

In architecture school, I was taught all kinds of things about buildings, but I learned very little about people. Now that I have been practicing architecture for nearly 20 years, I find myself increasingly drawn to the human drama that accompanies an architectural commission. I have come to realize that, for me, the real varsity-level action—especially in residential architecture—resides not in the bricks and mortar, but in the metaphoric sweat lodge of the architect-client relationship. Although each project is different, I have begun to recognize the same universal human themes over and over again: Exhilaration. Fear. Envy. Empathy. Betrayal. With each project I find my clients and myself starring in site-specific versions of the same high-budget, convincingly acted reality show.

There are five episodes in a typical show. I'll capitalize them so they sound official: Programming, Design, Documentation, Bidding, and Construction. If you've

worked with an architect before, you might recognize some of these terms. Even if you haven't worked with one and the biggest project you've ever completed is a ham sandwich, the concepts behind the episodes are probably familiar. The difference between architecture and a ham sandwich is that architecture is a far bigger sandwich—so big, in fact, that you need a sandwich specialist like me to help you make it. Architecture is unlike making a ham sandwich in that you don't succumb to a psychic meltdown when you feel your ham sandwich is a wee bit different from what you ordered. And when making a ham sandwich, I don't stare in the mirror in the morning and ask myself, Why are these nice people paying me to make them a ham sandwich when I can't even make a ham sandwich for myself?

Let me illustrate my point with a simple role-playing exercise. I'm the architect and you're the client. Your name is Marla. You need to renovate your house. You ▶



give me a call, and we go have coffee, and after sufficient schmoozing you decide to hire my firm to help you renovate your house and add on a 600-square-foot master bedroom and bathroom. Your husband's name is Earle, and you have two boys, JoJo and Ben.

EPISODE 1: PROGRAMMING

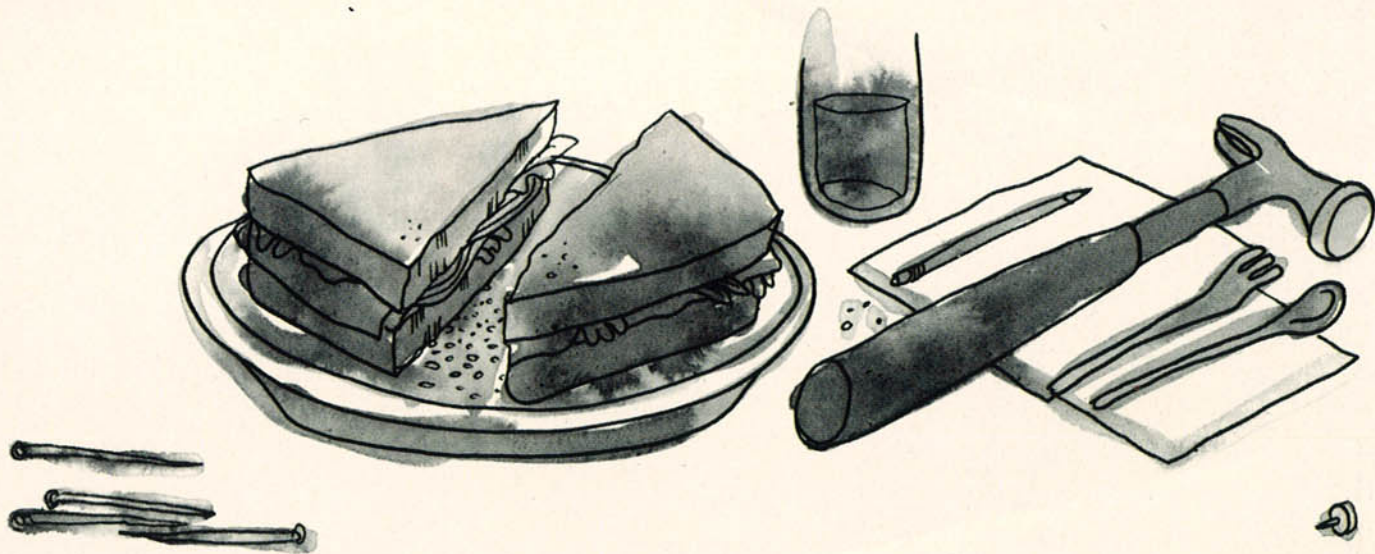
Programming, Marla, is the premiere episode, in which I help you figure out what, exactly, you want to do. Based on our preliminary coffee-shop interview, I know you and Earle like your house for the most part, but you are starting to feel cramped. JoJo is six and he's obsessed with jam. He drips it everywhere. Ben is 13, his voice just changed, and he's got these bushy eyebrows as of last week, and he's started to take alarmingly long showers at night. As the architect, I help you through this discovery process by asking a lot of questions to get a sense of what exactly you want your renovation project to accomplish functionally, and what you want it to look and feel like. This is the phase where pages are ripped wildly out of design magazines. This is the phase where we bandy about words like "streamlined" and "eclectic," and where I ask extremely specific questions about your toilet paper and shampoo preferences. So we do that for a while, Marla, talking and doodling and looking. We're starting to need each other already: I give you attention and a sense that I can help you organize your ingredients and then construct your enormous sandwich. You give me attention and maybe some money.

EPISODE 2: DESIGN

Design is the episode in which we turn the program we developed during the first episode into architectural ideas. This is the phase where I sketch out lots of wild ideas at first, and then fewer wild ideas and more variations on one pretty good idea. You and Earle are pleased, and I'm feeling good, too. My design intuition begins to kick in: One by one, bad ideas fall by the wayside, leaving good ones in their wake. I hole up at my office and crank. We talk less, and the design takes on a life of its own. I feel like I know each of you intimately. The

contents of your goal-vs.-constraint shopping bag have distinctive shapes and flavors, and their composition into a workable sandwich requires complete balance and focus. It grows dark outside, Marla, night after night, and I'm still working. As I draw and redraw on my computer, I feel like a ghost floating through your actual house—taking mental pictures and spiritual measurements. Finally, I get it right—I think. Although it might suck? I don't know. I draw it up. I call you the next morning and tell you about the changes, and you like what you hear, which makes me think it doesn't suck after all. I send you the final pretty good idea for your review. You're pleased and you want to show the plans to your neighbor, whose wife is an architect. I also send you a bill.

And you get mad. You inform me in a terse email that the design I sent along with the bill (which you felt was surprisingly high) was not what we talked about on the phone. Not at all. It just doesn't seem that I'm listening to you and Earle as much as I did at first. Where is this hostility coming from, Marla? I want to disagree with you, but I realize I'm guilty as charged. I'm not listening. (I mean, I still am, but not as much. It's true.) I'm trying to get a basic design buttoned down. I think I understand what you need pretty well, and I'm trying to get the thing figured out so you can move in by Christmas, which is the new deadline that Earle sprung on me Saturday morning, out of the clear blue sky. (And I think, but don't say to you, This is our ham sandwich, Marla. You, me, Earle, and the boys—we're in this together, and our ham sandwich is going to be a tidily crafted sandwich and not some Cajun pork wrap.) I realize again that I need to do a better job of communicating that design is an inexact process, and that missteps are an important part of the process. In not carefully walking you through the design I came up with in my ghost journey, it's true—I do suck. But give me another chance. Marla, for the love of God, let me into your life again. I send a calming email to you, ramp up the charm to initial chit-chat levels, and then call you a few hours later and set up a time to get another cup of coffee. ▶



Later, as we have coffee, I listen to you, Marla. For the first time, you allow me into the complex reality of your life. Some of the things you never told me in our Programming episode: JoJo's exploring new types of jam. You think Ben might be addicted to, you know, showering or something. On top of that, it seems like Earle's been cracking open an extra Mike's Hard Lemonade every night—he wasn't like that before the boys. Disarmed by your honesty, I open up about my insecurities as a designer and a communicator. As we become human in each other's eyes, we realize that this isn't even about your house—that your house is just a physical expression of your life and your relationships. I relearn (for the hundredth time since my career started) that as an architect, I can only really be of value if I truly understand your life. We get more coffee, and start sketching over the renderings I brought. It's a very special episode, this one...and it ends there on the street in front of the coffee shop, maybe with a little hug. As the music wells up, the camera pans to me waving goodbye to you, Marla, with a roll of red-marked drawings under my arm.

EPISODE 3: DOCUMENTATION

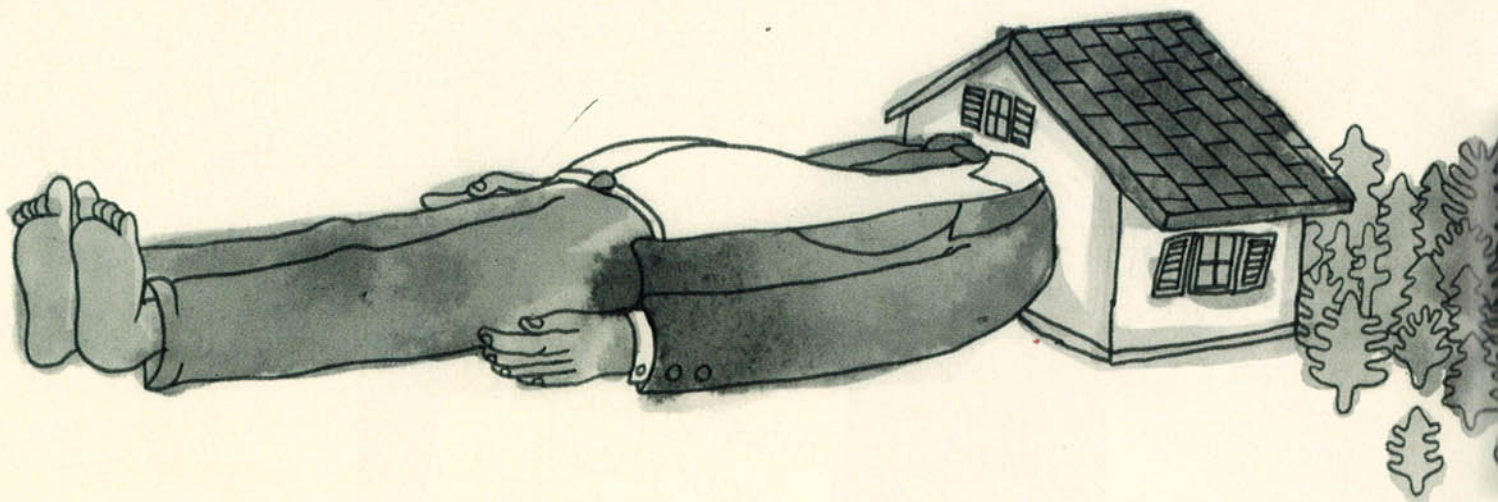
Documentation is the episode of the show in which I immediately fall back into my pattern and become incommunicado and hole up and crank, making construction drawings of the final red-marked design from the coffee shop. This is the longest episode, aside from Construction itself, during which I shoot you a couple of the fattest bills of the show. But you're not mad at me, see, because you keep changing things, Marla, and you don't want me to get mad at you for all the late changes, and perhaps charge you even vaster sums than I already am, out of contractual spite. This is the episode where you call me at home and start the conversation by saying, "Don't kill me, but Earle and I've been talking and..."

Marla. Am I upset that you keep changing your mind? That you want polished-concrete vanity tops in your bathroom, even though you initially wanted the iffy resinous translucent slabs you saw in Toronto, which I subsequently drew in about 23 details against my better

judgment? No, I don't get mad. Do I get mad that you want to go back to a separate laundry area pocketed away in JoJo's closet, which we'll have to enlarge somehow, even though we just made this same closet smaller last week because Earle thinks he needs to learn how to organize his jam-encrusted toys? Am I mad, Marla? Of course not, because I'm a professional, and because you're human and I'm human and this is our sandwich. So I make the changes. I find a stackable washer/dryer that fits nicely. I give JoJo an elevated bed that I would have killed for when I was six and that he probably won't fully appreciate, and figure out a way to cram all his toys into a built-in storage unit. We give Ben an upgraded lock on his room, and a bell, so he can alert you when he is done showering and needs to be fed. During this episode, you definitely get your money's worth. I come over quite a bit and ask a lot of questions and show you lots of drawings and specifications that look complex and official, and you and Earle both feel a sense of calm inevitability about your future house, which is good. If this episode were associated with a season it would be autumn: stormy, windy, smoky, beautiful. When it's over, I rake up all the sheets of drawings into a nice tidy pile.

EPISODE 4: BIDDING

Bidding is the episode in which you find out how much your sandwich is going to cost. This is winter, Marla, the darkest episode of the show. After a few weeks, the contractor comes back with a bid, and then you're mad at me. You feel betrayed: I've led you down a path and you're disappointed, frankly, that I apparently have no clue as to how much things cost in the real world. Your anger stops me in my tracks. Perhaps you're right. I live in my ivory tower, drawing my little lines. I may very well suck. But on the other hand, I did try to talk you out of quite a few things that we both knew you couldn't afford, Marla. This I say calmly, though my hands are shaking under the table. We meet and cut scope out of the project, switch out Trespa for polished concrete on the vanity tops and try again. The numbers come back. You're mad at me. I'm sorry, Marla, I'm trying. I can't ▶



tell the contractors how much they can charge. We cut more, lose the Danish woodstove, try again. You bump up your budget a bit. We narrow down the contractors to the lowest bidder, a guy named Darryl, whose card says “Dubble Barrel” and who insists you call him “Dub.” We’re still over budget. He trims his fee a bit. He blames everything on “China.” We’re still high. Earle freaks. I switch the Sheetrock from $\frac{5}{8}$ inch to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, we lose the center-pivot door, the cast-stainless fittings, and roll the dice again, shouting out the number we need to hit like Don Rickles at Caesar’s Palace. Finally, we hit it, and the bells ring. You sign a contract with Dub. The end of this episode resembles a Gatorade commercial: We’re sweaty and bleeding, we smell of moths—but we won, Marla, we won. You point at me, slo-mo, from the bottom of the roiling man pile, as I catch my breath in the end zone a few yards away. Hands on knees, ball at my feet, I nod and point back at you.

EPISODE 5: CONSTRUCTION

Construction is the final episode of the show, in which Dub makes your sandwich. As he frames up the addition, he pulls you aside at the end of work one day and tells you that it seems to him like a lot of money to spend on a bedroom that’s two feet too small. So you give me a call at home that night. You tell me what Dub said and wonder why the hell we didn’t make the bedroom two feet bigger, like Earle asked for in the beginning. What happened to listening? I calm you down, and tell you that everything is fine: Framed-in space always looks small before it’s Sheetrocked. It happens every single time, without fail. I know what I’m doing, Marla. I don’t suck. I meet you at your house the next morning to show you what I mean. I arrive early and just about have a heart attack when I see the bedroom framing. It does look too small! It looks way too small! The bathroom looks too small, too—there must be a mistake! Dub must have framed it wrong! The dude is incapable of reading drawings. I quickly measure the rooms before you arrive, and determine they are framed out exactly as designed. Jesus

Christ! My confidence drains out of me, which creates space for industrial-strength panic, and I realize I really do suck and that I need to hang it up and get cracking on my next career as a mailman. I sit on the floor in a sawdusty corner, rocking back and forth, mouth agape, when you arrive and are in a good mood. You talked to your neighbor’s wife, the architect, and she thinks the room size is fine. It’s fine, she says! And she’s right! That woman is an architect and a genius and she’s dead-on right! What was I thinking? I don’t suck. Not at all. And neither does Dub, that wily little so-and-so.

And Dub puts on the Sheetrock later in the week. And it’s fine, indeed. And the rest of construction plays out in a similar manner: Something sucks when it’s getting built, and then it doesn’t suck at all once it all comes together. Once in a while something actually does suck and we need to fix it. And then you’re mad at me. And I’m sorry, Marla. And then it’s done. Your house is done, and you’re happy. Earle and the boys are happy. And I’m glad, too. Sort of.

Our season is over. It’s hard to quit you, Marla. I’ve spent so many hours dedicated to you and your family—to our sandwich, sweating out the details, projecting you and your family into all the spaces. I feel an ownership of sorts in what we created. There’s even a wee bit of resentment in my subconscious as I imagine you abandoning me like an old popsicle wrapper after you’ve mined my creative soul and glued the golden nuggets onto the paper plate of your life. Of course, you’ve handed over a stack of money. But what is money? It’s paper. It smells of desperation and service and it gets wet in the shower. I have paper, and you have Earle and JoJo and Ben and your new house and your great life.

And you never call me anymore, Marla.

And when I call you, you don’t really seem to be quite as interested in what I have to say.

And we drift apart, your nice family and me. Me: a clown-faced helium balloon, let go and floating skyward as you move inside. You: a pile of bricks and people, shaped like a house. ■