

A finishing test

Walls done right? Find out easily.



By Duo Dickinson, AIA, an award-winning architect who has taught at Yale University and Roger Williams University. He is the author of six books. His most recent book, *The House You Build* (The Taunton Press;

2004; \$34.95), aims to help readers build homes with excellent features while staying within their budgets. Dickinson lives in Madison, Connecticut.

Here's a quick test to find out: Take a naked lightbulb and hold it up close to the surfaces to instantly see in shadow relief any deviations from a flat surface.

Once you've got a smooth surface, there is one simple tool that can transform any drywall—color. Contrast can easily be created, changing the way you view large aspects of your home's interior.

The second way to enliven the look is to create surface variations and “holes.” For instance, a niche or shelf area can be made by putting a hole in the wall itself. When you “break the box,” plain walls become sculptural events.

Q Friends have told me how much they like their tankless, on-demand water-heating system. But I'm not sold yet. What are the benefits and issues?

A Until about five years ago, my rule was this: If you need hot water on a regular basis (several times a day), keeping a well-insulated, medium-size conventional tank heater (40 gallons and up) at a high temperature was cheaper than an instant-on tankless system.

However, the technology of in-line water heaters has improved, and in many cases it seems now to make more sense to go tankless. I recommend asking your plumber about the energy required of either type of system for the gallons your household will need and going with the one that makes sense for you.

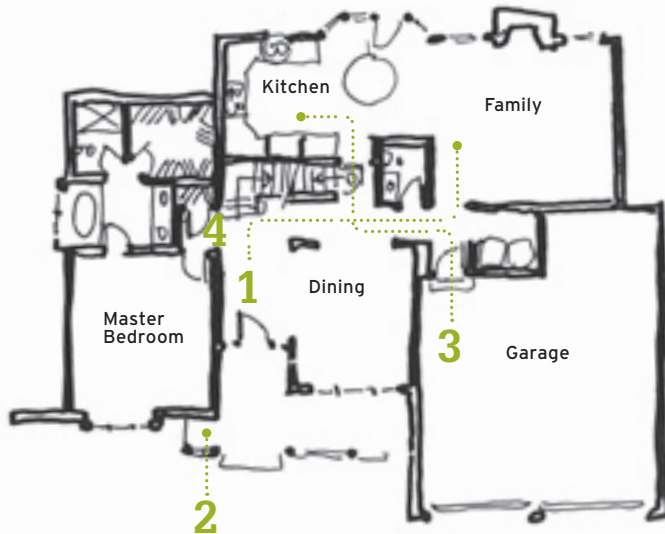
And a word of caution: Tankless solutions can be overwhelmed if you have relatively unrestricted water flow through 1-inch pipes, as the gallons per minute can often exceed the in-line water heater's capacity to transfer heat in a timely fashion. Talk to your plumber about this.

Q The walls of our house are going to be drywall, like almost everyone's house. Is there any way we can give our walls some character and individuality?

A Drywall is truly a miracle product. It is relatively lightweight, fairly flexible, and fantastically adaptive, but aesthetically it can be predictable and plain. Where drywall visually fails is at corners and at taped points between sheets—no amount of painting will obscure those flaws. Look critically at the drywall in your new construction. Are there enough layers of compound to obscure any obvious joints? Has the compound been spread and sanded well?

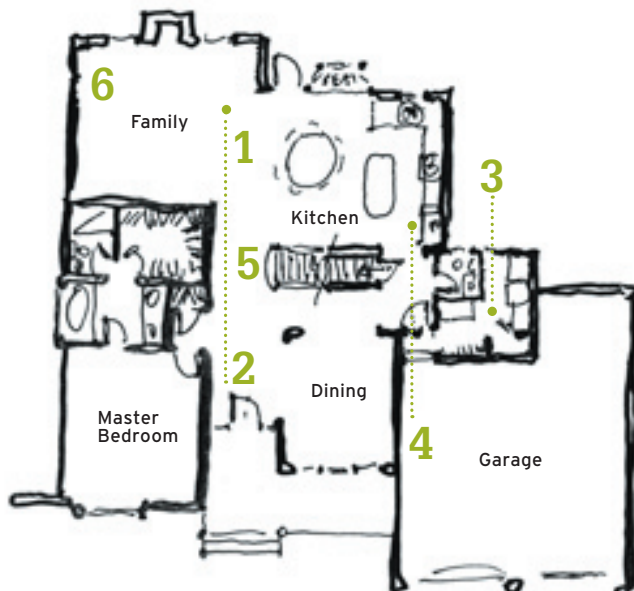
What's WRONG with This Plan?

1. At least two blind corners before you reach the family room from front door.
2. 2×2-foot porch corner with no real function.
3. Three turns between garage and kitchen.
4. Too many tight 3-foot openings.
5. No mudroom.



How to FIX It:

1. Flip positions of kitchen and family room.
2. Align walkway from front door to family room.
3. Add a mudroom and laundry area.
4. Straighten path into kitchen from garage.
5. Open area around stairs, putting railings on both sides.
6. Place kitchen and family room behind master bedroom.



Q I have a floor plan (“What’s Wrong with This Plan,” left), but I’m not sure I’ll be happy with it. What can be done to improve it?

A In the illustrated stock plan, it’s clear that both of the designed circulation sequences (for guests coming into the house for the first time or for homeowners coming through the garage) have gross misjudgments in their design. Fortunately, these seemingly fatal flaws have an easy resolution.

Rather than confronting the stair when you walk in the front door, you should see beyond it to where you ultimately need to go. And rather than having to turn twice with grocery bags in your hands and then walk through the dining room to get into the kitchen, why not have the kitchen directly in front of you when you walk into the house from the car? Finally, switch the locations of the kitchen and family room and the plan makes sense for everyday living.

Not only is the plan now more convenient, the homeowners have also gained an 80-square-foot mudroom and laundry room at the entrance from the garage into the house.



Q The house design we are considering has a flat roof. I love the look but am concerned about water intrusion. Should I go with a different design?

A In many parts of the country, flat roofs do make sense, as they cost far less to build and roof. The stark reality, though, is that flat roofs rely on roof membranes, mastic, and flashing; and all materials that are elastic tend to become less elastic with exposure, which results in small holes that leak.

Architects find flat roofs much easier to design. Realize that they—being human—will sometimes take the easiest route, and to me that often means a flat roof where a pitched one could turn home into sculpture.