



PROFESSIONAL FOCUS

SUCCEEDING IN THE WORLD OF RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

written by Donald A. Gardner, AIA
photography by Jon Riley and Walter Kirk



Residential architecture is generally not considered to be the most lucrative or prestigious branch of architecture. The heroes of architecture typically design the skyscrapers, the hospitals, and the universities. Not the Smith family's 2000-square foot-brick traditional.

After traveling the traditional road in architecture for awhile, I became dissatisfied and began looking for an alternative. My problem was that I enjoyed residential design. And as I considered traditional avenues to custom residential work, I realized that it is slow growing and time intensive. I was also haunted by a statement one of my college professors made: "If you're planning on designing homes for a living, don't count on it being a very good living." Yet I was determined to succeed.

While I could see some stunning custom homes being built in the late 1970s, I was struck by what was being built for the average family. It seemed clear to me that the stock plan business could use the influence of quality, yet affordable, architectural design.

Since I wasn't designing for one specific client, I had a client-type or market. I focused on market research in order to design plans that would appeal to the masses. I found early on that the design of a successful stock plan was a delicate balancing act. Our designs must be of a size the average family can afford to build while meeting the needs of their ever-changing lifestyles.

One of the biggest challenges in the stock plan business is getting your designs published. If you don't get them into the marketplace, you won't see any return on your design investment. I began making contacts and nurturing relationships in the home plan publishing industry. It took a concentrated effort to get those first plans published, but once



■ **Top Left** The elegant Gardner residence once sheltered the offices of Donald A. Gardner Architect, Inc. ■ **Bottom Left** Plan 331, The Milford, was designed by Donald A. Gardner Architects and built for the Williamsburg Parade of Homes in Virginia. ■ **Bottom Center** The great room of Plan 390, The Hampton, shows the openness typical of a Donald A. Gardner plan, with the stunning palladian opening, clerestory dormers, and vaulted ceiling. ■ **Top Right** A powerful first impression is made walking into Plan 451, The Rousseau. The drama of the foyer is escalated by a wall of windows seen through the great room. ■ **Bottom Right** Plan 726 was first designed and built for a custom client and is now marketed as a portfolio plan, The Avalon.



**PERSONAL
PROFILE
DONALD A.
GARDNER, AIA**

When Donald Gardner moved from New York to South Carolina to attend Clemson University in 1963, he brought with him an inherited eye for artistic detail and a passion for architectural design. After graduating from Clemson with a Bachelor of Architecture degree and serving two years in the Army Corps of Engineers, Don returned to upstate South Carolina to pursue his career.

Throughout the next 14 years, Don worked with several architectural firms, gaining experience in commercial, institutional, industrial and residential design. Recognizing his talents and interests lay in residential design, Don saw a need for better designed, more livable homes that would meet the changing needs and busier lifestyles of today's families.

Donald A. Gardner Architects, Inc.

With this dream his primary focus, Don founded Donald A. Gardner Architects, Inc., in 1978 as a part-time, home-based business. His goal, to design quality, portfolio home plans that fit the lives and budgets of today's families, proved a successful one. By 1984, Don was able to commit his attention full time to the firm. In 1994 Don's daughter, Angela Santerini, joined the company, where today she serves as senior vice president/operations.

Today, the architectural division of the firm employs a qualified staff that includes six registered architects who are members of the American Institute of Architects. Each new plan, be it custom design or portfolio plan, is a unique

interpretation of the American family home that combines a refined, impressive exterior with an exciting, open floor plan. To stay on the cutting edge of the home plan industry, the architectural division incorporates computer-aided design and drafting technology for the production of trouble free construction documents.

Expanding to meet the growing needs of its customers, the architectural division now offers custom design services, services for modifying existing designs, residential developer services, and Design/Build services.

**Donald A. Gardner
Marketing & Publishing**

The industry's standard in portfolio home plans, Donald A. Gardner designs are published nationally in plan books and periodicals such as *Southern Living*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Home*, *House Beautiful*, *Builder*, and *Home Planners* and *Garlinghouse* publications.

The firm also publishes its own plan magazine, *Designs™*, which is mailed directly to more than 137,000 builders nationwide three times per year. This full color magazine features the firm's newest and best-selling home plans with interior and exterior photographs of finished Donald A. Gardner homes.

Additionally, the marketing department offers an array of services to professional homebuilders and residential developers including signage, promotion and public relations services.

Donald A. Gardner Builders, Inc.

In 1994, Don and his son-in-law, Bill Santerini, created Donald A. Gardner Builders, Inc., to complement the successful architectural firm. This construction arm of the company is currently building homes in some of the most prestigious developments in upstate South Carolina. The care, expertise and customer-driven qualities that the Gardner name is known for in the architectural industry are clearly seen in the construction of these quality built homes.

Donald A. Gardner Interactive, LLC

In 1998, the firm debuted its newly improved and significantly expanded website, www.dongardner.com. Currently, the site showcases more than 440 Donald A. Gardner home plans, available for purchase online, and information on all aspects of both the architectural and construction companies.

"When we can help families with every aspect of their home building experience from start to finish, from the first glimmer of a design idea to the finished product, then we know we have done our job," says Don.

they proved themselves through volume sales, demands for more came quickly.

My next step was to publish my own plan books and advertise them in national, high-volume circulation publications. Getting our plan books into consumers' hands meant direct sales—no more middlemen!

I then targeted the building industry, as professional homebuilders were more likely to be repeat customers. To get my firm's plans into builders' hands, we began publishing *Designs™*, our own full-color plan magazine, to secure that repeat business. These free publications (direct mailed to 137,000 builders nationwide, three times per year) has proven very successful as we're now in the middle of our seventh year of publication.

Next came the website. Through the Internet, we're able to reach millions of people, 24 hours a day, all over the world. Visitors to www.dongardner.com can search through more than 440 home plans, all available for purchase via the World Wide Web.

With success came rapid growth. The overwhelming success of our home plans created a demand for more designs, necessitating the addition of more architects, designers, and support staff. I've always believed the maxim that if you're not growing, you're heading the other way. That's one reason I've grown my firm by hiring the most talented and experienced people in their fields. We've combated our growing pains by hiring the highest caliber professionals and rewarding them with a creative working environment, excellent benefits, and great career growth potential. My firm has expanded from 15 to more than 45 employees in the last five years, including the addition of my daughter and son-in-law. My daughter, Angela Santerini, is the firm's senior vice president/operations. Her husband, Bill Santerini, co-founded Donald A. Gardner Builders, Inc., and now serves as senior vice president/finance.

I've also grown the firm through diversification. Not only are we an architectural firm, but we also operate our own customer service and plan distribution depart-



■ A grand, colonnaded entrance is a design detail used in many Donald A. Gardner homes and is one Don included in the design of his own personal home.

ments. In addition, we're a marketing firm, a publisher, and a construction company. I started the construction firm for many reasons. Experiencing the construction of our plans first-hand helps to strengthen the design process. And building our own designs provides us with innumerable photo opportunities. Those photographs are essential in our marketing efforts to sell our plans and enhance our national exposure. This can also bring third-party endorsements, which heighten our image and recognition.

Our connections with publishers and own in-house marketing capabilities enhance all of our relationships. For example, we are able to offer manufactur-

ers and suppliers of construction materials added benefits by working with us (i.e., exposure through national publications and *Designs™* magazine).

Our newest endeavors are finally bringing my firm around to the more traditional avenues of residential design. We now offer custom residential design and construction services to individuals, and design, planning, marketing and construction services to developers. The stock plan business remains the basis on which we've honed our ability to understand and interpret what appeals to the majority of homeowners. We are now bringing all that knowledge and experience into the higher-end custom arena. And I've noticed

that since we've entered the custom design market, our stock home designs are also being infused with new ideas.

The stock plan industry requires that we invest everything in a design upfront before it's ever published, let alone sold. While that investment in getting a plan ready to market can seem staggering, once it's completed a good plan can sell numerous times. As a result, I haven't seen the fluctuations in workload, layoffs, etc., in my firm that are more common in traditional architectural firms.

Specializing in residential design can be risky if the housing market heads south. But we've successfully counterbalanced that risk with a national presence and diversified to handle more than just design. Time has helped, as we've built a collection of plans that can provide some cushion should future years prove lean.

Looking back, it appears that I've built a national firm opposing tradition every step of the way. But as I look ahead, the challenges seem more traditional in nature for this family-owned and operated business: finding the right architects with a love for residential work and positioning my firm to meet the changing marketplace—so that when I move on, we're still one step ahead. *Professional Focus is a paid-for insertion.* ■