

Architect-client collaboration yields highest reward

By DEBBIE WALTZER

Architect George Baker lives in a 4,000-square-foot barn, originally built in 1913, located in Victor. Just a few miles away, his client, East Bloomfield resident Sue Stewart, lives in a converted train station, circa 1860.

During the past several years, the duo has brainstormed and executed design strategies to make Stewart's home even more unique. Stewart is senior vice president and general counsel for the University of Rochester.

"The key to working well with a client is to listen, talk and think," says Baker, 66. "The ultimate goal is to provide clients with a solution that elevates their life. I think we've achieved that with Sue's home. She lives in a veritable tree house."

As homeowners remodel, renovate or add to residences, their ties with architects on the project can play a critical role in the outcome. Clients who decide to use designers and architects, however, may not always have easy relationships. Experts say homeowners often anticipate lack of control or a loss of original ideas, resulting in an unsuccessful project. Clear communication is key to overcoming those hurdles.

"(George) listens and works really well with people," says Stewart, 64. "Sometimes we disagree on minor points—such as whether I should paint the house's exterior lights white or beige—but we talk things through and figure out a solution."

Her home originally was a working train station located in Wallace, Steuben County, in the Southern Tier. During the 1960s, the structure was moved by a former owner to its current spot, and Stewart—a 2000 Athena Award recipient—purchased it roughly eight years ago.

She loved her new home but found the upstairs to be cramped. One day, while out driving, Stewart noticed Baker's sign, then called and hired him to open up the second floor.

Baker, a 1964 graduate of Kent State University's College of Architecture & Environmental Design, agrees that Stewart's abode needed work.

"There were two bedrooms upstairs, but they were small and claustrophobic," he says. "Also, there were tiny windows everywhere, so you felt like you were in jail."

Armed with Stewart's wish list for larger



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

Architect George Baker and client Sue Stewart worked together to make her Southern Tier home, a former train station, more livable.

windows and plenty of space for her extensive book collection, Baker designed two expanded bedrooms and added a sizeable bathroom to the second floor. Stewart was delighted with the results.

"It took a lot of creativity on George's part to do what he did," she says. "We worked really closely together and have remained good friends."

Baker's affinity for architecture has its roots in familial ties. Herbert Green, his maternal grandfather, was a San Antonio, Tex.-based architect.

"My grandfather always looked dashing in a three-piece suit and a monocle, and as a youngster I'd sit underneath his drawing board, and he would hand me a pad of paper and a pencil, and I would try to copy his drawings," Baker recalls. "I knew early on that architecture was my calling."

To this day, the design process is something that Baker relishes. His zest for inventive spaces is evident in the equestrian-themed home and office that he shares

with his wife, horse enthusiast Annabelle Francia-Kiss.

"As an architect, it's my job to see what the client has, find out what they want, then show them what I can do," he says.

Baker—a father of three and grandfather of four—charges \$75 per hour for his work, and he eschews written contracts with customers, preferring instead to seal the deal with a handshake.

The initial meeting with a client can be intense, he admits.

"The session often lasts for a few hours, and I'm listening, talking and thinking throughout," Baker says. "Before I leave, I give the client a narrative description of my design solution. Afterwards, I'm completely hosed."

Steven LaFrance, owner of LaFrance Architects.com P.C., who charges \$96 an hour, also pays attention to his customers' ideas. He asks prospective clients to delineate must-haves and wish-list items, so that he can develop Phase I and Phase II of a par-

ticular project.

Sometimes, ideas that emerge during an initial meeting later resurface as doable concepts. Such was the case for Baker and Stewart. Today, workers have decorated the exterior of Stewart's home with actual railroad ties and an extensive flower and herb garden—a design concept that Baker suggested several years ago during their initial discussion.

"Often it's hard to say who came up with an idea," he says. "I love to design something and make clients think that it was their idea because they then take ownership

of the concept."

And the creative process is ongoing. A few months ago, Stewart and a friend traveled to the train station's original site in Wallace and discovered a well pump on the abandoned premises. They removed the artifact and Stewart is in the process of installing the pump alongside her herb garden.

Recently, Stewart, Baker and the project's builder and landscape architect held a party to celebrate the end of their creative endeavor.

"This has truly been a collaborative project," Stewart says. "The whole process has been amazing, and we've all worked very well together. I couldn't be happier with the results."

Baker concurs: "It has been so much fun to be involved with Sue's train station project. I love the design gestation process, during which clients describe their design problems. Then it's my job to try and solve them."

Debbie Waltzer is a Rochester-area freelance writer.