

An Architect Who Wants Your Ideas



Lydia Straus-Edwards at her Woodbury office.
Mary Anne Haggerty



A Litchfield house designed by Ms. Straus-Edwards in a photograph taken by the architect.

By KATHRYN BOUGHTON

Perhaps no possession more clearly reflects the personality of its owner than a house. Whether a starter home for a young couple raising kids in the suburbs, a mansion set amid manicured acres or a retirement home on the shores of a quiet pond, each dwelling mirrors the tastes and needs of those who dwell within it.

Similarly, the way space is used in houses can change with the decades and the changing life styles of homeowners. Young families may find they need more room, while grandparents might want to create guest quarters for visiting children and grandchildren. Retirees who choose to stay in their longtime homes may decide to use extra space for an income-producing apartment, or homeowners may opt for a general redesign to make living space more efficient.

The evolutionary changes a house goes through are of particular interest to Lydia Straus-Edwards, principal designer, architect and master planner with Straus-Edwards Associates of Woodbury and San Diego, Calif. A year ago, Ms. Straus-

Edwards decided to change the direction of her 20-year-old architectural practice to offer a new service especially designed to help families recreate their homes to meet changing uses.

"After 20 years in the business I decided I wanted to change things," said the architect. "I searched my soul for what I liked to do best and realized I was happiest working with existing houses, doing something wonderful with them. I like working with people, and I find you learn more about them when you are working with an existing building. You are not as concerned with style, but more with solving a unique problem."

To that end she has established Design-In-Tandem, a service of Straus-Edwards Associates that provides affordable design packages for owners of moderately priced homes. Through the service, she meets with homeowners for half-day, intensive planning sessions that leave the owners with workable concepts and scale drawings they can use to *(cont.)*

carry their projects forward. The service eliminates many of the standard procedures used in redesigning buildings, with benefits for all.

"All the same issues are there as when you are planning new construction-lighting, traffic patterns, room arrangements, land uses - but this is an area of the business that has been under - served, where the traditional approach to architecture doesn't work. And the reason it doesn't work is because the fees just aren't there," she said.

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- Lydia Straus-Edwards,
Woodbury architect

"There is a tremendous amount of work involved in doing a redesign, so when you approach it from a traditional point of view everyone is unhappy - the architect feels he hasn't been able to charge enough and the homeowner feels he's paid too much. Then, when the project is under construction, the builder is there every day, the homeowner is there every day and the project will always evolve into something similar to what was planned while a fairly rigid set of plans sits unused in [the contractor's] truck. It's inevitable, it's human nature to want to change the plans, but about 20 percent of the [architect's] effort will be wasted."

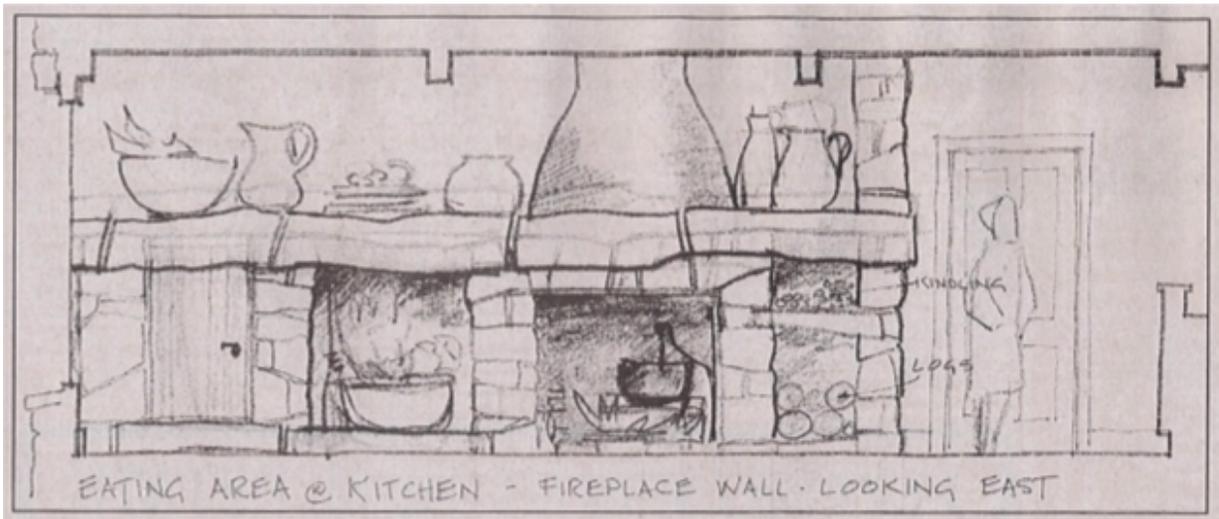
"So what part does the architect do best?" she asked rhetorically. "It seemed to me that the part that was missing was

the master planning. How does the house work? How will it evolve? How do the house and land work as a unit of design? I am now offering a design service package that does that part and leaves the homeowner free to decide how to handle the rest of the project.

When Ms. Straus-Edwards is called to discuss a redesign she begins by meeting with the owner or owners of the building. "That owner may be undeveloped intellectually, but he lives with that house daily," she explained. "They know how it works. When I arrive, I will talk to them for an hour or an hour and a half and then we will walk through the whole house and I will tell them how I think we can solve the problem. Often, they will say, 'No, that doesn't work because.... So, off we - go and plan again!

"Often they have a fantasy, but it hasn't jelled yet," she continued. "They haven't resolved the conflicts. But I haven't met a client yet who doesn't know what they want and how it should work."

Following the tour, the designer sits at a table with the owners and starts to plan. If the owners already have drawings of their house, the designer will use those as the basis for the planning; if not, Ms. Straus-Edwards does a drawing of the portion of the building to be redesigned. "It's a great deal of fun," the architect said. "Often these are lay people who have not been exposed to the design process and they are amazed at what can be done. Sessions cost \$595 and last between three and five hours, but in that time we will solve the problem." (cont.)



A redesign drawing by Lydia Straus-Edwards.

Straus-Edwards Helps Homeowners Redesign

Ms. Straus-Edwards said that using a flat fee for the service makes the process more enjoyable. "It's very relaxed," she said. "When people hear about me one way or another - I've done very little advertising and most of it is word of mouth - they are down to the point of desperation. They can't see how it will work out. But when I leave they have a plan that is attractive, if not gorgeous. It's always beyond what they could have imagined, and what an ego boost for me to have clients who are so happy."

When the session ends, the homeowners have a scale drawing of the plan they have approved, "good enough for understanding the project." This drawing can be taken straight to a contractor, if the changes are relatively simple, or can be referred to an architect - either Ms. Straus-Edwards or another - for further design. Or the plans can be shown a realtor if the property is to be put up for sale. "A realtor could take a look at them and tell the homeowner if the changes would be too much for the neighborhood and not worth

the expense before a sale," the designer said.

Ms. Straus-Edwards said the plans she leaves with the homeowners are their property. She does not keep files on the projects unless the homeowners commission additional design services from her.

"A plan could need more architectural design or it could be given to a builder to execute - sometimes that could be a very good plan. If the changes are simple, a builder would probably be capable of taking the master plan and completing it," she concluded.

She said she is looking for more builders in the region who can take plans through to completion.

This new direction for Straus-Edwards Associates is only one of the changes for the firm. Ms. Straus-Edwards moved to Woodbury in 1978 and bought an old Victorian on Main Street that had been

converted into apartments. In one, she set up living quarters and her office. The former art teacher and sculptor completed her practice on the site in 1982.

She began her practice in an upstairs office in her tiny apartment, but the business thrived and she soon had a number of associates working with her in a remodeled barn located behind the Victorian. She married David Pintsov and the couple purchased another home in Woodbury, where they lived for some years before he changed companies and moved to California. This started a dual practice for the architect, and since 1989 she has lived much of the year in California, where she has developed another branch of her firm, while still dealing with clients in Connecticut.

"About a year ago I decided I didn't want to deal with so many buildings," she said, "so I gave up our home here in Woodbury and moved back into the apartment. And I have leased out my office space in the barn to a software company."

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- Lydia Straus-Edwards

"I have worked with associates in Newtown, Danbury, Meriden and San Diego through a 'virtual office' for the past seven years. Everything is done

electronically," she explained. "I have a phone service that forwards calls anywhere I am, so when someone calls, they get me - they may not know where they are reaching me, but I am the one who answers the call."

She says she is always able to meet with clients - when needed, adding that most architects schedule meetings a week or two in advance, so this gives her plenty of leeway to cluster meetings while she is in Connecticut. "And if there is a problem, I am only a plane flight away," she said.

To date, Ms. Straus-Edwards has concentrated most of her effort in Connecticut, but now she is working to increase her client base in California. "When I first moved to California we were in the midst of a recession - and what two states were hit worst, Connecticut and California. I had a certain loyalty from my clients in Connecticut, so I kind of ignored California for a number of years. Now, 10 years later, I am trying to build my practice there again."

She feels her mini-charrettes may be just the ticket for building that practice. "If you want to be successful as a newcomer, you have to find a place that no one else is paying attention to," she said. "I see myself as a house evolution specialist. I get to see how people are using their houses and then to write how the house will continue in their story. I understand and respond to the continuing story of their lives. My architecture is not about me - I respond to their lives and dreams and then make them concrete." ◀