

**Metropolitan**

## Master planners

By Jen Waters, *THE WASHINGTON TIMES*

Dawn Mixon doesn't want the average home with a white picket fence. When deciding on plans for her future residence in Northwest, she placed a high priority on originality. Because the lot on which her home will sit has an irregular shape, her house will have to fit the space. Accomplishing her goal required that she find an architect who could make the unusual plot of land complement the finished project.

"I wanted my house to be a little different," she says. "I wanted something spacious and modern. In D.C., it's really hard to get those things, ... but I wanted something that was ours, which we built from scratch." When picking the perfect house plan, the options are nearly endless. In addition to looking in magazines or books for ideas, one can purchase blueprints from online sources and adapt them to fit personal needs. Many people, however, still choose the old-fashioned route of hiring an architect. Others bypass the architect and ask the builder to design the home.

While working on Mrs. Mixon's house plans, Travis Price, owner of Travis Price Architects in Northwest, envisioned a 6,200-square-foot steel home on stilts, with a 22-foot bridge as the entranceway leading from the street to the house. He also plans to have six decks on the outside of the house to make up for the lack of yard and give Mrs. Mixon's two small children, Chaz, 7, and Skye, 6, a place to play outdoors. "We go about our daily lives, and we underestimate the power that space has on us," Mr. Price says, citing a quote from Winston Churchill: "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."

When choosing an individual to make a blueprint for a home, Mr. Price says finding the right person is essential, especially because it probably will take about two years before a welcome mat is placed at the front door. Looking into the person's design ability and experience is important. Many people never consider using an architect for the project because of budget concerns, Mr. Price says, but it's a myth that architects are only for the rich and flamboyant. In fact, he says hiring an architect as part of a team to build a home will cost the same or less in the overall budget as buying a house built by a development company, which often has a "soft cost" of 20 percent to 30 percent hidden in the price. Like most other architects, Mr. Price charges a specified percentage of the total cost of the house for his services. Further, he believes an architect should be an objective party between the client and the builder, helping make sure the builder's price is fair. "A house designed by an architect ends up costing the same and looks 10 times better," he says. "It's a shoe that fits."

For clients who would like to browse many blueprints before making a decision, logging onto a Web site that sells house plans might be an option, says Stephanie Nelson, co-owner of Nelson Design Group in Jonesboro, Ark. The company displays about 700 drawings for sale at [www.nelsondesigngroup.com](http://www.nelsondesigngroup.com). The prices of its drafts start at \$450. Web surfers might buy a specific plan for a number of reasons, she says. They could decide the plan is exactly what they want for their home and within their budget. Or they might like only a specific portion of the draft and think it's worth saving for reference. Or they could ask for modifications to a blueprint that almost fits their needs. "People are spending a whole lot of money on building a house," she says. "It's doesn't need to be easily chosen. It's a major investment someone makes. You pay a lot of money for a mortgage payment. The house should fit you. You shouldn't have to fit the house. It should reflect your personality and lifestyle, within reason."

Sometimes clients do not need an entirely new home but an addition to their existing house, says Chris Landis, co-owner of Landis Construction in Northwest. Even for a smaller project, he says, an architect's drawings can assist the process. "There are a lot of little details you need to use to specify how it should be built," he says. "You have to deal with an existing structure and measure it. ... You want it to look like part of the existing house."

Even though architects have an eye for the fine points, their drawings need to translate from paper to reality with ease, says Curtis Guckert, vice president of the Apollo Group Inc. in Clifton. As a builder, he is not convinced that an architect is needed to construct a stellar home. He says many of his clients work directly with him to avoid structural issues that may result from an architect's faulty drawing. "The customer deals with the designer and builder all at once," he says. "When you get to the final outcome, the project seems to move forward seamlessly." Whatever method soon-to-be homeowners pick, John Blackburn, owner of Blackburn Architects in Northwest, says customers should be compiling a "fantasy file." Researching as many alternatives as possible will make the completed house better. Their dream, however, has to be compatible with the zoning restrictions of the area. Depending on the client's contract, either the architect or the builder is responsible for making sure the regulations have been met.

"We take their ideas and thoughts and knead and digest them," he says. "They have to be flexible as we educate them and they educate us." When Rick Devine of Aptos, Calif., met Mr. Blackburn for the first time, he described his dream home. Mr. Devine wanted a customized house with redwood siding and a matching horse barn on his 80-acre ranch. The Devine family is living up the street from the building site, anticipating the completion of the home in the next year. "Once you begin construction, there are always issues and changes that come up," Mr. Devine says. "To have an architect help resolve problems and coordinate technical issues, in my opinion, it's fundamental."