

# Six Approaches to Building your Dream House

Excerpted and adapted from *The House You Build: Making Real-World Choices to Get the Home You Want*, by Duo Dickinson, AIA

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## SUMMARY

For American homebuyers, homebuilding offers an affordable alternative to purchasing average, run-of-the-mill homes or seemingly unattainable homes. The following six methods can help homeowners to design their dream homes in a cost-effective manner while also making the process of homebuilding more enjoyable and worthwhile in the end.

## GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

In *The House You Build*, Duo Dickinson, AIA, explains that American homebuyers tend to look at houses in one of two ways. They either feel limited to “production” houses that are typically set in subdivisions and built en masse with generic materials, or they feel intimidated by the houses found in popular media that highlight the “lifestyles of the rich and famous.” Thus, people who want to shape their homes are most often faced with readily available mediocrity or inaccessible fantasy.

There is, however, a “third way” of looking at homebuilding. Through diligence, resourcefulness, and some risk taking, homeowners are finding they can gain control of their homes’ design by partnering with professional home designers who share their values.

Getting what you want, and can afford, in a home is not as difficult as it may sound. The following basic approaches can help make a dream house a reality.

## USE STANDARD MATERIALS CREATIVELY

Using mass-produced materials in generic ways saves money over using esoteric products that require artful installation. Using easily obtainable, affordable products can create real opportunities for containing costs. However, blandness results unless you reinvent the way you use standard products—and reinvention can be as simple as painting walls in bold colors. If you save money by using standard materials and techniques, you can afford personalized expression elsewhere. Taking stock building parts (such as windows) and arranging them in creative and evocative ways can make the standard special.

## SHRINK TO FIT

If you can design your home to fit the way you live while providing for future changes in use, your house can shrink to fit. The tendency in house design in America is to make houses larger to accommodate many different lifestyles. Average home size in America has more than doubled in the last generation, while family size has shrunk by more than 20 percent in the same period.

Logically it would appear easy to pare back size and increase quality, but this must be done carefully and consciously. Unless you design in a sense of openness and build in usefulness, you may end up in a house that feels too small. It is possible to overcome the feeling of being “squeezed” into too tight a space by artfully aligning spaces and hallways, by providing some spaces that have higher-than-expected ceiling heights and larger-than-“normal” window areas, and by directly connecting the inside of your home to outdoor “rooms.”

## DON'T FIGHT THE SITE

The average lot size has shrunk by 30 percent in the last 25 years, and the remaining buildable sites around major urban centers are tougher to deal with in terms of slopes, subsoil conditions, and regulations as land around cities becomes scarcer and scarcer. You can adapt your design to minimize these impacts.

You may need to adapt your house plan to your site. Creating raised terraces or decks on a site that falls off to one side can be unnecessarily costly. If the home can be oriented to have exterior spaces walk out to an existing grade, a sloped site can allow the basement foundation to do double duty: both supporting the floors above and enclosing naturally lit, finished space below.

## TAKE YOUR TIME

In designing and building custom homes, time is money. The more time you spend figuring out exactly how your house will be used and the more time you spend in “value analysis,” the less money

ends up being spent. “Value analysis” is a catchall term to describe maximizing the bang for the buck on materials and systems used in building your house.

If time is spent fine-tuning a design and shopping for the right materials at the right price, the opportunities for mistakes in judgment are drastically reduced.

**DEFER AND SAVE: BUILD IN PHASES**

When the budget isn’t big enough for the “big picture,” sometimes a half-a-loaf philosophy allows you to build at least part of the home you want now and allow for expansion in the future. Attitude is critical in being able to defer what’s desirable, but the compelling reality of determining your own home is often well worth the wait.

**TAKE CHARGE: SPEND TIME TO SAVE MONEY**

You can save money if you act as your own general contractor. Serving in this role does save money, but you must take on the burden of a large time dump. There may be a 15 percent total savings over a house that has a professional general contractor, but the myriad responsibilities of insurance, scheduling, and management can be a daunting challenge for the average homeowner. For many people, however, the savings in total cost is the difference between having enough money to build a dream house and letting a lifelong dream go unbuilt.

Taking the time to personalize your home need not blow your budget. Creative architects and builders use inspired design and common sense to build affordable homes that reflect the essence of their occupants. You don’t need to settle for what’s already available, and you don’t have to put your life on hold and quit your job to build your dream.

**RESOURCES**

**More Best Practices**

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 18.03.02 Ten Key Factors that Affect Any Design
- 18.03.06 Eight Pillars of Traditional Design
- 18.03.08 Core Qualities that Make a Great American Home

**For More Information on This Topic**

This article is excerpted and adapted from *The House You Build: Making Real-World Choices to Get the Home You Want*, by Duo Dickinson, AIA. *The House You Build* can be ordered from the AIA Store by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by ending e-mail to [bookstore@aia.org](mailto:bookstore@aia.org).



**Key Terms**

- Design
- Design context
- Site environments