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United States Court of Appeals
For the Eighth Circuit

No. 19-3458

Designworks Homes, Inc., a Missouri corporation; Charles Lawrence James

Plaintiffs - Appellants

v.

Thomson Sailors Homes, L.L.C., a Kansas L.L.C.; Thomson Homes, L.L.C.;
Donald Sailors; Edward B. Thomson, III; Team 3 Architects, Inc.; Bruce H.
Beatty; Bobby Sailors; Eric Bradley Thomson; Elswood Smith Carlson, P.A.

Defendants - Appellees

Appeal from United States District Court
for the Western District of Missouri - Kansas City

Submitted: June 15, 2021
Filed: August 19, 2021

Before GRUENDER, ARNOLD, and STRAS, Circuit Judges.

STRAS, Circuit Judge.

Designworks Homes, Inc., thinks that a group of architects and other builders copied one of its home designs. It also believes that, even if there was no copyright

violation, it should not have to reimburse the alleged infringers for their attorney fees and costs. The district court¹ disagreed on both points, and so do we.

I.

Charles James built a house on Melrose Drive in Columbia, Missouri. The house, just like two others built in the area, has a two-story “triangular atrium design with stairs as part of the main room.” Many years later, Designworks registered the design as a copyrighted architectural work.

Another firm, Thomson Sailors Homes, L.L.C., also used a triangular-atrium design in what it called the Newbury Model. Designworks believes that everyone involved in the design and promotion of the Newbury Model, including those who displayed it in brochures, infringed on its copyright. *See* 17 U.S.C. § 102(a)(8) (extending copyright protection to “architectural works”).

At summary judgment, the district court did not see things the same way. It concluded that the Newbury Model was not a copy of the original Melrose home. It also decided to award over \$400,000 in attorney fees and costs to Thomson Sailors and the other defendants. *See id.* § 505. The reason: Designworks’ “litigating position was unreasonable and . . . [its] pursuit of the case was, at best, frivolous in nature and, at worst, done in bad faith.”

II.

We review the district court’s decision to grant summary judgment *de novo*. *See Warner Bros. Ent., Inc. v. X One X Prods.*, 644 F.3d 584, 591 (8th Cir. 2011). Summary judgment was appropriate “if the evidence, viewed in the light most

¹The Honorable Stephen R. Bough, United States District Judge for the Western District of Missouri.

favorable to [Designworks], demonstrates that there is no genuine issue of material fact and that [Thomson Sailors was] entitled to judgment as a matter of law.” *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

To prevail on its copyright claims, Designworks had to prove that Thomson Sailors copied its design. *See Taylor Corp. v. Four Seasons Greetings, LLC*, 403 F.3d 958, 964 (8th Cir. 2005). It had no direct evidence, so it attempted to make its case indirectly by showing that Thomson Sailors had access to the Melrose house and then designed and built “substantially similar” homes. *Id.* at 966–67.

Substantial similarity incorporates two concepts. First, there must be similarity of ideas, which must be “evaluated extrinsically, focusing on [the] objective similarities . . . of the works.” *Rottlund Co. v. Pinnacle Corp.*, 452 F.3d 726, 731 (8th Cir. 2006). Second, if the ideas are similar, they must be similarly expressed, meaning that an “ordinary, reasonable person” would think that “the total concept and feel of the [designs] in question are substantially similar.”² *Hartman v. Hallmark Cards, Inc.*, 833 F.2d 117, 120–21 (8th Cir. 1987) (referring to this as “the intrinsic test”). Without similarity in ideas *and* expression, there is no infringement. *See id.* at 120.

After “compar[ing] [the] works,” *id.* (second alteration in original) (quoting *O’Neill v. Dell Publ’g Co.*, 630 F.2d 685, 690 (1st Cir. 1980)), we agree with the district court that substantial similarity in expression is missing here. The Melrose house, which was built first, has a roughly rectangular floorplan, except for a large diamond-shaped great room. *See Appendix*. The corners of the great room intersect the rear wall and, as the floor plan of the home shows, half of the diamond extends

²Even if the district court misstated the standard for evaluating similarity, as Designworks argues, “[we] may [still] affirm.” *Wierman v. Casey’s Gen. Stores*, 638 F.3d 984, 1002 (8th Cir. 2011). The reason, of course, is that our review of a grant of summary judgment is *de novo*.

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