

*Being both an architect and a builder  
brings out the best of both worlds*

Interview by Ted Cushman

**E**veryone was born to do something,” says design/build contractor Andrew DiGiammo. “I was born to build. Even when I was a kid, I always knew this was what I wanted to do.” In high school, DiGiammo worked for his uncle’s construction company. Then he went out on his own, supporting himself as a contractor while he worked through the five-year architecture program at Providence, Rhode Island’s Roger Williams University. By his final year at Roger Williams, DiGiammo was already developing the design/build process that forms the core of his business today. Now a registered architect in Massachusetts, DiGiammo owns his own construction company, Residential and Commercial Master Builders of New England. He specializes in high-end custom projects near the water in the coastal communities around Providence, R.I., and Fall River, Mass., doing about \$6 million worth of business volume a year.

# All in One

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Architect and builder Andrew DiGiammo prefers to create visual interest with building forms rather than with decorative trim. This bay-front house in Swansea, Mass., with its multicornered footprint, offers a choice of ocean views from every room.

PHOTOS BY TED CUSHMAN

## **AS AN ARCHITECT WHO IS ALSO A BUILDER, YOU DESIGN ALL OF YOUR OWN BUILDINGS, AND YOU BUILD MOST OF YOUR OWN DESIGNS. WHAT ADVANTAGE DO YOU GAIN AND WHAT ADVANTAGES DO YOUR CLIENTS GAIN OUT OF THAT ARRANGEMENT?**

The clients' advantage is that they get single-point responsibility. They get a seamless transition from design to construction, they get accurate cost estimates all through the design, and it's guaranteed that the intent or the spirit of the design carries through to the construction. That's a huge advantage for the clients, especially on single-family residential projects, where the scope

is small enough that one guy can really have his hands around the whole thing.

I like it because, first of all, I save a tremendous amount of time. I don't have to spend time reviewing and studying someone else's print to figure out what is going on and then bidding on it. In high-end custom markets like mine, builders can spend 40 hours on a detailed bid for which they never get the job. I don't have to do that.

Second, when we start construction, I already know the clients, and I have a comfort level with them. When you're

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about to sign a million-dollar-plus contract with someone, it's nice if you already know the person — and you really do get to know someone during the design process.

Also, while I'm building, I know the project inside and out. So I can eliminate a lot of those things that come up between owners and builders, or between the builder and the architect, when the customer starts to say, "Oh, that's not what we really wanted."

## **SO THAT'S WHY IT'S BETTER FOR YOU AS THE BUILDER. WHAT ABOUT FROM YOUR POINT OF VIEW AS THE ARCHITECT?**

Well, I don't have to put up with the builder trying to get extras off my plans. I am not dealing with questions all of the time. And I save time on cost estimating, because I create the cost estimate at the same time as the design. I don't waste time drawing plans that turn out to be outside the budget. I never even start the working drawings until I know that I am going to meet the client's budget within reason. That determination is made during the initial phase of analysis and evaluation.

## **ISN'T THERE A PHASE AT THE VERY BEGINNING WHERE YOU DON'T KNOW WHETHER YOU ARE GOING TO GET THE JOB OR NOT?**

Yes, there's a predesign meeting, but that is a modest time commitment. When new residential clients contact me, I give them one meeting at their site with no obligation. I ask them to bring any ideas they have, and the site plan if they have one. After we view their site, I take them to see two examples of what I do — one example under construction that is still open and then a finished example.

My goal at that first meeting is to collect enough information on their budget, their site, and their needs that I can define the scope of the project. Then I follow up within the next couple of

DiGiammo's signature bays and bump-outs make the most of ocean-front sites by offering homeowners comfort in all weather. The many-windowed polygon elements help bring outdoor light and cross-breezes into the home, while also sheltering the locations of entryways and outdoor decks.



days with a design proposal. For residential work, I propose a lump sum for the design fee, based on the hours I spent on similar past projects. I can usually prep a new design contract in 15 minutes, based on a previous project — I just modify it for inflation or for any particular needs they have, print it out, and send it. Then I'm done with that client, unless they select me for the work — and lately, it has been a hundred percent. Typically, I spend six hours maximum to get the job.

## **HOW IS COMMERCIAL WORK DIFFERENT?**

It's a different ball game. It's not nearly as personal, and you make a mistake if you try to treat it that way. On commercial projects, I start with a site meeting also, but the focus typically

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With its less restrictive codes, residential work offers DiGiammo the most leeway to play with interesting forms and shapes, like this whimsical bridge to an over-the-garage guest suite.

is on the overall cost — what the total project budget will be. The design fee is based on a percentage of the construction cost.

## **SO MONEY ISSUES PLAY DIFFERENT ROLES?**

Well, they are two different markets. The cost of residential plans can be all over the place, starting at \$600 for stock plans from the Internet up to \$150,000 for custom designs from upper-echelon architects. And how you get high-end coastal residential work is based on much more than lowest price. In that market, shopping by price is the exception, not the norm. But in commercial work, often the primary questions are time and money: “How soon can we have the plans done, and how much is it going to cost?”

An exception to this is some waterfront commercial work, however. Occasionally, a light-commercial project in a nice coastal location, such as a public waterfront, may call for exceptional design work, and that could change the way the clients approach choosing an architect.

## **THAT FOCUS ON PRICE IN COMMERCIAL WORK SOUNDS LESS ADVANTAGEOUS TO YOU AS A DESIGNER/BUILDER. IS THERE AN UPSIDE TO IT?**

Yes. For one thing, usually the rate for design work on commercial is higher, based on the work you have to do and considering that the building forms are usually simpler. Usually nonprofessionals can't compete — the drawings in commercial work always have to have a stamp. But then again, in coastal areas these days you are going to need a stamp for a residential foundation and probably for a lot of other parts of the house. So that's all changing.

## **IS ONE TYPE OF PROJECT — RESIDENTIAL OR COMMERCIAL — MORE SATISFYING?**

It's usually the residential work that really allows me the opportunity to produce unique, site-specific designs. That's what residential clients are looking for. Also, in residential design you are free to do a lot more, without all the codes that can determine

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so much of the form in a commercial building — accessibility, egress, fire codes, and all that stuff.

## **HOW MUCH OF THE ACTUAL WORK ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR OWN CREW, AND WHAT KIND OF WORK ARE YOU SUBBING OUT?**

For the homes, I use my own crew, but a lot of the commercial work I sub out — even the framing. That's because commercial buildings usually have simpler building forms — it's more production-type stuff, and I don't have to be there all of the time. That's also easier for a sub to price; a framing contractor can price a simple rectangle for you easily, but maybe not a rectangle with five octagonal bays.

A lot of my homes get their uniqueness from their form. I use elements like bays and bows to make them interesting, both on the inside and on the outside. I think it's a better use of the client's money to create those shapes to take advantage of better



Crew members discuss a framing detail on one of DiGiammo's waterfront condominium projects in Fall River, Mass. On complex residential projects, DiGiammo prefers the efficiency of a crew who knows the more intricate details by heart.

views, better breezes, and to provide a more interesting shape to the room rather than spend it on, say, custom window trim. When someone looks at a beautiful bay, the trim doesn't really matter — people aren't even looking specifically at the trim at that point. They are just seeing the beauty of the shape and its proportions and, of course, the view beyond.

A framing crew can really stumble on those bays and bows if they don't do them very much. My guys know how to do these frequently used details almost by memory. It's kind of like having CAD details in your computer that you can pull in and use in various designs. My crews have been building my designs for 15 years. So by now, the memories of my crew members have become like those details in the computer that you can just pop in. If I draw a detail, usually my foreman already knows that detail. It's a big advantage over a separate architect and builder who don't have that shared experience.

## **IT SOUNDS AS IF THE CREATIVE DESIGN PART OF YOUR WORK IS A BIG FACTOR FOR YOU.**

That's what keeps me going. I like the construction process, too, in a crazy way, and I like seeing the design through to the end. But building is such a tough business. In my area, at least, the general contractors on smaller jobs make a lot less money than the plumbers, the electricians, and the other subs they use. And when I take on a building, all the responsibilities fall on me. I may get three headaches — from the carpet guy, the plumber, and the electrician, you know — all on one day. There is just so much involved when you have sole responsibility.

But when I get out there on a design interview, it's like the greatest thing in the world. It forces me to reflect, and it kind of breathes some new life into me. Whenever I drive away from an interview, I feel refreshed, because I've been back to a finished project, and I've seen what I did.

The process of building that house may have been more of a headache than anything. But after the dust settles and you go back to see it, you've forgotten all the headaches. That dormer or bay that you made to capture that beautiful view — maybe at the time it was something that went over budget, and you hated it for a while. And let's face it; going through a long project with people, even with the best clients, may be rocky at times. But when you bring other people back to a finished house, all that seems to be forgotten. And your old clients meet the prospective clients, and although they might not otherwise say it to your face, you hear them praising you. So those client interviews are a really uplifting thing. If I were building other people's plans and trying to hold the line every day on cost, without the design process and that interaction with the owners, it just wouldn't be the same for me. ~