

# Planning your New Home?

by Lisa M. Jensen

## Don't Wait to Get Started

You're pre-qualified and know what your budget allows. You've scouted out a handful of lots, each potentially ideal. You've chosen a builder you trust and have gradually whittled down a selection of home designs to what appears to be a manageable pile. But now, it's time to take all of this forward. Time to decide exactly what to build, where to build it, and how you want it to look and live – inside and out – when it's finished. It's time to get really serious about one thing – while you still have time.

Your Homework.

"There are thousands of decisions to make when you're building," says Calvin Jen, principal designer and partner at A.M.D.G. Architects, Inc., in Michigan. "Most people don't realize how many decisions there are and they don't allow enough time to plan."

Katherine Slant, author of *The Brand-New House Book*, agrees. She cautions that rushing the process once product selection deadlines kick in may result in a new home that's a lot like your old one – only bigger or smaller.

## Looking At Your Lifestyle

"People tend to concentrate on how they want each room to look, but the key to building a home that will really work for you is asking yourself, 'How do I want to live?'" says Harold Spitzer, president of Spitzer & Associates Architects in New York. "Am I formal or informal? Do I feel most comfortable in spaces that are wide open, or smaller and more intimate?"

The rooms your family spends the most time in deserve the most attention. Spitzer suggests considering how you spend your time in these rooms. "Do you love to cook? Then invest in a nice range and countertop. Do you love to unwind in front of movies or do you appreciate music? Then make that big screen TV or sound system you've been eyeing a priority. Cut corners in other areas. You don't need to sacrifice these things for a mantle that impresses your guests or extensive built-ins you wouldn't really use."



Study home plans and ask yourself, "How do I want to live? Am I formal or informal? Do I feel most comfortable in spaces that are wide open, or smaller and more intimate?"

Once these primary decisions are made, take a more detailed assessment of needs. What activities will take place in the rooms? How many people will typically occupy each room at a time, along with the largest number? Will you use existing furniture or do you plan to purchase new? What are your storage needs? Do you have family heirlooms or collectibles to exhibit? What is your flooring preference?

If you frequently entertain outside, think about how you can extend living space into "outdoor rooms." Consider where walking paths or gardens might go and whether you'll be able to view these from inside your home.

## Making Aesthetic Decisions

Aesthetic preferences can be the most difficult to define and satisfy because of the multitude of directions you can take. For instance, do you prefer formal or casual? Simple or detailed? Open or defined? Structured or whimsical? Rustic or refined? Comfortable or elegant? Airy or cozy? Bright or subdued? Cool or warm?

While you may already have a preconceived notion of what your new home will look like or include, try not to lock in on specifics until after you've investigated all of your options.

"One mistake I often see people make is choosing a certain design element because they admire it in a friend's or neighbor's house," observes Lorene Elzinga Roskamp, ASID, IIDA affiliate and senior interior designer at Design Plus in Michigan. "Just because it may work well in their home doesn't mean it's going to be applicable for your home or lifestyle."

"I'll have clients who say, 'I want a mahogany-paneled living room,' but I'll point out that practically everything they've clipped features light oak," Spitzer says. "They'll tell me that their best friend has mahogany and it's just beautiful. I'll remind them that no matter how beautiful and functional something is in another person's home, it just might not be right for them – and ultimately, they'll wind up unhappy."

Roskamp agrees. "Eighty percent of the people I work with have their mind locked in a certain direction before they begin. They decide they want deep red walls in the family room. But after opening themselves up to all possibilities and working through the design process, they wind up with celery green."

### Clip, Clip, Clip

To explore all options, begin by perusing home magazines and catalogs – as many as you can. Clip out photographs that appeal to you instinctively, without trying to analyze why. Stuff these into a folder that you can later organize by room.

Many surprises come out of clipping

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images. You may realize you're actually drawn to bolder colors than you'd originally planned to have, or you may see an innovative built-in you wouldn't have considered. You might find that your design style has changed and you're ready to experiment with minimalism or be more eclectic. "You won't know until you look," Spitzer concludes.

Jen also encourages his clients to clip out what they don't like. "That especially helps a designer to focus in on where a client is headed," he notes. "But you're able to keep a more open mind."

Roskamp considers a client's wardrobe. "You can tell a lot about a person by what they choose to wear – whether they are a bolder or more introverted personality – and those traits can be carried over into design choices for the home."

She urges clients to focus on structural and big-ticket items first, elements that will likely remain in the home for years and says window trim and cabinetry style set the tone for a home. "If you're torn between light maple and rich espresso hues, run the two styles side-by-side for a while as you continue to fill up your idea book," she suggests. "Eventually, one style will emerge as working better with the flooring, countertop or furniture you choose."

Consulting a professional designer, even if it's only for a couple of hours to help you sort through your ideas folder, can be very beneficial. Designers draw upon years of experience and can make suggestions regarding lighting, texture and other elements you never would have considered.

"It also helps to solicit opinions from friends and family who know you well and see how your family lives in your current home," Jen comments. "Share your magazine clippings with them. Often they'll raise a point you've completely overlooked. You may be amazed."



left photo courtesy of BloomingPrairie.net

FAR LEFT: If you frequently entertain outside, think about how you can extend living space into “outdoor rooms.”

MIDDLE & RIGHT: The rooms where you and your family spend the most time, deserve the most attention. Do you love to cook? Then invest in a nice range and countertop. Do you like curling up with a good book? Treat yourself to a cozy spot by the fire.

## Shopping Around

Giving yourself more time to shop around means, of course, that you’re likely to secure the ideal products – at the best prices. Do your preliminary research on-line, then check out stores and showrooms, armed with a notebook – not a checkbook.

“Your home is the hugest investment you’ll ever make,” Roskamp says. “You owe it to yourself to see what’s out there. If your mindset doesn’t allow you to look beyond certain products, you may miss out on something you might have liked even better. Don’t be afraid to like something better.”

In addition to discovering the latest industry offerings for flooring, plumbing fixtures, lighting, cabinetry and appliances, shopping around also allows you to view the real McCoy up close, early on. Discovering that the cabinetry you’ve loved on paper for the past six months isn’t so perfect

anymore at the store – after the builder has given you two weeks to make your final decision – can result in a rushed selection you aren’t crazy about.

Before choosing paint hues, Roskamp encourages clients to walk around each space after it’s been dry-walled and to buy a small container of paint and coat a larger-sized sample board, or ask for larger chip sample sheets. “I look at the color on a cloudy day and on a sunny day – to see how natural light changes the color,” she says. “Then you can zero in on how intense the color should be.”

The myriad of decisions in building a home can be totally overwhelming. Spitzer summarizes the best way to stay in control and ensure an outcome you’re happy with for years to come: “Get educated and gather as much information as you can – about yourself and about products.” ■

## Planning a New Home Check List

### ■ PLAN WAAY AHEAD

Make as many decisions as possible before you’re faced with deadlines to do so.

### ■ THINK LIFESTYLE

Your decisions should accommodate how you actually live on a daily basis.

### ■ CLIP, CLIP, CLIP

Get to work on that pile of magazines. Cut out things you like, and things you don’t.

### ■ TALK ABOUT IT

Run your ideas past friends and family, and consider consulting a professional designer.

### ■ SEE FOR YOURSELF

Get out there and touch the real thing.