

# Using an architect for your home

# Using an architect for your home

Whether you are planning to build a new house, to alter or extend your present home, to employ a builder or just do it yourself, it makes sense to consult an architect.

This guide is designed to show how an architect can help, the benefits to your project, and how working with an architect can pave the way to a successful project.

## Why you need an architect

An RIBA Chartered Architect will provide you with much more than just the drawings for your new home or alteration. You will be fully involved in creating a totally tailored solution for your living needs. An architect has the experience to steer your project safely through to completion, overseeing the design, planning and building regulations, the builders and your budget.

You can hire an architect to manage any or all parts of the design and construction process. All architects are trained to:

- help you to **define your objectives** for the project, identify the risks involved and interpret your ideas imaginatively and expertly;
- work with you to **develop a design** that will maximise your investment, be economic to build and run, and, of course, bring you years of comfort and pleasure;
- help to **secure the approvals** that will be needed before your project can go ahead, including the preparation of applications to the local authority for planning consent (which certifies that the project meets rules governing the use and form of buildings) and for Building Regulations certification (which covers the functional requirements of buildings to safeguard the health and safety of the people using them);
- be able to **manage the construction phase** by helping you to select suitable builders, obtain competitive prices for construction, monitor progress, standards and safety on-site, arrange the input of other design specialists, and oversee the co-ordination of the construction through to its successful completion.

# Using an architect for your home

## Setting your brief

*Your brief should be clear and unambiguous and it should enshrine a common understanding between you and your architect.*

Seek the architect's help in formulating the brief. The process may involve a number of discussions and help to establish the dialogue between you that the project needs. Above all the project brief should describe:

- **The functions of the finished project**  
Who will use it, and for what?  
Have you visualised how these activities will be accommodated and provided for in the new space(s)?
- **Your motivations and expectations**  
What do you hope to achieve by this project, in the short and long term, for yourself and others?
- **A design direction**  
Contrasting or in keeping with existing buildings?  
Contemporary or traditional?  
Are there certain materials, fixtures or finishes you favour?  
Is sustainability an issue for you?
- **Authority for decision making**  
Who will sign off decisions about design, about costs and about day-to-day matters on-site?
- **Timetables and budgets**  
When should key stages be completed, how much should they cost, and how will they be financed?

A good, thorough brief will form the basis of the professional agreement you sign with your architect.

## Protecting your interests

You are likely to be making a large financial and emotional commitment to your project, which makes standards and performance from others all the more important. Using a Chartered Architect provides you with extra safeguards to ensure that your designer acts with integrity and gives independent advice in support of your interests.

Only qualified architects registered with the Architects Registration Board are entitled to call themselves 'architects' in the UK and only registered architects who are members of RIBA and adhere to the RIBA *Code of Professional Conduct* can be called 'Chartered Architects'.

If you are uncertain about the credentials of anyone claiming to be a Chartered Architect do ask them for their RIBA membership number or check with the RIBA.

# Using an architect for your home

Architects are required by UK law to be registered with the Architects Registration Board (ARB) and to comply with the Board's *Standards of Conduct and Practice*.

The ARB also has an obligation to represent consumers' interests and in the final resort architects are subject to the disciplinary sanction of the Board in respect of 'unacceptable professional conduct or serious professional incompetence'.

The requirements of the RIBA and ARB codes of Professional Conduct include:

- maintenance of professional indemnity insurance cover appropriate to the scale and type of work undertaken;
- provision of adequate competence and resources; and
- a written record of the agreement with the client.

## **The client/architect agreement**

Once you have selected your architect, the responsibilities of each party and the services to be provided by the architect should be set down in a formal agreement.

When you have work done to your home, you are acting in your private capacity, i.e. as a 'consumer', which is where the *Unfair Terms of Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999* come into play. Your architect will discuss these issues with you so the terms of your agreement are fully understood and 'individually negotiated in good faith'.

The agreement will record:

- details of your project and the services to be provided by the architect;
- the calculation of fees and expenses;
- the appointment of any other consultants;
- the amount of the architect's insurance cover and period of liability; and
- dispute resolution procedures.

You may find the RIBA *Conditions of Appointment* and *Schedule of Architect's Services* will be suitable for this purpose. These state, in plain, simple terms, the basic responsibilities of the architect, which include:

- performing the services required using reasonable skill and care;
- acting as your representative;
- advising you on compliance with statutory requirements;

# Using an architect for your home

- keeping you updated on progress and on issues affecting time, cost or quality;
- not making any material changes, without your agreement, to the services or the agreed design except in an emergency; and
- not sub-contracting any obligation under the agreement.

When you have discussed and agreed all the details, your architect will draft a Letter of Agreement which you both sign to complete the contract.

## **Fees and expenses**

There is no standard or recommended basis for this calculation and the fee is usually a matter for negotiation. The fee will reflect the degree of personal service and bespoke design that your project involves. Other factors will include the location and size of the practice, its reputation and specialist skills.

In 2004, an independent annual survey of fees by Mirza & Nacey Research recorded the general level of architect's fees for providing a full service for new private houses to be between 8% and 12% of the construction cost. On projects to refurbish or extend houses, or for repair and conservation work on historic buildings, the fee can be a larger percentage of the building cost.

Fees for a partial service for preparing the design and submitting the planning application are generally between 3% and 5% of the construction cost.

## **Fee options**

An architect will usually quote their fee as a percentage of the building cost or as a lump sum. In cases where the scope of their work is harder to predict, or for services such as surveys or party wall services, the quote will usually consist of an hourly or daily rate together with an estimate of the time required.

## **Expenses**

These will generally be added to the fee and will be charged for items such as the costs of travel, copying drawings and documents, and for making planning or Building Regulations applications.

## **Payment**

An architect who is retained for the entire project will typically invoice about one third of the fee during the design stage, the same at the construction information stage, and the balance during and following construction. Invoices are usually issued monthly, but regular payments can be budgeted over a period. Alternatively, fees might be paid on completion of each work stage.

# Using an architect for your home

## Legislation

It is important, before you start your project, that you are aware of the approvals that will be needed from the local authority for Planning and Building Regulations, as well as legislation that might affect your plans, such as party wall regulations.

Your architect can guide you through all of these matters as they develop the design. They will also be able to make the necessary submissions for approvals and handle negotiations with the statutory bodies.

## The building contract

This is a vital document – the legally binding commitment between you, as the client, and your builder to deliver your project. Your architect can administer this contract on your behalf.

As we all know, it is not uncommon for building projects to contain hidden surprises – structural quirks or unexpected ground conditions, for example – that can impact on the design and possibly on the building cost. The best way to prepare yourself is an adequate written contract, designed to manage such events fairly from each party's point of view.

There is a range of standard forms of contract tailored to different size projects, and your architect will be able to advise you on the one best suited to your needs. They can also explain your rights under the *Unfair Terms in Consumer Contracts Regulations 1999*, and how these might influence your decisions about certain terms in the building contract, particularly payment procedures and dispute resolution.