

expert advice

Cost per square foot.
Zoning dilemmas.
Wish lists.
Budget busters.
These top-of-mind
issues are among the
hot topics debated at
our recent roundtable.

ARCHITECTS ROUNDTABLE

AT THE TABLE: Susan Alisberg, Alisberg Parker; Phillip Dodd, Wadia Associates; Jack Franzen, J.P. Franzen Associates Architects; Rich Granoff, R.S. Granoff Architects; Neil Hauck, Neil Hauck Architects; Chuck Hilton, Hilton-Vanderhorn; Jerry Hupy, Shope Reno Wharton Architects; Amanda Martocchio, Amanda Martocchio Architecture + Design; Sean O’Kane, AIA; Jonathan Moffly, president of Moffly Media; Kate Hogan, editor; Amy Vischio, creative director.

portraits **MELANI LUST**

AMY VISCHIO What are clients asking for in today’s economy? What’s at the top of their wish lists?

JERRY HUPY Because of the economy, home offices are becoming very important. After the kids are in bed, that’s where couples can go to answer e-mails, and deal with things relating to the house.

RICH GRANOFF I’ve been seeing clients ask-

ing for his-and-hers offices. We’re also creating mom’s offices near the family room—kind of a mission control for the family.

NEIL HAUCK Organization has gotten so important. We seem to be doing a lot more built-ins in all areas to organize things. A lot of thought goes into how people live their lives.

AMANDA MARTOCCHIO Outdoor spaces are

becoming more like rooms in the home, expanding the footprint. This is where people can get away from their home offices, their computers, and their screens and be outside.

JACK FRANZEN It’s family-oriented projects that we’re seeing. Pool houses and recreation barns are popular. We have these boomerang children who graduated and need to come back home for a year or two.



“ARCHITECTS ARE ALWAYS THINKING ABOUT HOW A SPACE WORKS AND HOW YOU FURNISH A SPACE. AS PART OF OUR SERVICE, WE JUST DO A FURNITURE PLAN.”

AMANDA MARTOCCHIO

PHILLIP DODD For our clients, entertaining is important. They’ll say, “We need to fit X-number of people around the dining room table.” Or they’re going to host fundraisers and need to fit a certain number of people in the living room.

JERRY The mudroom isn’t the bench-and-hooks place it was years ago. Now everybody has a locker, a place for backpacks and charging stations, space for papers that have to go back to the teacher.

What are the most common requests for renovations?

RICH The typical renovation is adding a kitchen, family room, mudroom, and master

bedroom suite.

SUSAN ALISBERG The kitchen has changed a bit, I think. People really want space to entertain.

NEIL We get requests for terraces, outdoor rooms and outdoor kitchens, sometimes elaborate and expansive.

AMANDA With our aging population, I’ve had clients whose parents want to come back to live or visit for longer periods of time. I recently renovated a guest house designed for very long-term stays.

SUSAN In making homes more accessible for older people, we have done several projects that called for an elevator. We’ve also built closets that could house an elevator in the future for clients who want their master bedroom upstairs but also want to be able to age in the house.

Are people really right-sizing their homes? Are any of your clients asking for smaller square footage, or is that not a Fairfield county phenomenon?

JERRY People are paying a lot more attention to what they’re requesting. They want rooms that are really functional. Not just a library that doesn’t get used; it’s also a library that doubles as a homework room.

SUSAN My clients don’t seem to want rooms as large as they did several years back.

AMANDA In my last two projects, my clients have eliminated the formal dining room and living room altogether and replaced them with a space that’s the heart of the house, where family is going to spend lots of time.

RICH We get requests for a combined dining-kitchen space, all open. I personally love it because I think it’s the way we all live.

PHILLIP Some of our clients do want to do more formal entertaining, using the dining room.

JACK People think they want a smaller house, but it turns out that they want the entire basement finished. Some towns are get-

ting very Draconian with their zoning laws. On a basic lot, you may barely fit 5,000 feet, but then the basement is another 2,500, where people are putting a wine cellar, kids’ game room, storage, and, if it’s a walk-out, a cabana or a potting shed.

SUSAN The finished basements reflect the way people live today. They are very focused on their children. They want spaces where they can have their friends over and play.

NEIL People also want a place where the kids can leave toys out.



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JACK FRANZEN



"SO WE ALL LOVE THE STORIES ON **EXTREME HOME MAKEOVER**, BUT WE KNOW THAT'S NOT THE RIGHT WAY TO GET THINGS DONE."

JERRY HUPY

SEAN Something needs to be done about zoning regulations that restrict you from finishing off the space within the footprint. If zoning were a bit more creative, people could build more within the footprint, by building vertically.

CHUCK HILTON Everyone thinks they want to build smaller, but then they have this long wish list and wind up back where they were. I think people are more receptive to green building, to energy efficiency, because they are sensitive to the fact that these houses are large, and they try to make up for that by being sensitive in other ways.

So how is green building affecting or changing your business?

JERRY For us, it's been great because these are techniques we've been using for 10 or 15 years. Now it's a selling point. Now there's payback for the type of framing you specify, the windows you use, the insulation, the type of heating and cooling system.

CHUCK There are credits you can apply for, some incentives for investing in green.

RICH People feel good about going green, about the example they're setting for the kids, their neighbors, their associates. It's more of an investment they're willing to make.

Is there one green technology you'd like to see in every home you build?

RICH Super insulation. We don't even ask anymore. We just super-insulate every house. Payback is a no-brainer.

[All agree.]

NEIL The right insulation also makes for a much quieter house. We have always insulated interior walls as well.

SEAN Put in the best windows and doors you can. A lot of clients also want to know about geothermal; they may not commit to it, but they want to know about it.

CHUCK Geothermal has to be designed very well. But the payback is almost instant: There's a 30 percent tax credit for most of the system.

SUSAN Geothermal works best in new construction, and you need to have the house well insulated.

What's the best way to find an architect? How should someone who's beginning a project interview you?

JERRY You have to like the work. If an architect does all modern houses, but you want a Colonial, he may be able to do it because he's talented, but it may not be a fit.

SUSAN You have to know with whom you'll be working in the office. Are you working with the principal or just someone in the office?

NEIL If I were the homeowner looking for an architect, I would want to meet with that person more than once.

JACK Cameron Clark, a really great residential architect, used to give people three addresses to go drive by. He would say, "If you don't like those houses, don't call me." [Laughs] If you can find contractors or subcontractors who are willing to be candid, they could be a good way to find an architect. They see what's going on—who's on the job and who's not.

AMANDA Ultimately, it has to be a great fit



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SEAN O'KANE

personality-wise. I like to educate the client about the process, especially one who's never built a home or done a renovation.

At what point in the process do you recommend bringing in an interior designer?

PHILLIP One of the things that's a bit different about Wadia is that we have a decorator on staff. We like to work with decorators to do the furniture and fabrics, but what a lot of people think of as interiors—moldings and ceilings, for instance—we do ourselves.

JERRY Let us do the design work and be focused on the entire shell and on the land-

scape. Then bring in the interior person after that.

AMANDA Architects are always thinking about how a space works and how you furnish a space. As part of our service, we just do a furniture plan. Otherwise, how are you going to figure out where the outlets really go? I like to segue into interior design services when I can because I think you end up with a better-integrated design.

SUSAN Our office does interior design and decorating, but we also do projects where the owners come in with their own decorator. The appropriate time is at the end of schematic design. When it comes to the electrical, for instance, a decorator may feel she wants two chandeliers in the great room. It's much easier to have that kind of information early on.

PHILLIP Some people really want one-stop shopping, and that's why we started our decorating service.

CHUCK It's important to bring in the landscape architect too.

RICH We found that landscape architects were coming in a little late, to the point where we decided to bring it in house and we have three on staff now. Landscape architecture is integral to good architecture.

SUSAN The homeowner may benefit from bringing the landscape architect in early on because plantings that are not in the direct path of construction would have a year to grow and the garden would be more mature.

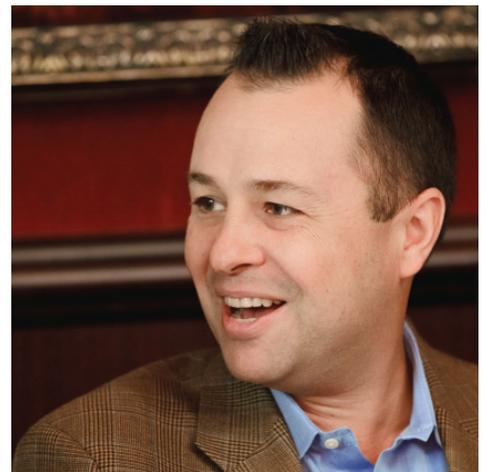
SEAN We've gotten into the habit of doing study models, putting together a model that shows the house in the environment. We've found it's a huge benefit to our clients. Sometimes we bring a model in, and the client says, "That's my house?" Clearly from the schematic drawings, they didn't get it. It's a great relief when the client then says, "Well, I like it."

SUSAN It's a lot more cost effective to make a change in cardboard.

We're asked a lot about materials. Are there certain materials you spec time and again? For example: What kind of windows do you like?

JACK: We just used some Marvin windows that are laminated glass, and if you live near 95 or an airport, these really work.

AMANDA The films on certain windows diminish solar heat gain, so they have many levels of aid to the interior envelope. If you



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CHUCK HILTON

have nice art, these windows can also be protective.

PHILLIP Windows are closely tied to the budget of the house, so there are ones we like to use at different price points.

SEAN If you have a client with a certain kind of budget, you can start to look at higher-end products from Tischler and Zeluck.

RICH They're made of mahogany instead of pine, so they'll last 100 years.

JERRY You don't want to scrimp on quality with the shell of the house.



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PHILLIP DODD

JACK Marvin's hurricane windows are terrific.

What are telltale signs of poor design construction?

AMANDA It may look as though someone looked through a magazine—not yours—and cut out little elements and wants them all to work.

NEIL Cupolas in the wrong places.

RICH When you drive down a block, you can always tell an architect-designed house. You might not know exactly why. It's where we all add value.

JACK If you see a house with bad drainage—because the roof or the site is not properly designed and water isn't going where it should—that's a dead giveaway.

PHILLIP I always worry when I see a house getting built too fast. Some houses just pop up overnight and to do it right, there's a lot of coordination involved. So when a house gets built too fast, you know they took shortcuts.

SUSAN Materials do have to acclimate to the climate, so if a house goes up very quickly, they have not been seasoned. That can lead to problems with cracking.

JERRY So we all love the stories on *Extreme Home Makeover*, but we know that's not the right way to get things done.

CHUCK Timing and budget are big discussion items. People will come back from a cocktail party and say, "My friend built his house in 10 months. Why we can't do the same thing?" Or, so-and-so built for so-many dollars per square foot.' There are all these numbers spinning around that are unqualified. Professionals can advise people about the true amount of time needed and the right budgets.

SEAN Right, you need to ask: Does that price per square foot include all the appliances, all the finishes, allowances for time and materials?

AMANDA The single best investment is investing in an architect. With a well-designed house, you will be able to save money. If the



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NEIL HAUCK

tiles or the light fixtures or the flooring are of a lesser quality, you'll still have a very strong solution.

NEIL: What I like to tell my clients is, you can either tell me what spaces you want, what things you want in a house and then I'll design it and it's going to cost what it's going to cost. Or you tell me what your budget is and I'll design to that budget. But you can't have both.

What are some areas where homeowners can save money?

SUSAN Good design. Using simple materials in the right proportion will give you a better value, than, say, spending money on a very expensive marble that doesn't follow a good design.

AMANDA Smaller house, better quality.

RICH Except in Greenwich, where they're forcing us to do high ceilings because of the zoning, attics count. They gave us basements but took away attics.

JERRY The most frustrating zoning rules are



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RICH GRANOFF

those that start to dictate the architecture.

Why is 2011 a good time to start a renovation or new construction?

SEAN We need more work. [Laughs all around] We're ready to go, we've got our pencils sharpened.

RICH Land prices are at an all-time low. Financing is cheap, and construction costs are down.

NEIL Contractors are hungry.

SUSAN Construction costs are very competitive.

CHUCK A lot of good craftsmen are available. Two, three years ago, you had to beg people. Now they're ready to go.

AMANDA That improves the construction schedules. The cabinetmaker doesn't have a six-month delay.

JACK You're going to get the architect's attention, which is what a lot of people expect. When you hire an architect, you'd like to think they're thinking about your project all the time. And now they are.

[Laughs]

SEAN Give the architect the time to put together thorough drawings and specs. They can go out and get bids, and the savings will more than make up for the cost.

PHILLIP The exchange rate is good right now. We source a lot of materials from overseas, and prices are better now.

AMANDA Going back to the whole green thing, people are more educated. The consumer has many more options now. And there are fewer hacks out there now.

SEAN It's been a bit of a weeding-out process.

RICH There's still some greenwashing going on. It's our job to educate people about green construction.

AMANDA Working with an architect, as big of an investment as it is, can be fun.

JERRY We love the personal relationships; we have a blast. It's a very time-consuming, challenging profession, but it's also fun.



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CHUCK HILTON

PHILLIP People always ask me why I'm over here. They say, "It's so pretty over in England, don't you want to go back?" I tell them, "Well, in England when someone wants a nice, old house, they just go and buy a nice, old house." Here, they want to build a new house that looks just like a nice, old house. That's why I'm here.