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The Coach House, Court Essington, Midford, Somerset, 2005. David Archer Architects; Photographer: Keith Collie

The design brief

Once you have a clear picture of the benefits and problems associated with the house, you are in a good position to start looking at the improvements you can make in detail. You should also have estimated a budget and have an idea of how long the work is likely to take. The next thing to decide is what end result you are hoping for once the work is completed. It is quite easy to fix on a solution that relates to a specific alteration, such as 'extend the dining room' or 'convert the loft', but it may be better to keep an open mind and to make this kind of decision part of the design process, rather than part of the design brief. The objective is to describe your needs, rather than how the building will change. If you can keep an open mind, you will be able to take advantage of any fresh ideas or unexpected conclusions that may come out of the design process.

An example of this way of thinking resulted from an early consultation that a family had with an architect. They wanted a first floor extension over an existing ground floor lounge to form a new first floor room. The architect realised that this would be expensive and tricky to build, but spotted a brick-built garage in the back garden, at that time used only for storage. The analysis of the family's requirements that followed showed that if the garage were upgraded into living accommodation and linked to the house, the existing spaces could be re-organised, with the finished scheme meeting all the needs of the family for many years to come. Not only was money saved, but also the result worked better for that particular family than their original proposal to add a first floor extension.

A 'brief' is the information that you give to a designer which explains your needs, along with an idea of the budget and timescale. Sometimes the brief can be given verbally, but even if this is the case, the architect should write down everything that you say and identify those parts of it that are the most important. If you prepare your own list before you meet the architect it will be a useful starting point and will save time. Apart from being of enormous assistance to the designer, it will help you and any other occupants of the house think through what

you would like to do in more detail, and expose any areas of disagreement.



Hot tip: Agree your requirements with family members in advance of meeting the architect if possible. There is nothing more uncomfortable for architects than to find themselves trying to mediate between two new clients who cannot decide on a brief.

An enjoyable exercise, which is also very useful, is to compile a scrapbook of pictures from magazines or your own photos of styles or designs that you particularly like, or that you think are relevant to your project. Just as important, is a similar collection showing things that you positively hate – it is quite demoralising for an architect to spend several hours on an ingenious way of using a dormer window to increase a roof space, only to find on presenting it that you dislike dormer windows. It is very important to decide on your absolute minimum requirements, without which it is not worth your while to proceed. This is in contrast to those things that you would like, but would be prepared to sacrifice if practicality or lack of money made them unattainable.

Some thought should be given to what extra

A typical brief for an extension

Budget: £70,000 – £80,000 plus VAT

Problems with existing house

- Kitchen is too small, the family is about to get bigger, and there is not space for the crockery and household gadgets already accumulated.
- When friends come to stay, they have to camp down in the living room.
- There is no garage.
- The main bedroom is too small.
- The hallway is quite dark and dingy and would benefit from more natural light.

Essential extra space needed

- Kitchen – twice as big, to have an American-style fridge and space for a four-person dining table. Also to have patio doors, and get plenty of sunlight.
- Cloakroom/WC 2 or 3 square metres larger than existing.
- New master bedroom, about half as big again as the existing one.
- Bedroom, compact, for a double bed (visitors only), also to act as a study with good daylight levels.

New rooms that would be desirable

- Ensuite bathroom to new master bedroom to contain a WC, shower and washbasin. Can be very compact.
- Utility room – could be upstairs for washing and drying clothes.
- Garage, single car built on to side of house, with access to hall.

Preferred location for extension

- Back of house, away from neighbouring houses and boundary.

Appearance

- To match in with existing house in scale and materials.
- Traditional design outside, modern interior, open plan downstairs.
- Lots of light, to give an 'airy' feel to the spaces.

Future

- Allow for attic conversion at a later date.

Work to existing house

- New boiler.
- Redecorate hall, landing and all new rooms.
- Replace all existing timber windows with new to match.

Other important considerations

- House will be occupied during the building work, so kitchen facilities will need to be available for most of the time.
- A baby is due in 7 months' time so building work should not start until several weeks afterwards.
- We dislike: dormer windows, concrete tiles, stripped pine, the colour green.
- We do not have a good relationship with the neighbour on one side.
- We are in a conservation area (i.e. special planning controls).

Attached: Extracts from several magazines showing design features that are particularly liked or disliked.

space is needed and who will use it if it is created. You should try to indicate the sizes of any rooms that you think would meet your needs. Ideally, this would be in square metres, calculated by measuring the existing rooms and visualising how much has to be added. You can refer to existing rooms or features – for example ‘the kitchen is to be extended as far as the edge of the existing patio’.

Finding a designer

Choosing the right person or company to help you with the design is an important step and it is worth spending a little time to make the right choice. The architect must be able to understand your requirements, respect your budget, and put forward ideas and suggestions in a clear way. As with any creative project, good communication between client and designer is vital. In turn you as the client should make your requirements clear as well as listen to your adviser’s professional advice.

The design process begins earlier than you may think. You will be making choices that directly affect the design in the very early days when you first contemplate the project. As you gather more information about the potential of the building and what your expectations are for it, the design is already beginning to develop. It also goes on until the very end of the building work, when the new furniture is bought and the curtains are hung.

However, at this stage, a landmark is reached – engaging someone to turn your hopes and dreams into a solid building. All the available information you have gathered has to be presented to the designer. At the same time, the architect should embark on an information gathering process, before starting to explore possible design solutions. But first of all you have to find that key person.

How to be a model client

1. Be sure that you really want the level of skills and assistance with your project that the architect you are considering is offering.
2. Do your homework before you meet and agree with your family what you are looking for from the design.
3. Don’t dismiss a new idea without at least giving it some thought. Part of a designer’s job is to suggest things that may not have occurred to you.
4. Don’t go for the cheapest fee possible if you want an acceptable level of service. You will probably require someone with experience, expertise and skill to ensure the success of your project, and these are worth investing in.
5. Make yourself available during reasonable office hours for meetings with your architect and other consultants if possible. To you it is a hobby; for them it is work.