

## There's a long tradition of mothers offering architects the first big commission

Written by The Conversation USA

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One of the very first pieces of advice you receive in architecture school is Never Work For Family: the risks are too great, runs the argument, there's too much emotion and too much money at stake, and you're at the mercy of a building process that is invariably unpredictable and stressful.

Designing a house for someone means discussing the most intimate details of how they live (or would like to live), probing their most dearly held values and most powerful aversions, their wild dreams and secret anxieties.

Even the closest families can find this a febrile mix, and that's before you lob in the incendiary effect of cost over-runs, recalcitrant builders, inclement weather, pathological indecisiveness, and general misfortune that often seem to plague the building process.

But despite the warnings, architects do persist in working for family. In fact, there's a long tradition of mothers, in particular, offering the first big design commission that launches an architect's international career.

Harry Seidler came to Australia partly because of the lure of designing a house for his mother – realised in 1950 as the [Rose Seidler House](#) .

Likewise, the [Vanna Venturi House](#) that Robert Venturi designed for his mum (Philadelphia, 1964), stands as an embodiment of his theory of “complexity and contradiction” in architecture.

The list could go on – Charles Gwathmey's little gem for his parents, the [Robert and Rosalie Gwathmey House](#) in Amagansett, New York, 1965 is a slightly lesser known example. In any case, it's fair to say that houses for parents, especially mothers, hold a celebrated place in architectural history – there's even [a book](#) about it.

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Designing for family was explored at a recent talk in Brisbane, part of the inaugural [Asia Pacific Architecture Forum](#)

Architect Claire Humphreys (who had worked in association with Kevin O'Brien), presented a house in Brisbane designed for her mother Julia. [Eva-Marie Prineas](#) showed a Sydney bungalow she had extensively renovated for her sister (whom we will call Sarah). Both Julia and Sarah also participated in the discussion.

Prineas jokes that everyone assumes she and her sister must be now no longer speaking, having fallen out over the project. In fact, and despite some bumps along the way (by both their accounts, Sarah turned from "the dream client into the nightmare" when she flew into a panic about the joinery at the last minute) they are both delighted with the resulting "Breezeblock House".

Prineas argues that their process worked because they had a neutral third party, an arbitrator, in the form of Sarah's husband.

His only requirement (apart from having strict oversight of the budget spreadsheets) was the inclusion of an outdoor wok burner, and this lack of investment in the emotional and stylistic aspects of the design meant he could act as the calm and rational peacemaker between his (more volatile) architect and wife.

A family commission is usually based on some degree of altruism, both on the part of the architect (who's likely doing it for mates' rates, or for free) and the family (who likely feel they're offering an opportunity for work, experience, and possibly exposure). In this sense, working for family is made more complex by the idea of the client as patron.

For centuries, architecture, like the other arts, was based on a system of patronage. A wealthy and powerful person would commission an architect to design a building (whether private or civic) to augment their own prestige and reputation.

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These days it's often said that the age of patronage is over. A speculative developer is not a patron in the sense of "sponsoring" the architect who receives the order, nor in continuing to own and maintain the buildings they commission.

And while public institutions might still patronise architects in something like the old sense, perhaps the most common vestige of patronage today is in the commission of private houses.

Here, even today, some clients are willing to offer architects a fair degree of leeway, and the liberty to pursue themes and ideas that may be particular, or peculiar, to their own (artistic) practice. And those clients are sometimes members of the architect's family.

Humphreys's mother Julia observed that "because it was my daughter I wanted to let her go, you could say I was an indulgent client...and I was loving watching it. It's watching your daughter do something amazing."

The two began the project when Claire was still a student in her final year of architecture school. The brief specified a house with a seamless, overlapping connection to the garden, a building that would take account of the climate and use it to beneficial effect – and a place where a woman in her sixties could live contentedly alone.

Julia never considered not using an architect – partly because of the unusual constraints of her site. Overlooking neighbours, easements, and eight trees that had to be retained, left little area on which to actually build, creating a complex spatial puzzle. Julia says that "when she first brought the plan to me I was blown away by how she'd managed the site. I remember thinking 'I guess that's what all that education was for...'"

And this, for me, is the crux of the matter: the way in which these two talented, highly trained and skilled women came into focus as professionals in the eyes of their family members.

We don't all get to see our siblings, or children (or even partners) at work, and seeing that persona can be a real revelation.

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That son whom you always saw as vague and dreamy turns out to be as sharp as a tack, and the sister you thought couldn't organise her way out of a paper bag is keeping the whole company in line.

Observing your loved ones being respected and valued in a professional context is something we often only hear in the retirement speeches.

So, architects – maybe you should work for family more often, if you can find an arbitrator. And families – maybe you should trust your architect relatives.

But both of you, please, proceed with care. As Claire joked, the challenge may be the opposite of what you expect. She now worries that “mum will be the best client I ever have”.

### Disclosure

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