

ADVICE

# 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." **Niall Maxwell, Rural Office for Architecture**



Kate Cooper, Absolute Architecture (absolute-architecture.co.uk)



Neil Wall, Studio West Architects (studiowestarchitects.co.uk)



Andy Ramus, AR Design Studio (ardesignstudio.co.uk)



Colm Tamney, AIR Architects (airoffice.co.uk)



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Kate Stoddart, architect and property consultant (katestoddart.co.uk)



Lesley Hally, LA Hally Architect (lahally.com)



Graham Bizley, Prewett Bizley Architects (prewettbizley.com)



Allan Corfield, Allan Corfield Architects (acarchitects.biz)

## DEVELOPING A BRIEF

### PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO YOUR LIFESTYLE

"Before you hire an architect to design your dream self-build, you need to prepare a brief for them to work with. Creating this brief is one of the most important things you will do, and not taking time to consider it carefully can be detrimental to the success of the project. The brief is an ever-evolving document, which first sets out a 'wishlist' of priorities your dream home should include. As a minimum, it should cover the basics, such as the number of rooms required, or the architectural styles you like or dislike.

"How you and your family live in your home is an important factor to keep in mind, too. For instance, do you come home from work and all congregate around a breakfast bar in the kitchen, with the kids completing homework while mum and dad cook dinner? These types of scenarios are fundamental to thinking out your design brief criteria. Consider how your self-build will function as a family home and what spaces need to be your priority.

"It's also recommended you match the scale of your project with a practice with the required experience. For example, if your project has the potential to be a large-scale one, finding an architect with a good track record of bigger projects is sensible."

**Allan Corfield, Allan Corfield Architects**

### FIND OUT WHO WILL LEAD ON YOUR PROJECT

**"Ask who will be involved in the project from the office, on a day-to-day basis and at higher level. Find out who will be the main point of contact and what their experience is."**

Colm Tamney, AIR Architects

### TRUST IS KEY TO DEVELOPING A DESIGN

"In order to design your home, your architect needs to fully understand your life. It takes more than a simple brief about how many bedrooms you need, or how big the kitchen should be. We spend as much time as we can with you, making sure we understand the logistics, the order and the pace of your life, prior to us getting to a design stage. We spend time getting to know you, so that we can collate as much information as we can to go forward with your dream home. From this, a huge amount of trust tends to develop and with this established level of confidence, you're happy to let us get on with the work, safe in the knowledge of knowing we've learnt enough about you to do a good job.

"The success of the project is based on this trustful connection and is what helps to shape a truly great project. The rapport between client and architect can almost be treated like a friendship; it's great to be able to create these relationships with people and it's part of why I love being an architect so much."

**Andy Ramus, Director of AR Design Studio**

### SIMPLE SKETCHES AND MOOD BOARDS HELP

**"Often simple sketched plans of a layout – such as a bubble diagram of how rooms should connect or relate – can be helpful. This is often altered or influenced by the site, its orientation and any potential views, but is a good starting point. Style boards of the types of buildings, interiors or features you like are really helpful."** Neil Wall, Studio West Architects

### MAKE CHANGES DURING THIS STAGE – NOT THE BUILD

"A good client understands that achieving their design is a complex procedure that requires the architect to lead a team of specialists, from the structural engineer to the builder. We have meetings with our clients during each stage of the process to review the designs and agree the next steps to be taken. We encourage all our clients to ask questions if they do not understand anything or find reading the drawings challenging. 3D visuals help to explain ideas and are now common for all but the smallest of projects.

"It is also important to realise that no matter how well designed and thorough the organisation of a project, the building process is always one of discovery. This is particularly so when working with existing buildings; there are inevitably hidden historical defects. Contingencies should be in place. Some elements can be standardised, but every project is unique and bespoke in its own way.

"What architects also wish to avoid as far as possible are changes to the designs once the project is in the construction phase. Minor amendments are inevitable, but client changes on site nearly always impact on time and cost."

**David Nossiter, David Nossiter Architects**

### DON'T CLOSE YOURSELF OFF TO OPPORTUNITY

"A good client isn't after an easy ride – a great client wants to challenge their architect and is open to being challenged. A design brief isn't a fixed thing, it's a starting point that needs questioning and testing throughout the process. Design and briefing go hand in hand and a good client embraces that process knowing it can lead them to a more coherent, specific and enjoyable solution that delights them every day they use it. A client that starts knowing exactly what they want has already closed themselves off to so much potential; solutions that surprise are often the ones that stick."

**Paul Testa, Paul Testa Architecture**

### COST THE PROJECT ACCURATELY

**"The best client relations happen when you have a clear budget, and you can define your requirements in the design and specification stages and stick to them, with a project drawn in detail and costed accurately with funds secured. Don't forget the contingency – 10 per cent is a sensible amount to set aside for any unforeseens; there's always some."**

Neil Wall, Studio West Architects

## APPOINTING AN ARCHITECT & TROUBLESHOOTING

### COMMON PROJECT PITFALLS TO AVOID

"With any project there can be various pitfalls: some of the most obvious to consider include not paying for a professional survey at the start of the works. When considering extension and renovation works, a proper survey, prior to your architect commencing with the design, is invaluable. You will be safe in the knowledge that walls have been drawn at the right thickness, and in the right place, which can affect the structural design. Also, other issues will have been highlighted during the survey, which, if not taken into account, could cost extra while on site — such as the positions of trees with a Tree Preservation Order or manholes adopted by sewerage companies that may charge for you to build over/near a public sewer. By having a professional survey in place at the outset, you can factor these extra costs into your budget from an early stage, or possibly design around them.

"It's always best to inform your architect during the design phase if there are items you want to change. It is a lot less expensive to change a design on paper than it is to make changes on site. If you don't understand elements of the design, ask your architect to explain it further.

"Tendering without a schedule of works or bill of quantities is another pitfall. Working drawings are extremely informative but they don't go into fine detail and specify the materials you want. For example, one client expected the use of an expensive chalk-based paint but, because this was not written on the drawings, the contractor had allowed for trade emulsion. We tender with working drawings and a schedule of works to give as much information as possible. It may cost more to have the schedule of works written, but can save money, and stress, in the long run by avoiding ambiguity while on site.

"Choosing a builder without seeing their work is another mistake. Prior to tendering we advise our clients to visit a builder's past projects to ensure the client is satisfied with the quality of work they see. When we tender with a new builder, we ask them for a reference from both a client and a previous architect; we talk to these referees to understand their view on the builder's speed on site, quality of works and how costs were handled. From there we consider whether they should tender or not."  
**Lesley Hally, LA Hally Architect**

### CHANGING ARCHITECT DURING THE PROCESS

"If things are not working out with your architect, you should terminate the working relationship as soon as possible. This should not happen, though, if research and homework is done before and you've met with two or three architects and seen examples of their work — and met with their previous clients.

"If fees are paid in accordance with the appointment with your architect, you own the right to use the design on that site. You do not, however, own the right to copy the design on another site. The architect owns the general copyright of the design."  
**Neil Wall, Studio West Architects**

### WHAT TO PAY

"As a guide, RIBA suggests that a full service for a new-build home is around eight per cent of the total construction cost. However, you could look for a practice that offers a fixed rate. (For example, unlike most architectural practices operating on a percentage of construction cost — meaning the self-builder knows from the beginning how much to expect to pay at particular stages of the project, and can therefore budget accordingly.) Keeping an eye on the budget is difficult, so hiring an architect who gives you the numbers upfront can really make a difference."  
**Allan Corfield, Allan Corfield Architects**

### BE CLEAR ABOUT THE LEVEL OF SERVICE REQUIRED

"Architects/designers present their fees in different formats, which can make it very tricky for the first-time client to compare. For example, a set of building control drawings from one architect might only cover the basic Building Regulations issues in order to get you a conditional approval. The drawings might not actually have enough information to issue a good tender, agree a fixed-price contract and build from. I suggest requesting an example set of drawings for a previous project so that the level of detail and specification can be understood.

"To get the right fee proposal, make sure that you brief your architect as to the level of service you actually require. Do you want them to quote for just a skeleton service, whereby the design is progressed just as far as getting the basic shell up? Or do you expect them to assist with lighting design, bespoke staircases and fitted joinery? These bespoke tasks could potentially double the design time and, therefore, fees. It is possible to outsource the design of such items to other specialists, which may save on budget, but might not result in a cohesive design."  
**Kate Stoddart, architect and property consultant**

### APPOINT YOUR ARCHITECT IN WRITING

"When appointing an architect, or any professional for that matter, it is important that the agreement is confirmed in writing. There are several ways to do this, but the most formal approach is for the architect to provide a RIBA Standard Agreement Contract. This is filled out by the architect and the client, and forms a legally binding contract.

"The other widely used method is via an exchange of letters. The architect would provide the client with a letter of intent — or 'fee proposal' — which the client then agrees to in writing. Both of these methods form a contract as they confirm the main areas required as follows: Who the contract is between; What it is specifically for; A time period for the service to be completed; The cost of the service.

"Whichever way you decide to appoint your professionals, it must be in writing!"  
**Allan Corfield, Allan Corfield Architects**