The Great Room Reformation

Having spent my formative years (the 1950s) in a large family living in the smallest of William Levitt's cookie-cutter homes (one where the living room was the size of some present-day walk-in closets), I fantasized about having a really huge living room.

In my late 20s, I was employed in two professions simultaneously and was flush with savings accumulated by living frugally. I also believed I knew what I was doing. So I gave flight to my big room fantasy. The house I designed had a three-car garage (rare in the '70s), one bedroom (insane in any decade) and a really huge great room. My friends were in awe; I was pleased with myself. My self-satisfaction was short-lived. The room looked great but felt uncomfortable.

Here are the pluses of huge-volume great rooms: People will marvel at the size; photographs will look fantastic; large parties are no problem; and they can easily be converted into singleplex movie theaters. The drawbacks? Echoes may be annoying. Not being of human scale, such rooms will lack intimacy, harmony and proportion, and you will spend more money to heat and furnish than you should.

Of the mistakes clients want to make, the "too big great room" is near the top of the list. Proportion and human scale must be considered. If you want to create a really large room in your new home, make it the kitchen. Again, this is my opinion, and I warned you that you might not take well to it.

Staining the Timbers

Timber frames are essentially works of structural sculpture. As such, they are intense and dramatic enough without exaggerating them with dark stain. If you must alter the natural color of the timbers, con-



Designing a timber home doesn't require you to create huge, lofty living spaces. Here, two cozy areas are defined by timber posts and separated by windows.

sider whitewashing. It adds a lightness and subtleness to the frame. Going with a dark stain often imparts an oppressive feel to the timbers.

Part of me understands the appeal of dark timbers. Staining is an attempt to mimic the look of an old frame. It is a poor attempt. Time will darken most interior timbers, and Mother Nature does it best. If you must have dark timbers immediately, consider reclaimed timbers from an old barn or factory.

Staining timbers, particularly those inside a house, is not a protective issue; it is a cosmetic choice. Most timber frame companies offer a clear penetrating oil finish. The oil richens and slightly darkens the timbers and looks natural. Additionally, if a timber is ever scratched or marred, that area can be spot-sanded and re-oiled. With stained timbers, the whole face, if not the whole timber, would need to be sanded and restained. Also, dark stain applied to timbers before the timbers are well-seasoned (which is almost always the case) will cause any checks, or cracks, that open to be incredibly pronounced. The darker the stain, the more pronounced the open check.

Taking the Easy Way Out

Most people live in dwellings designed for someone else. If you are lucky enough to build your own environment, don't blow the chance to tailor that environment to your own desires, aspirations and needs, and those characteristics and shapes of your lot by purchasing a pre-designed set of architectural drawings developed for some other person (real or imaginary) and some other lot (existing or conjured). You, as a person, couple or family, are unique; as is your site. Make your home and its surroundings reflect you, not someone else.

This is not to say that you shouldn't be inspired by what others have done. Adapt the elements and aspects you like, but solve your own problems and meet your own needs and desires in a way that gives your house its own spirit.

Do you actually need to take T-square and vellum in hand? Of course not. An architect or house designer can take your ideas, pictures, sketches and priorities, with

your budget and site, and help you create your vision. Will it be at times hard work and at times frustrating? You bet. Will it be worth it? Absolutely.

Being in a Hurry

In terms of land, I have had calls from people who wanted us to start design work before they had found a lot. People have called who had just recently purchased their

land and wanted to start design work immediately. The former I avoid totally; the latter I discourage. Do not rush it. Get to know your land. The larger and more complicated (varied) the plot, the longer you should spend getting to know it. Ideally, you should know your piece of heaven for four seasons before the design work begins.

In terms of the house design, know your budget and your priorities before the design work begins. Make mistakes and changes on paper. Paper is cheaper than wood or glass or stone. Enjoy the process.

Wanting to Be the G.C.

Some clients believe taking on the responsibility of a general contractor for themselves will save them substantial money. These owner-builders will earn every penny that they think they will save. A good general contractor is like a good orchestra conductor. He or she can make the difficult appear easy and the complicated seem simple. Unless you have a ton of free time, loyal connections in the trades (if not you yourself being in the trades), great communication skills and a highly motivated personality, put the project in the hands of a professional.

Here is a simple scenario that shows what you might face by acting as your own general contractor: Imagine this: Your dry-wall finishers will need every hour of the coming week to finish their work so that the trim carpenters who are scheduled to start one week hence can begin. The trim carpenters have to finish their work so that the painters who are scheduled two weeks hence can start. Tonight, your drywall finisher gets a call from a general contractor (a real one, as opposed to a "once and done" like yourself) with whom he has worked many times before. This G.C. really, really needs him and his crew for the next, say, four days. Where do you think the drywall finishers will be tomorrow morning?

Well, there you have it. These are my opinions and I'm sticking by them. I do hope that some of them will save you from regret. **THI**

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