



THE ARCHITECTS' SECRETS

How the pros design homes that are cheaper to build, easier to maintain —yet look sleek and sophisticated; ‘knowing where to spend money.’

BY NANCY KEATES

Doug Larson's weekend house looks like it's straight out of a glossy magazine: Set on a lush lawn, it has fat white columns, a covered porch and a light-filled, contemporary interior. Yet the materials are basic: IKEA kitchen cabinets, inexpensive wood flooring, a prefab metal roof and a fireplace with a factory-built stove pipe instead of a brick chimney with a fancy surround.

Mr. Larson, a Manhattan architect, purchased the dilapidated house in Stanfordville, N.Y., for \$170,000 in 2005 and spent \$300,000 on his renovation—or \$250 a square foot. Projects he designs for clients cost two to four times that amount.

"A lot of people wouldn't accept these things. There's no gilding the lily in my house,"

he says.

In the luxury market, many buyers want homes that have it all—complicated floor plans, high-end finishes and the latest technology. But when the same architects design homes for themselves, the results are usually simple, sophisticated structures that merely look expensive.

These architects argue that streamlined designs take less time to build and are easier to maintain—yet are still more aesthetically appealing.

"It was knowing where to spend money and knowing where it didn't matter," says Tim Eddy, a principal with Hennebery Eddy Architects in Portland, Ore.

Mr. Eddy recently moved into a sleek new white-stucco

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Grand Design

Architect Doug Larson's streamlined design at his Stanfordville, N.Y., weekend home. **1.** Cabinetry from IKEA **2.** A prefab metal roof **3.** Light-filled interiors **4.** Inexpensive wood flooring. Above, Mr. Larson with his wife, Victoria, and son, August.

MAGAZINE PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN KUCZALA; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RICHARD POWERS (2); TIM STREET PORTER (3)

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THE ARCHITECTS' STREAMLINED DESIGN

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contemporary house he designed specifically for his family. Details include massive triple-glazed windows, a rainwater-recovery system, cantilevered walnut stairs and a solar-heated swimming pool.

The same house would cost about \$450 to \$600 a square foot to build for his clients, but Mr. Eddy says he spent "quite a bit" less, in part because being in the business gives him an edge. Like other architects, Mr. Eddy saved thousands of dollars in architectural design fees. And there are the trade discounts, in which architects get about 30% off big items like light fixtures and paving materials and about 10% off lumber.

When building his hip, new T-shaped contemporary home in downtown Fayetteville, Ark., architect Marc Manack of Silo AR+D minimized elaborate design details, chose pre-finished flooring and exterior siding, and put IKEA cabinetry in the kitchen.

Mr. Manack spent about \$95 a square foot on his own house—less than half the cost of a bespoke home he is designing for a client nearby. "You're willing to take chances and risks in your own project that you wouldn't with clients unless you had their complete buy-in," he says. "With clients, a lot of things can get in the way of a simple design. The forms tend to get more extravagant."

David Wagner of Minneapolis-based Sala Architects designs homes that tend to cost about \$300 a square foot. But he just did a 1,000-square-foot addition to his own house for \$220 a square foot. Mr. Wagner estimates he saved about \$4,000 on wood siding because he knew from experience how to cut out the middlemen when purchasing materials. He also knew to get his white-oak flooring a few grades lower than what's called "clear," which is what most clients demand, because he understood the flaws were just some "character knots" in the wood.

Mr. Wagner also bartered his architectural skills to keep prices down: He enlisted the help of a friend to put in radiant-heat flooring in exchange for an offer to design his kitchen renovation—a move that saved about \$6,000.

For his home, Jeff Stern of Portland, Ore., firm In Situ Architecture focused on creating two box-shaped structures

for \$190 a square foot. "We worked really hard to get to the essence of what was important to us," he says, "rather than starting the process wanting it all and having to compromise."

Key was resisting the temptation to make the house bigger: He kept it to 1,960 square feet. Mr. Stern's big splurge was on windows, so he found savings in less-expensive materials—concrete floors, fir cabinetry and brightly colored plastic laminate countertops.

Designing their own homes also allows architects to take more risks. When building his vacation home in New York's Catskills, Thomas Gluck of Gluck + Architecture in New York City used a tinted-glass treatment—typically reserved for commercial projects—on the home's exteriors. The dark surface reflects the trees and sky, allowing the structure to blend into the landscape. Even though the glass itself is inexpensive, the technique of applying the tint can be costly. But using workers trained by his firm in that material helped lower the costs. In the end, Mr. Gluck spent \$250 a square foot to build his three-bedroom, 2½-bath home.

"We are willing to believe in design in a way that sometimes clients would not go for—things that would be a hard sell," Mr. Gluck says.

High-end New York City architect Steven Harris and his husband, interior designer Lucien Rees Roberts took their time when constructing their vacation home on 50 acres in upstate New York. First they spent \$150,000 to build a very simple, 500-square-foot house with one big living room and a small bedroom in the basement. Three years ago they finished a second house and connected them with an underground tunnel.

Conservative and modest was their mantra. "We didn't want something that was the coolest thing this week," says Mr. Harris. A number of extras—a full kitchen, two separate bedrooms, huge sliding-glass pocket doors and two bathrooms—made the second house more expensive, but to them worth it.

Still, it was their willingness to be flexible about space that made the most difference. "Most people wouldn't agree to have the dining room and living room in two different buildings," says Mr. Harris.



KYLE JOHNSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PORTLAND, ORE. 'Getting to simple is often very complicated,' says architect Tim Eddy, who recently moved into a new contemporary house he designed specifically for his family.



MINNEAPOLIS Architect David Wagner just finished a 1,000-square-foot addition to his own house for \$220 a square foot.



L-R: TROY THIES; PAUL WARCHOL (2)

NEW YORK'S CATSKILLS Thomas Gluck put the living room on the top floor of his vacation home to get the best views.