



EXPENSIVE MARRIAGE COUNSELING

Clearly defined expectations from the get-go help ensure smooth, drama-free client relationships

By Craig McMahon, AIA

The scene is familiar: A couple sits down in my conference room to discuss a new home. This meeting has been preceded by at least one or two phone calls, or maybe even a site visit to the land recently purchased. The prospective clients are jazzed: For years, they've imagined what it could be like to build a dream home or a ranch retreat, and now it's time to move forward.

After the couple describes the property and I get an overall feel for their dynamic, I start with this statement about myself: "My wife will confirm this, but I'm a terrible mind reader," I say. "I can guarantee you that after we get started, I will be 100 percent wrong in guessing your expectations for this project." I then add, "We are very expensive marriage counselors, so let's make sure we know from the start what each of you is looking for."

It took me years to get to this level of honesty with new clients—and lots of angst and fretting to work through issues that weren't related to the actual project design. The takeaway was crucial: The unknown can have the greatest impact on any project. It can be devastating as you move through design phases with finalized budgets and realize that one party's expectations are not being met—or maybe even missed from the beginning.

Working on my own for years, I've found that there are usually two client types sitting across from me at the conference table: one focused on quality, the other on value. Often, in a couple, both factions are represented.

The quality-oriented member of the client team is focused on details and finishes, with an emotional understanding of what's appropriate and acceptable. The value-oriented faction wants to ensure the project has value. Typically, the value side is fine with the quality side, as long as the value side doesn't exceed the potential future resale value of the home. At the end of our first interview, it's usually clear which side is which. Our goal is

to see how we can meet each side's expectations. Again, this requires making sure that everyone's opinions are voiced, and that they're heard.

The process is amazing to watch. In the beginning, the quality side always seems to take the lead on how everything will look and feel. Then slowly, as the design is progressing and costs are being established, the value side becomes focused and invested in the end result.

The smoothest projects seem to focus on the early conversations: what, specifically, the clients want out of the home. We always start with the project scope: how big, general look and feel, and expected cost. This usually cracks the door of different expectations. We are successfully showing many clients that our homes can be smaller in air-conditioned space, but with outdoor connections from the main living spaces that double the usable area. The more difficult projects seem to be centered on unvoiced expectations. Surprises such as needing space for a grand piano, a private car collection, or special finishes everywhere in the house—versus concentrating the need in focused areas—pop up and cause discussions such as, "I get to have this space because you had to have that oversized four-car garage with a car lift."

Another thing: During the design process, I've often witnessed the two personality types begin to flip, where the quality- and detail-focused client becomes more understanding of the impact of details and their costs, and the value side of the team gets invested and excited and starts fighting for details that make the home special.

In the end, the most successful team is one where one side begins to see the project from the other's perspective—kind of like good marriage counseling.

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