

PREPLANNING, THE FIRST STEP TOWARD YOUR NEW HOME

Picture this! You have spent the last few months of your life planning your new home, only to find that it does not fit on your lot. Your builder has told you the only option is to make drastic changes to the design that you poured so many hours of thought and searching into. Could this really be happening? Well, in the real world, it happens all too often. Is it just bad luck? Not exactly! There was an important step that was missed before the plan selection started called preplanning.

Before an architect starts designing a custom home they go through an information-gathering phase called predesign. It starts before the first pencil touches paper. When a homeowner purchases a house plan, they must go through a similar phase called Preplanning. There are two primary types of information to be collected. The first type is **site information**. The second is a list of needs and wants of the homeowner known as a **program**.

Site information is any feature of the site that will be helpful to know when selecting a design. Here is a breakdown of the primary elements you will need to know:

1. **Site survey.** This is the single most important piece of site information. It can be a simple description of the meets and bounds of the property lines; or a detailed topographic survey. This detailed survey could show land contours, spot elevations, major plantings, roads, existing structures, utilities, and easements. The existence of unbuildable areas, such as, wetlands should be identified. The more detailed the survey, the more information that you have to work with, and the less chance for problems farther down the road.
2. **Applicable zoning ordinance, and any development restrictions.** This will tell specific requirements on how to build the house, such as, what types of materials are acceptable, and give any required setbacks from property lines. If the property meets a body of water, the Department of Natural Resources will identify setback requirements from shorelines or bluffs.
3. **Utilities.** You will need to determine the availability of utilities to the site. If on-site utilities are needed, like a well or septic system, more specific soil information will be required.
4. **Walk the site.** This is the best way to get a true understanding of what the site is really like. What are the best views? What do the neighboring properties look like? What is the best approach for drive ways and side walks. There are things you may see when walking a site that may trigger the need for more information, such as, environmental concerns.
5. **Environmental problems or wetlands.** If these items are suspected they should be investigated as soon as possible. If environmental problems are suspected you will need an environmental analysis done. If there are wetlands you will need to work with the DNR and a survey engineer to locate it on your survey.
6. **Near-by properties.** Talking to neighbors, local contractors or building inspectors are also a good source of information. They can tell you if other homes in the area have encountered problems such as high ground water or bad soil conditions.
7. **Soil borings.** Normally this information will not be required on a typical residence unless there is a reason to suspect bad soil. If bad soils are anticipated, soil borings should be done to determine the bearing capacity of the soil. This will tell you if costly foundation systems will be required.

In addition to collecting information on where you will build, you will also need to collect information on what to build. Having a written **program** helps to understand the goals you would like to accomplish. It will give you a checklist of needs prior to beginning the design searching process, and allow you to check the design later on to verify if you are achieving the goals you set out to meet.

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A program could be a very structured form or a free-form set of notes. Either method is acceptable as long as the information is useful in the searching process. The information should include the following items:

1. **Desired spaces or rooms.** These can be listed by traditional room names or by function.
2. **The size of a space or room.** The size should be indicated either by dimension or by description. For example, a dining area could be listed as 10'x14', or you could say it should seat six people comfortably.
3. **Internal relationships and adjacencies.** What rooms need to be near other rooms? What rooms need to be separated?
4. **External relationships.** If any spaces need to have a specific view, sunlight at a certain time of day or a door to the outside it should be noted.
5. **Equipment or utilities.** Spaces that get plumbing fixtures, special lighting or unique mechanical requirements should also be indicated.
6. **Special uses or lifestyle patterns.** These are characteristics that may be unique to the particular homeowner. An example may be: A husband and wife like to cook dinner together. This will have an impact on the organization and circulation of the kitchen.
7. **Style and character.** The desired style and character of the house should be considered, as well as, the number of different levels.
8. **Budget.** Determine what you are willing to spend on your home. Talk to local builders and find out what is a practical cost per square foot for your area. Be aware that as the quality of the home goes up, so does the cost. The most common mistake for most people is to use the low end of a range of cost per square foot, but then expect a high level of quality. Be honest to yourself when establishing your budget. It is better to find out early in the process than to be disappointed after your dreams are fixed on a home that is outside your means. There are three important variables that you will need to consider. How big will it be? What level of quality do I put into it? And what do I have to spend? Finding a balance between these three variables will be the most difficult part of building a home.

Acquiring site information and a program before your search begins will help you keep the selection process from spinning out of control. You can collect most of this information yourself and any information that you can't find can be obtained with the help of your local builder. The added benefit of obtaining this information will more than outweigh the cost of collecting it. The preplanning phase will give you many of the parameters needed to avoid problems later on, and provide a much better chance of getting exactly what you want in your new home.

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