

How to Get the Best From Your Architect

It's one of the most important working relationships you'll have during a self-build or renovation project. Our panel of architects reveal how to make the most of the service they offer

CHOOSING AN ARCHITECT

BUILD A GOOD RELATIONSHIP

"A strong rapport can make all the difference. It cannot be overstated how important relationships are: between client and architect, client and builder, and builder and architect. Even the smallest project requires a sense of 'simpatico' and trust to complete, while a new build represents a huge leap of faith.

"Clients should like their architect and vice versa, but more importantly they have to be able to trust them. It is likely that there will be difficult stages during the design and construction process, and it makes a great deal of difference to the project if both parties trust each other and feel that the other has their back during more challenging times.

"Do what the Japanese do before signing business deals — go out for a drink with them (karaoke is optional)." **Kieran Gaffney, Konishi Gaffney**

CHOOSE SOMEONE WHO CAN DELIVER ON THE DETAIL

"In order to manage this wonderful process we call self-build, finding the right architectural fit is critical to the success of a project. The architect you choose must, as a general rule, be flexible, have a good sense of humour (even during the difficult times in the build), be a good collaborator and communicator, general councillor, strong concept designer, stay calm in every situation and have an excellent eye for detail.

"Overall, choose someone you trust, get along with and who is going to deliver you an original crafted home. Don't choose the cheapest — interview several architects. Ask exactly what their deliverables are in terms of service, drawings, reports and managing the process of planning, tendering the building project and delivering the detail on site. Anyone can sketch and draft out a concept, but who out there can really deliver the detail; the real architecture?

"To deliver truly great projects you also need to be prepared to compromise, as clients' budgets only stretch so far. Find an architect who can think creatively about the use of different types of space and materials, while still achieving the end result — that is a real skill."

Darren Bray, PAD Studio

TRUST YOUR INSTINCT

"Don't be tempted to rule out architects that charge a fee for the first visit/meeting — the best architects are busy and you are very likely to receive great advice and creative inspiration from talking to them, so there is a value attached.

"Trust your instincts at this stage. The best projects result when architect and client instinctively understand each other. You'll spend a lot of time working together, revealing your personal dreams, wildest aspirations and day-to-day practical needs. Family politics, births, life plans and finances will need to be considered, so it's crucial that you feel comfortable with your architect and that they can empathise with you.

"You may be happy to place your trust in one person at this stage — in which case, you need to make sure that you are comfortable with their fee proposal and away you go. Or, you may invite proposals from more than one architect. Consider these carefully but remember that the difference between fees will be a tiny proportion of your overall spend. A good architect will design, specify and manage your project efficiently and add more value to your home." **Kate Cooper, Absolute Architecture**

TALK PROJECT BUDGET FROM THE OUTSET

"Be realistic about budget and timescales, and talk about these at the beginning of the project — the architect will advise on this based on similar experience," says Colm Tamney of AIR Architects. "Budget is vital from the outset, whether that is a project budget or build budget. Fees for all consultants and statutory fees are often overlooked (and not to forget the dreaded VAT on alterations/extension projects)," adds Neil Wall of Studio West Architects

LOOK AT THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA, TOO

"It's a fairly easy task to search online for local architects and the better ones tend to have a good online presence. Look at social media pages as well, as these are often better at communicating an architect's personality and likes and dislikes, as well as current projects." **Kate Cooper, Absolute Architecture**

ADVICE GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR ARCHITECT

CHOOSE AN ARCHITECT WITH LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

"Do your research. Working with a local architect is always helpful. They will know the area, have relationships with planners, builders and suppliers, and they will be more available to you. Seek recommendations from friends, look at buildings you like in your area and find out who the architect was (planning records can help)," says **Kate Cooper of Absolute Architecture**.

Neil Wall of Studio West Architects adds: "They will also know the local terrain, and be in tune with the local context on many levels. They'll know the vernacular and how to use that when coming up with a design. They'll also know the way local planning works its restrictions, and how to manoeuvre around them to try and get the dream house you want. Finally, it's very important your architect is on hand to visit the site."

GOOD DESIGN DOESN'T HAVE TO BE EXPENSIVE

"It's crucial to employ an architect who listens to what you say and responds to your concerns. All architects have different interests and business models, so you need to find one that is right for the budget and design ambitions. Ask them lots of questions on the phone and when you meet, and see how they respond. Good design takes time and, therefore, costs money, but a well-designed building doesn't have to be expensive. Push the architects on costs. Ask about some of their recent projects, what the budgets were and how much they actually cost. Can they explain to you what your budget means you can achieve?"

Graham Bizley, Prewett Bizley Architects

LOOK FOR AN ARCHITECT WHO SHARES YOUR VISION

"It is essential that a client is familiar with the work of their chosen architect and shares similar taste in design. It is pointless appointing an architect known for producing immaculate glass cubes if your vision is of rustic stone.

"Most clients choose an architect as they have a track record of producing similar sorts of projects to their own. Experience working on a particular building typology yields a depth of experience and research for an architect to draw on. Often underestimated, though, is that architects are adept at designing a whole range of buildings."

David Nossiter, David Nossiter Architects

START WITH A FEASIBILITY STUDY

"This is often a long-term relationship that you are establishing, involving a long process of decision-making and substantial sums of money. It is essential that you do your homework, seek recommendations from other clients, visit completed projects and understand as much as possible about the way in which your preferred architect works.

"This works both ways, of course, and all clients come with their own set of demands, relationship dynamics and financial constraints. We tend to recommend starting with a feasibility study, which develops and tailors a brief that fits the site, budget and time frame, and explores initial design proposals. This initial pre-planning period is financially low risk for the client and allows both parties to establish trust and to understand each other's role for the journey ahead."

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