The Proposal Confirms the Project

(Post 9 of 9 — From Aspiration to Alignment*)*

By the time a well-developed project is presented as a proposal, most of the consequential work has already been done. The client, architect, and builder have spent months discovering what matters, weighing competing priorities, and testing design decisions against the level of investment the client is willing to make. The proposal carries considerable weight, but it shouldn't be the first moment the project is confronted with its cost.

That distinction takes us back to the renovation that opened this series. The clients had purchased a home they loved, completed design, and begun preparing for construction. When we were brought in to estimate the work, the cost was roughly twice what they expected. The project had appeared to be progressing appropriately, although the clients' priorities hadn't been sufficiently explored or weighed against the financial investment they were prepared to make. By the time that disconnect became apparent, the clients faced the prospect of revisiting much of the design they'd come to love, investing more time and money in reworking it, and wondering whether the result would still be a home they wanted to build.

I ended that story with a question: Was this avoidable?

Largely. Existing houses conceal conditions, costs change, and good teams encounter surprises. But the gap between the project being designed and what the clients were prepared to invest did not need to remain hidden until the estimate.

A client doesn't arrive with every priority fully formed, and the architect and builder don't simply receive a list to execute. Together, they discover what the client values, explore possibilities the client may not have considered, and weigh competing priorities as the implications for design, construction, and cost become clearer. The design evolves alongside their understanding of what the client seeks and is prepared to invest. The work of preconstruction is to bring the client's aspirations into conversation with the realities of design, construction, and cost, allowing each to inform the others until the project takes a shape that everyone understands and the client is prepared to carry forward.

By the time the proposal is presented, the design, scope, and cost have developed together through months of shared decisions. The proposal brings those decisions into focus, establishing a common understanding of the work to be undertaken and the investment it requires. Construction can then proceed as a continuation of the direction established through preconstruction, with the client's priorities reflected in the plans, specifications, and commitments that will guide the work.

What began as aspiration has gradually taken the shape of a home that reflects what the client has come to value most - shaped through countless questions, difficult decisions, and thoughtful compromises into something they're genuinely excited to bring to life.