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Click Your Way to an Architect-Designed House

By AMY GUNDERSON

IN mid-May, Don DeFeo was overseeing the finishing touches on his Shoreham, Vt. summer home, a three-bedroom modernist design with cedar tongue-and-groove siding and a wall of windows to capture the view of 33 acres of rolling hills. In an area where most residences tended to be either "100 years old or a new house that looks like a 100-year-old house," Mr. DeFeo said his home stood out for its contemporary design. But it wasn't one of a kind.

Mr. DeFeo bought the plan from an architect who sells ready-made designs online. Two years ago, Mr. DeFeo, 59, a retired hotel general manager, tracked down a design from Gregory La Vardera, a Merchantville, N.J.-based architect who in addition to creating custom designs,

sells stock plans for contemporary homes on the Internet. Mr. La Vardera agreed to modify the plan, called the Plat House, adding an extra bedroom, a laundry room, two sleeping porches and a garage — changes that increased the living space by 1,000 square feet.

Mr. DeFeo said that changes to the \$1,500 plan ran just under \$10,000, but that his own research showed that a custom design for a similar home would have cost at least \$40,000. And the fact that the Plat House had been built before only helped to convince him. "There was one already completed in Arkansas," said Mr. DeFeo, "and they had great pictures of the house online."

For buyers of home lots, blank canvases of sorts for building a dream vacation

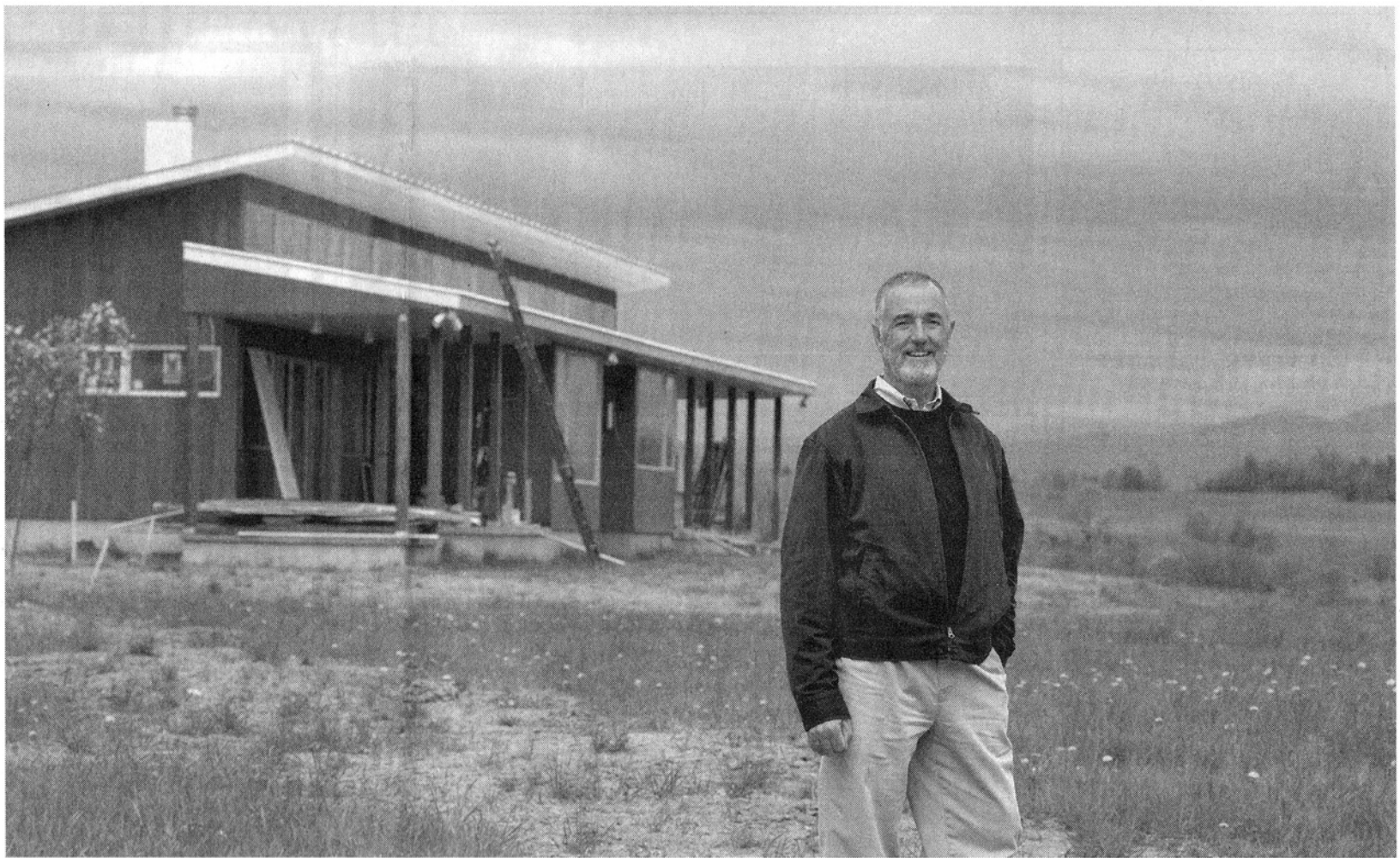


Lori Cain for The New York Times

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FLOOR PLANS ONLINE Christian Gladu of the Bungalow Company.

Click for an Architect-Designed House



Caleb Kenna for The New York Times

OFF THE SHELF Don DeFeo outside his home in Vermont. The design is by Gregory La Vardera of New Jersey, who sells plans online.

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home, stock plans represent a way to save money and to streamline the road to construction, allowing buyers — especially those who have bought lots in rural areas, where architects may be hard to find — to get into that vacation home as soon as possible. The business isn't new; books and magazines have long featured home designs for purchase. What has changed is the accessibility of such plans on the Internet and the growth of stock plans, which some architects have turned to as a side activity to their custom designs.

The second-home market is helping to fuel the trend. While design firms don't have hard numbers on the number of online plans bought for second homes, architects who sell their designs on the Web say that the second-home shopper is a sought-after customer.

The way architects present their online plans says it all. Donald A Gardner Architects, based in Greenville, S.C., divides up its plans into categories like country homes, vacation homes, resort homes and beach homes. Houseplans.com, based in Novato, Calif., classifies its home designs as beach, coastal and cottage styles, among others.

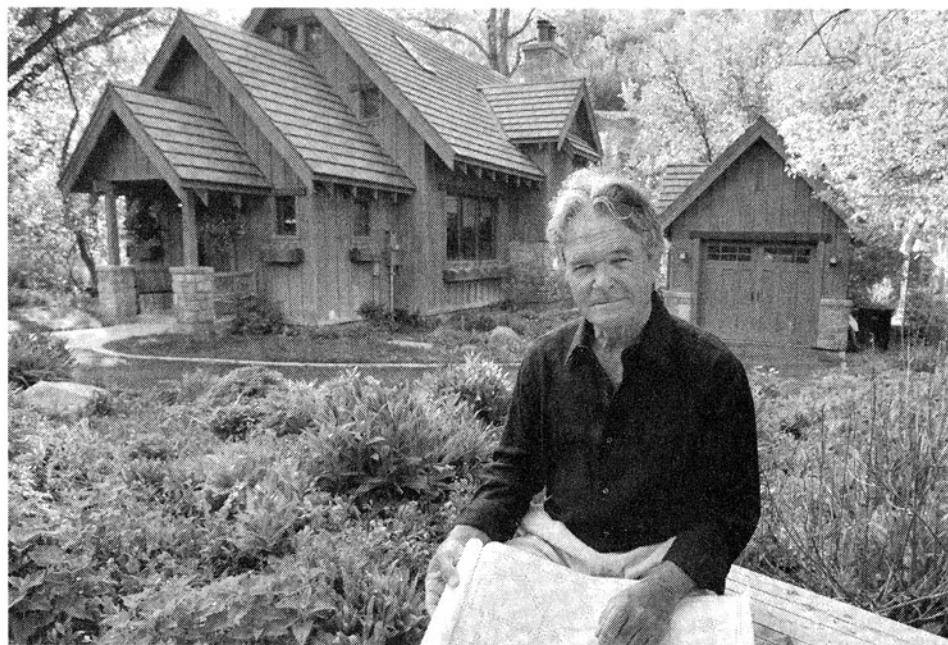
THREE of the most popular plan categories at Architectural House Plans, based in Sausalito, Calif., are cabins, small houses and country homes. And Ross Chapin Architects sells ready-made plans through its GoodFit division that are suited to a second-home client looking for a small, easy-to-maintain residence. "They naturally capture the essence of cozy retreats," said Debbie Loudon, the public relations director for the company.

While so-called online architects vary in the size and variety of their designs, as well as how much service they provide for modifications, they do have one thing in common: their plans cost just a fraction of what one would pay an architect for a custom design.

And for some buyers, the savings is motivation enough. When Ron and Beth Matsko were preparing to build what would eventually be their retirement home on Fripp Island, off the coast of South Carolina, paying for a custom design wasn't in the budget. "We bought the ocean view lot and then spent 15 years paying that off. We didn't have an extra penny to throw around for architecture fees," said Mr. Matsko, who purchased an \$800 plan from Donald A. Gardner Architects. The couple modified the three-bedroom design to increase the size of the dining room and expand the back deck. The changes were made by the builder. "It wasn't hard to do," Mr. Matsko said. "I just had to get a local engineer to bless the plans."

Modifications can often be done by the firm selling the design, but buyers can also find their own architect or builder to make changes. In addition to securing local permits prior to construction, homeowners may need to have their plans approved by an engineer or architect to insure that they are up to local codes. Even plans that have not been modified may still need to be changed to conform with local regulations. Homes built in California need to meet regulations for earthquakes, for instance, while a Colorado house may need to have its roof strengthened to handle snow.

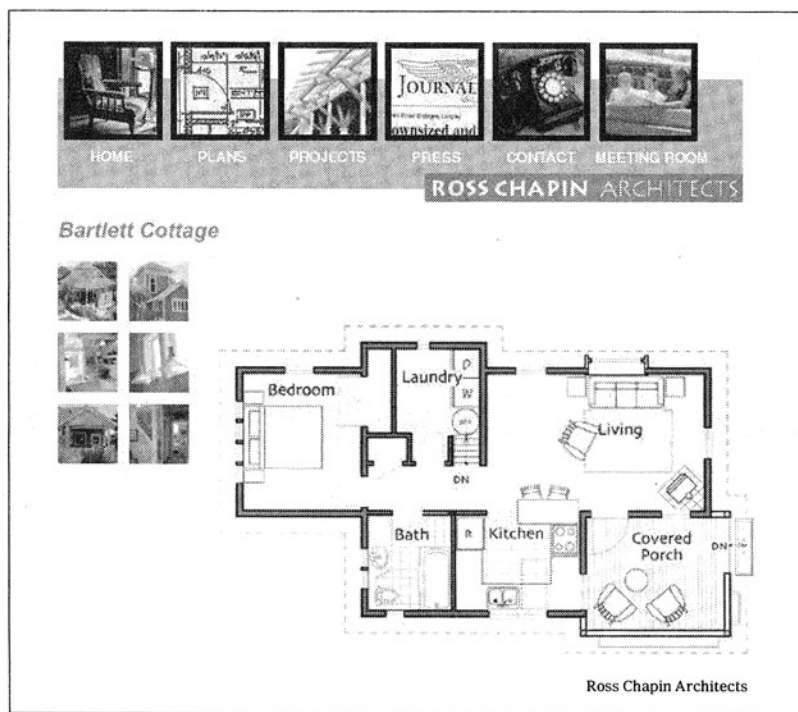
These are concerns that an architect working on a custom home would automatically address. And it is this service and personalization that some architects say differentiates custom designs from stock plans. "An architect can take the unique characteristics of a lot and



Tom Smart for The New York Times

THREE GABLES

Jack Plumb in front of his cottage-like home in Salt Lake City, designed by Ross Chapin Architects. The Bartlett Cottage, below left, is another design by that firm.



that his stock plans cost more than other online offerings but says the extra cost is made up for in services like deciding where to put the house on the lot. Most of his firm's 54 designs cost \$1,800, but with modifications the price can easily double or go higher. "It's not unusual for an owner to pay \$7,000 or \$8,000 by the time we engineer a basement or garage. But plans can still be out the door in six weeks," he said. "A custom house takes us three months."

Another firm, Robinson Residential Design, a design company in Regina, Saskatchewan, has a series of 14 stock home plans starting at \$725. Simple changes are common and are made with an hourly charge. "It is usually a bedroom that is not quite big enough, or a window is moved to get a better view," said Rob Young, Robinson's cottage division manager, noting that the firm's online business is "predominantly for vacation-type homes."

Donald A. Gardner Architects has about 850 designs averaging \$1,000. Prices for modifications vary; a basic mirror image of the plan adds \$150. Architectural House Plans has 250 separate design plans averaging \$1,000 to \$2,000, and buyers will need to seek out their own architects or find builders to make changes.

Larry Slick did just that in January when he purchased a \$770 plan from Architectural House Plans, complete with a tower that would offer views of the lights of Duluth, Minn., just across Lake Superior. The design for his vacation home in Superior, Wis., needed to be changed to meet local regulations on building height, and he wanted larger bedrooms. He arranged for a draftsman to make changes to the plans, which came in an electronic file. "He just redrew it on his computer," said Mr. Slick, adding that the changes took less than two weeks.

maximize them," said Martin Sell, an architect in Juneau, Wis., and vice chairman of the Design-Build Committee at the American Institute of Architects, a trade group.

While Mr. Sell acknowledged that stock plans cost significantly less, he said that an architect creating a fully custom home can better guide clients into figuring out not only how they will use their living space but how much space they need. "You might buy a 2,000-square-foot plan because you think that is what you need, but maybe you can really get away with 1,500 square feet in a house that is designed with more of an efficient living space," he said. "The square footage can more than offset the cost of the architecture fees."

Motivations to choose a stock plan go beyond economics. For Jack

Plumb, a co-owner of an auto repair shop who built a retreat tucked into a canyon in Salt Lake City, seeing a ready-made design five years ago helped him visualize what it was he really wanted in a vacation home. The design, from Ross Chapin, a Whidbey Island, Wash.-based architect, was for a 1,100 square-foot house called the Three Gable House, with an unusual three-peaked roofline. "I'm a visual guy. Turns out I was drawn to smaller homes and very pitched roofs," said Mr. Plumb, who paid \$500 for the plans and filled the cottage with arts-and-crafts detailing and Stickley furniture.

While Mr. Chapin's company does not offer modifications, many online design firms can make changes and provide more hand holding. Christian Gladu, co-owner of the Bungalow Company in Bend, Ore., admits

FINDING THE RIGHT SITE

ROBINSON RESIDENTIAL DESIGN (www.robinsonplans.com; 877-352-6617), a Canadian company, offers 14 styles of bungalows. Most designs are 690 square feet to about 3,000 square feet and cost \$725 to \$1,200.

The Bungalow Company's (www.thebungalowcompany.com; 888-945-9206) 54 Arts-and-Crafts-style home plans go from around 1,100 square feet to just over 3,000 square feet. Most plans are priced at \$1,800.

Ross Chapin Architects (www.rosschapin.com; 360-221-2373) has 29 plans, primarily for dwellings of less than 1,600 square feet. Most plans are either \$950 or \$1,150; the firm does not provide modifications.

Designs from Gregory La Vardera Architect (www.lamidesign.com/plans; 856-662-4909) all have a modern aesthetic. The houses, many with flat roofs, range

from just over 1,000 square feet to 3,100 square feet. All plans are \$1,500.

Architectural House Plans (www.architecturalhouseplans.com; 888-388-5735) sells 250 designs from various architects from around the country, including lake houses, cottages and houses designed for energy efficiency. Plans start at about \$1,000; the company does not provide modifications.

Donald A. Gardner Architects (www.dongardner.com; 800-388-7580) has 850 designs online that can be searched by style, such as cottage, farmhouse, Georgian and others, or by square footage, number of bedrooms or type of building lot. Prices average \$1,000.

Houseplans.com (www.houseplans.com; 888-705-1300) acts as a storefront for some 26,000 plans from architects and home plan designers. Prices average \$700.