

7. SITING YOUR NEW RESIDENCE

As we drove up to my clients new 12.5 acre lot in the Tesuque area, three words came to mind - access, location and orientation. We had obtained some important information pertaining to zoning, building setbacks, and access to public utilities. I had asked the owner to bring the legal plat and any accompanying restrictive covenants, both of these were in his closing package which he had received from the Title Company. We had already stopped at Bascamp and purchased a USGS map which would give us an idea of existing topography. The property corners had been staked from the recent survey and we were ready to walk the site to locate potential house and driveway sites. We had begun the process of selecting a site for his new residence.

I began the site search by looking for a natural point to enter the lot. This can be the first dollar saving decision. You don't want to enter against the grade you want your driveway to look like it was meant to be located right there. Instead of looking at the driveway going straight to the site, let the driveway meander up to the site and avoid cutting down trees wherever possible. Also look at avoiding arroyos and not effecting existing drainage patterns. One of the most important considerations in the winter months is orientation. Your driveway should have southern and western orientation so in the winter months you don't have to constantly worry about snow and ice buildup. The final point I'll make about driveways is by all means look at sharing a driveway with a neighbor, this can cut the disturbed area on both lots in half and increase the aesthetics on your lot and your neighbors.

Now that the parameters for driveway location are understood let us start looking for house locations. Starting this process can be done back at the office by looking on the preliminary topography and identifying buildable areas. Stay away from areas that have excessive slopes (over 30%) and ridgetop areas which are usually exposed to elements such as wind. Instead look for areas with good orientation (solar) and that are naturally protected, like bowls or shelves. Knowing what we are looking for, we can now walk the lot and look for potential sites. The most important thing is to walk the whole site, there maybe a beautiful area that could be overlooked because it is not easily seen. Another aspect to be aware of is whether the client will also want a future guest house, stables or some other accessory structures. This should also be discussed during this initial site visit.

Once all the sites have been identified, start weighing them against each other with these three basic criteria in mind: 1) access, 2) location and 3) orientation. A big part of this process should also be looking at existing houses or potential future buildings on adjacent lots to make sure a site with maximum potential for privacy is chosen. Avoid sites that are exposed to the prevailing winds or have excessive northern exposure. Keep in mind your site must be workable through all four seasons that we enjoy in Santa Fe and its surroundings.

There is no better feeling than finding that perfect site with the client and beginning the design process. I'd also like to point out that this process should be used whether your lot is 2,000 square feet or 2,000 acres. Don't get caught in the trap of hastily picking a site that may not be the perfect one.