

7 Architect designed

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Architects are professionally trained to dream up the best building you and they can imagine. If you dream of living in an imaginative house, adapted to your particular lifestyle and your land, or simply dream of protecting your investment and your contractual interests, architects are the specialists you need.

WHY CONSIDER AN ARCHITECT FOR YOUR HOUSE

There are only two reasons why someone wanting to build a house should consider using an architect: *standards and protection*. Architectural education, which normally takes five to six years, and the Acts of State Parliaments, are concerned to ensure that those who practice architecture maintain standards of professional performance that protect the interests of their clients, and the public in general.

Registration under the State law requires evidence of practical experience, knowledge of law, and of professional practice. If you desire a higher standard of design, a building adapted to your needs and protection of your interests during the building contract, then consider using an architect.

WHAT ARCHITECTS' FEES BUY

The fees you will pay are buying five to six years of higher education in design, building construction, architectural history, electrical, plumbing and drainage design, as well as structural analysis. They also buy the requirement of the State, that the architect be skilled in administration of building contracts, and knowledgeable in Council regulations, and other building laws.

Almost all architects who run their own firms have worked with other practising architects before setting up on their own. In this way, the practical knowledge and experience of their profession has been passed on to them.

The architect's fees may range from 5 to 15 per cent of the cost of your house. It will depend on the extent of service, talent and public reputation of the architect. Amortised as an investment over ten years at 5 per cent inflation, the best architect charging 15 per cent will only cost you about \$90 per annum for every \$10 000 of building cost, or \$900 per year for a \$100 000 house.

HIRING AN ARCHITECT IS AN INVESTMENT DECISION

The cost of hiring an architect should be weighed against the return on living in a house tailored to your needs and in knowing that there is a professional keeping an eye on the quality of construction. It is an investment that may also be reflected in a higher resale value, should you want to sell at a later date.

Either way, it can add up to value for money, if you choose your architect wisely.

CHOOSING AN ARCHITECT

Choosing the right architect involves the same difficulties as choosing the right doctor, or solicitor, except that in cases of architecture, you can have a good look at examples of the architect's work.

The first starting point is through friends who may have used an architect or know of someone who has. Failing friends, you may have noticed a house that appealed whilst driving around. Knock on the door. Most people are proud to show off their house and tell you the good and bad stories about their architect and builder.

Magazines and newspapers often feature special houses or interiors. This is also a useful starting point, though don't only go by the photograph. Photographers are great at taking advantage of the best angle, while ignoring the impracticalities of the design.

Finally the local Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects will provide you with a short list of architects practising in your area. The Institute also publishes useful pamphlets on the variety of services architects provide. This can help you get off on the right foot.

JUDGE BY THE RESULTS

Having put together a list of possible architects, ring them up and ask for a list of houses and clients they are happy for you to inspect and talk to. Naturally they'll give you their best jobs but it is their best job you want them to do for you.

Contact the clients, visit the houses, find out the names of the builders and talk to them all. The questions that matter are:

- Did the architect correctly interpret the owner's needs?
- Did the architect illustrate the design well enough for the owner to really understand what was going to be built? (Remember most people have difficulty visualising from a plan.)
- Did the architect work to the budget?
- How long did it take to go from design to construction?
- Did the architect listen sympathetically to the concerns and doubts of the owner?

- Does the builder feel the architect prepared adequate plans and specifications?
- Do the owner and the builder feel the architect administered the contract fairly and efficiently?
- Would the owner use the architect again and would the builder be happy to work with the architect again?

INTERVIEW THE ARCHITECT

If the answers are positive and you like the feel of the houses, next interview the architect. Ask to see current projects under way on the drawing board, or being built. Find out how busy the practice is, and who will work on your job. Have the architect show you around the office.

Architectural practices range from one-person firms to those of well over a hundred employees. The larger practices often turn down domestic work for a variety of management reasons.

Many small to medium-sized practices, which accept domestic commissions, will divide the responsibility for design, plans and specifications, and contract administration between two or three people. This takes advantage of specialist skills. In today's complex world it is difficult for any architect to do it all and specialisation is normal.

However, insist on one partner or principal being your contact person throughout the design, documentation and construction.

Discuss fees, stages of payment, time to complete the project, the realistic limits of your budget and ask to see the form of contract between yourself and the architectural firm. The Royal Australian Institute of Architects has prepared a standard client-architect contract for use by architects and their clients.

Ask the architect to describe his or her design philosophy. Most architects love to talk about why they design a certain way, and will appreciate the opportunity to explain the principles behind their designs.

Remember, it's not only protection you're buying, but also that skill at design. And, if you don't understand all the 'aesthetic jargon'¹, ask for an explanation in simple language. It's a good test of communication ability.

If after all this, you still feel positive, then sign on the dotted line. If all goes well, you're about to buy something unique, that nobody else has and you may collect a friend along the way.

DEFINE YOUR NEEDS

Having done your homework on choosing your architect, you must now do your homework on what you want designed and built. Remember, you're going to live with the results for years. Describing your ideas to the architect, what it is you want designed and built will be your best contribution to a happy result.

Actually, it may be a good idea to do most of the work on writing down your needs before choosing your architect. That way you'll have a much clearer idea of what you're looking for and be able to ask the right questions more easily.

The architect can help you and will want a lot of questions answered before starting to design. Things will go more smoothly and quickly if you have done most of the homework beforehand.

Read Chapter 10, steps 3 through 10 in this chapter. This is what you are paying your architect to do. Reviewing those sections will help you understand what your architect does when designing your house. It will enable you to more easily discuss the pros and cons of the design.

Remember, *architecture is the art of finding beautiful compromises between competing priorities*. The best brief in the world always has competing priorities. It is your responsibility to guide your architect and to decide what matters most in your domestic lifestyle. It is your architect's responsibility to find the beauty that gives you art and practicality, at a cost you can afford.

WHAT YOUR ARCHITECT DOES

Architects and architecture are no mystery. It only seems so from the outside. Your architect will work his/her way through a number of logical steps to allow you to arrive at your front door.

Firstly, your brief will be turned into a design, much like the process set out in Chapter 10. This design will be checked with you, modified, adjusted and refined. The cost of it is worked out by a number of methods. It will then be translated into construction drawings and specifications, including design and construction details of the house such as kitchens, bathrooms, laundries, windows, etc.

If the traditional method of contracting is adopted, tenders will be called from four to six builders and a contract signed between you and the builder. The architect is not a party to the building contract, but is nominated as the representative of the proprietor (the owner) with certain powers and obligations relating to both the owner and the builder.

The architect will then inspect the progress of the construction, checking to see that it is being built in accordance with the plans and specifications and that the builder is properly supervising the job. The architect will also issue certificates authorising the proprietor to pay the builder progress payments.

The end result will hopefully be a beautiful house that suits its new owners, has been built well, come in on budget and results in you, the owner, recommending the architect to new, prospective clients.

ARCHITECTS ARE ETERNALLY OPTIMISTIC

Anyone who chooses an architect to design their house is engaging a person, who is more than likely, 'eternally optimistic'. The act of architectural creation is always about making buildings that are more efficient, better planned, more useful, soundly built, enjoyable, and beautiful. Architects want the world to be a better place because of their buildings. Designing buildings can be one of the great pleasures of life.

They also want to extract the maximum space and beauty out of the dollars available. It is while designing the house that the most difficulty is experienced in balancing the competing claims of beauty, space, construction methods and costs. It is important that you enquire carefully about the methods your architect uses to cost preliminary design. It is at this stage that a serious mismatch between design and cost can occur.

Both architect and client can be carried away by the design, only later discovering, to the embarrassment of the architect, and disappointment and frustration of the client, that it can't be afforded. Only careful, realistic costing methods can avoid this dilemma.

Architects can, on occasion, carry themselves away on the strength of their involvement in the design, a design the client may not like, fully understand, or afford. The responsiveness of the architect to your doubts and difficulties in understanding the design is critical to overcoming what can become a conflict in interest and lead to a breakdown in the relationship.

Checking this out at the time you interview the architect is the best way of avoiding disappointment and frustration, not to mention a dispute over fees.

You are buying a balance between art, practical building experience and business common sense. Discovering the right balance for you and your architect, requires give and take, as well as realism, on both sides. You'll be talking to your architect for a long time.

ITS A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP

From the time you hire your architect, to the time the defects period of the contract ends, can extend anywhere from 18 to 24 months or longer. During much of that period you may be in contact with your architect, or his or her staff, on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Your discussions will concern decisions ranging from spending tens of thousands of dollars, to choosing the kitchen cupboard door handles.

It's a long-term working relationship and on occasion, a highly emotional one. It involves the excitement of creating something new, and at times the tensions of ensuring bad workmanship during construction is properly redone.

The relationship is built on understanding, good communication, trust and performance. Checking it out at the beginning can result in you receiving the one thing that architects do that is mysterious, the creation of a fine piece of architecture.

Princes and kings paid fortunes for the pleasure of living with fine architecture. As tourists we are prepared to journey overseas to bask in the pleasure created by architects of past generations. As Australians, we are now able to enjoy the same pleasure, in a style that suits our way of life, by choosing an architect to design our home.