

## **Laying the cornerstone of your new home design.**

By; Glen Van Orman

Many times as I start off with a new client to design their home, I am asked; “What should we bring to the first meeting?” My first comment is usually; “Make a grocery list.” In some cases there may be a concept from a friend’s home, or another home the client has been through or even lived in before, and occasionally there may be other pieces of designs they have gathered that help to determine the direction. Frequently, that type of information hasn’t been found yet. That is especially where the grocery list is handy, but it is helpful even if there is an established starting concept.

Start with the large items first; Do you want all the bedrooms on the first floor, (making it a ranch home) all the bedrooms on the second floor, (making it a two story) or maybe the Master on the main floor and the remainder of the bedrooms upstairs (making it what is commonly called a ‘Story and a Half’)? There is also a twist to these concepts: Multi-levels. These are usually brought into play due to a site limitation and are predominantly used in the more modest markets because of their ability to be expanded by finishing usable lower level space at a lower cost, or perhaps at a later date. A Bi-level home is typically where you would see the Garage under the Main Floor of the house, and the Front Entry split between the Main and Lower levels. This is a good plan to use when the site slopes up from the street to the rear, making it difficult to build a conventional plan type. A Raised Ranch (sometimes mistakenly referred to as a Bi-level) is in fact just like a Bi-level except that the Garage sets along side or in front of the home at grade level, halfway in between each level. They are generally used when the site is quite flat, due the fact that they allow egress (code word for fire escape) windows in the lower level, making for a large expandable area. Tri-levels are similar to the Raised Ranch, except the main living area is like a normal ranch, being at grade, and the bedroom areas are raised to allow for grade windows in the ‘third’ level down, allowing for approximately half of the total main floor square footage to be expanded into. Occasionally, you will see a ‘Split-level’ design which is essentially a tri-level, except the main floor area runs across the front and the raised portion runs across the rear, instead of being arranged left to right. Most people think of Multi-levels and think STEPS! In reality a Tri-level has fewer steps to traverse than there would be in a Two Story and a Bi-level has approximately only a half flight more than a ranch for most of the day to day usage.



If you aren’t sure what plan type you need, ask your designer or builder to visit the site after the initial meeting, and they will be able to point you in the right direction. To the unpracticed eye it may be hard to determine if a site will allow for a typical ‘Daylight’ or ‘Walkout’ basement. However, to a professional, your site is like a block of marble to a sculptor, there is an obvious way to approach it to let the image trapped inside to come through.

Now that we have chosen a plan style, we need to ‘fill the box’. What rooms are you looking for and what relation to other areas makes sense for your lifestyle? Do you need a large Kitchen, or just something simple? Do you really use a formal Dining Room? Do you want the Living area to the front of

the home or the rear? How many bedrooms will you need? How many bathrooms and what locations? What are you looking for in a Mudroom Entry area? Do you need a Home Office, or a Den? How many Garage stalls will be desired? Some plat restrictions may call for three stalls minimum. Are there any special needs that must be addressed? These are some of the questions that help designers start to layout the concept of your home.

Now that we have an idea of the rooms required, we can talk about how to use those spaces. You will obviously have some sort of a front entrance; how formal that area is, needs to be thought out. Will you have any furniture in that area, like a side table or a bench? That will require some space planning for those items. Do you want the Foyer to be connected to other areas (for example access to the Mudroom) or directly connected to the Main Living area? Is it beneficial to have the Living area to the rear? It is quieter and there may be a view to take advantage of. Will you have a fireplace in that area? How about built-ins for media and décor? In the Kitchen will there be an Island or a Peninsula? This is important as an Island Kitchen takes considerably more floor space than one without. This possibly can mean a larger home due to more square footage being consumed to allow for the island and space around it. Do you need an area for stools? How many? Again, an important question; 3 or 4 stools requires an average space. 5 or 6 stools will require some special planning. Does your lifestyle lend more towards informal large spaces that may incorporate the Dining area near or in the Living area for more of a Great room or Gathering Room concept, or more individual private spaces with clear separations? How much space is enough for your Master Bedroom? This requires some thought about furniture that will be brought along or purchased, and your lifestyle. Do you spend time in the Master Bedroom other than sleeping? Do you want to enter the closet from the bedroom proper or from the bath? Entering from the bath used to be frowned on, but is becoming more desired due to different sleep/wake schedules. It allows one person to use the bathroom and dressing areas without traipsing back and forth through a room someone is still trying to sleep in. How big of a closet is big enough? Most men will tell you that you can't build a garage large enough. Most women will tell the same thing about a master closet! What do you need in regards to the other bathrooms in the home? Do you prefer a Half Bath in the Mudroom area or more of a Guest Bath near the Living area? It is a good idea not to place the guest bath in an area directly adjacent to living spaces, as it does not afford proper privacy. Are you looking for a simple Mudroom entry or more of what I call a Family Foyer? A simple mudroom may consist of an open room with a coat closet and the washer & dryer, however, I would always suggest that the washer & dryer either be enclosed or be of an eye pleasing design such as the new under counter models. If your plan choice is a Two Story with all the bedrooms upstairs, a second floor laundry might be the way to go. It keeps the laundry from traveling up and down, but it does require a few more steps up and down to cycle the loads. My definition of a Family Foyer would usually have an outside entry, possibly a sub-porch entering into a spacious area with amenities such as lockers, a bench, a separated Laundry room, a Half Bath, and more than likely some sort of a planning/message center to serve as a hotspot for dropping off keys, cases, purses, cell phones, (great place for the charger) etc. Obviously, the garage entrance is from this area as well as a direct line to the Kitchen.

These are some of the major talking points, in a somewhat simplified manner; nonetheless it should serve as a catalyst for compiling a list to give your designer some direction right from the start.

What style of home are you leaning towards? The next thing to consider would be the style of the home; meaning mostly the exterior details, although this generally will carry through to the décor of the home in some manner throughout. There are many different styles of home exteriors, especially today

with so many homes becoming an 'eclectic' design. Meaning different styles being blended together into something that is not necessarily one style or another, but more of a current trend of design. This is acceptable, but care must be taken to guard against something being too trendy or not pleasing at all. For the constraints of this article we will assume that exterior design will be guided by a professional, however it is important to understand that your designer will need some input from you as to what you like or don't like. Take pictures of homes that are pleasing to you, even if there is only a detail or two that you like. It helps.

Details, Details: Finally we approach the fine details. This would include all of the finishes such as; counters, floor coverings, wall covering, trim details, cabinets, faucets and finishes, and built-ins. Most of these details won't affect the actual home plans that much, however, some of them are important such as columns, arches, built-ins, and cabinetry allowances, because they need to be accommodated for space planning and also need to flow smoothly with the layout and character of the home. Include these in your 'Grocery List' as your architectural designer may need this information, but it also will help later in the building process, to not overlook something that was important to you. If you are using an interior designer, these items will become critical for the next design phase.

This approach will help you get under way with your design whether you are a builder working with a customer or a homeowner looking to design/build a new home.



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