

Architects – Myths Busted

“Why would I get an architect? They’re expensive and extravagant.” Have you ever said this when looking at building a house or an extension? Many do, and it’s a common belief – but is it true?

Well, yes and no. It is true that, as an initial cost and as a percentage of the construction cost, an architect’s fees seem high, but let’s drill deeper.

First of all, a lot of those fees include engineers, building surveyors and local council costs that you will have to pay anyway. OK, I hear you say, I can carpet my house for the cost of an architect. Maybe, but what about the savings you might make?

Many people don’t realise that architects will give you great up-front advice that can save a lot of money in the long term. For starters, an architect can advise on how to minimise the running costs of your home by ensuring the rooms are getting the maximum amount of sun and the house is constructed to properly retain the heat on cold winters nights. They can also help you make your house size efficient so you are not paying for extra square metres you don’t really need. Architects can discuss your future plans to ensure you don’t build a house that needs another extension in five years. They can even tell you how to rework your existing house so you don’t need to build on at all.

An architect will also manage the construction for you – signing up a builder and checking on the building of your home regularly, ensuring that you are getting what you’re paying for. If there’s a problem an architect will work with the builder to solve it. That’s right – it minimises your risk of being a segment on *A Current Affair* (you know what I mean).

So what about the extravagant bit? Well, architects will respond to your needs; some people want it ‘a little bit fancy’ but architects are just as comfortable helping you create a modest home as well. You’ll be surprised at the number of smart, practical solutions architects have to your home design problems.

There are all sorts of architects, just like there are all sorts of houses, and the important thing is to pick the one that suits your needs. So talk to one or three of them, they will usually have an initial conversation for free and then you can make an informed decision. After all, it’s likely to be your biggest investment.

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Architects – The ‘First Date’ (part one)

In my last column we talked about why you might use an architect to design your home or addition – basically because they give advice and ideas you may not have thought of and because it lowers your risk of something going horribly wrong and costing you a lot more than the architect’s fees.

I am now going to assume you have taken the plunge and found an architect you like. You are now about to walk in to your first real meeting with him or her (your ‘first date’ – there’s a feeling of anticipation and the pressure is on to show a bit of substance if this ‘relationship’ is going to have legs). At this point it’s worth noting that it may take six to 12 months to finalise your design before you start to build – so you really are getting into a ‘long-term relationship’.

So, what does your architect need to know? In a nutshell, your architect will want to know what you want and how much you want to spend – easy, right?

Let’s deal with what you have to spend first.

Many architects think in terms of project cost, which means they talk in terms of the *construction budget*. That means they are not necessarily including everything you are when you tell them your *total budget*. It’s important that you clarify this at your first meeting. It is always worth making sure that you make clear either what your total budget is, including their fees, furniture, whitegoods, etc., or, you put allowance for that to one side and just deal with the construction budget in the conversation. Like any first date, the wheels will come off at the end of the night if there’s uncertainty over how the bill is getting settled.

While we are on money – architects start with talking about cost per square metre of your home, which is a rough guide only to begin with. They can get more accurate costs from a quantity surveyor (QS) as your home design takes shape, but even the QS often allows a variance of plus or minus five to 10 per cent, which can translate to quite a difference. Unfortunately, the cost will remain uncertain until a builder has given you their price.

If money is really important – and of course it is – and you need more certainty as you design your customised home, talk to your architect honestly about this. They will have some suggestions about how to control your costs including more regular checks with the QS, getting a builder involved during the design process and more.

In summary, like any relationship, open and frank communication is the key to being successful.

In my next column we will talk through the second part of your ‘first date’ – to quote the Beastie Boys, “What’cha, What’cha, What’cha Want”.

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Architects – The ‘First Date’ (part two)

In my last column we talked about how an architect talks about budget and some basic steps on managing the financial aspects of your new home or extension. This month we are going to look at the more exciting part of your ‘architectural first date’ – what you want to build.

An architect will normally call this *project scope* or the *client brief* but, essentially, it is the basic list of your needs and desires for your home.

I have had all sorts of different briefing meetings, from one where the client just said “surprise me” through to incredibly detailed, ‘down to the last door knob’, 100-page note books, so a couple of main points:

HAVE YOU ALREADY DESIGNED IT?

If you are 100 per cent certain of everything you want, down to knowing what the floor plan and the outside of the house need to look like exactly, and you just want the architect to *draw it up*, chances are you don’t need an architect; a building designer or draftsman is likely to be more suited to your needs. An architect will design a home to meet your wishes but, generally, will be most useful to you because of their ability to bring new ideas to the table, which suit you individually.

HOW MUCH DETAIL?

This is tricky. You will probably have been thinking about this for some time and already have a fair bit of detail in your head. However, your architect has not and, generally, your first briefing meeting should be a summary of the rooms and spaces you need and the things that are important to you. Give the architect all your detailed thinking if you like but you cannot assume it is all taken in during that first meeting and there will be a time for that further down the track.

Finally, be honest about what you like and don’t like, show pictures if that helps or explain how you and your family like to live during the week and on weekends. Your architect will ask the questions he or she needs to have answers for and there will be plenty of time to work through issues during the design phase.

A word of warning – it is quite possible that this meeting may uncover a difference between your desires and your budget – this is something that will need to be worked through pretty quickly as discussed in last month’s column.

If they haven’t already, your architect is now going to see where you want to build so, in my next column, we will talk through taking your architect back to your place.

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Architects – This Must Be the Place

In my previous columns we have talked about budget and the initial briefing. This month we are going to look at your first site visit with your architect.

This is critical to an architect because he or she will want to design a home that best responds to the peculiarities of the land you have bought. I have heard of architects who have camped on house sites for days at a time to take in all the qualities, including bird life, frosts and night sounds. I admit that I have never gone that far but visiting the site a few times is important to most architects before they put pencil to paper.

I do remember one client who asked me to look at a site he was thinking of buying where I initially poured a ‘teaspoon of doom’ on his plans; the site was very steep and while the views were great, the cost was going to be high and it wasn’t child friendly. He bought it anyway and after we worked on his home together, he lived in the house for a good few years until the kids needed a backyard. Only you know what you are willing to live with and it’s important you communicate that to your architect.

Anyway, be prepared to spend some time on site with your architect as they walk up and down, look around, mutter to themselves, take notes and generally take in what your block of land has to offer. This is time well spent. Your home will take a while to be ready for you but, if it’s planned well, it will last you many years.

This is a great opportunity to talk about why you bought this site and while it may be simply because “it’s close to the city, or “it’s peaceful” or even “I could afford this”, this is yet another opportunity for your architect to get some insight into what is important to you.

Your architect will talk to you at this time about getting a proper survey done by a land surveyor, and going to your local council to gather some of the initial details of your site from a planning perspective. Your architect will also need a copy of the *Certificate of Title* so they can see what easements and covenants are on your property.

They are starting to gather the basic parameters required as they start on their first designs for you.

In my next column we will talk through the first design sketch and how to avoid the temptation to say “what the hell is that?” when you see it.

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Architects – Upside Down Miss Jane

In my previous columns we have talked about budget, initial briefing and the first site visit. This month we are going to look at your architect's first real feedback to you: the first sketch.

You may not have heard from your architect for a few weeks and this can be frustrating, I know, but this doesn't mean nothing has been happening. Usually your architect has spent these past few weeks collating the information to date, including local council planning restrictions, survey data, land title information, etc.

They have also been soaking in the information you have given them of your personal requirements and the qualities of the site for your home or home extension. They have now pulled out the big soft pencil and a few sheets of tracing paper (more modern architects probably use a computer, but I can't relate to that – I still don't quite understand the Wonderful World of Web).

The first sketches are usually messy – really messy – “lines and lines and lines” as Tubbs said to Edward in *A League of Gentlemen*. An adventurous architect may show you these but many will tidy them up before they present them to you.

These first sketches are the architect working their way into your project. They are ordering spaces, ensuring the planning makes sense, trying to pick up the most important parts of your brief and your site and, to use an architectural term, developing the *architectural language* of this design.

What does *architectural language* mean? Well, a bit like movies have themes (good versus evil, girl meets boy, etc.), architecture can too. It may be about the planning, for example, a long spine wall that all the rooms are planned off; or it may be about the site – a house on a hill that looks like it is embedded into the hill in order to keep out strong winds; or it may even be quite abstract – a house that is designed around a contemporary scientific or mathematical theory.

Anyway, the first sketch will be a starting point for the design of your project. It is meant to get the main areas of your house in the right place to suit how you live. Don't be afraid to be brutally honest about what doesn't work for you; as time goes on, changes are harder to make so it's crucial to be up front early. This first sketch is an ideas sketch rather than a complete house plan and not yet looking at the finer details.

In the end, while each architect has their own way of designing, and by now you should have a fair idea of this from your first few meetings, the most important thing is that it works for you.

In my next column we will talk through the development stage of your design, where all the talking and ideas start getting closer to reality.

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Architects – This is Serious, Man

In my previous column we talked about your architect's first sketch. Now we are moving into the *design development* stage of your home.

While the previous stages have been reasonably straightforward in terms of what is required of you as a client, the *design development* stage is, in most cases, the longest and most demanding period of your project.

The next few months will involve regular meetings with your architect as each of you slowly adds layers of information and refinement to your design. This includes detailed discussions about the more complicated areas of your house, like the bathroom and kitchen, but also more questions about your preferences in everyday life:

- how do you want to wake up in the morning?
- how do you prepare breakfast?
- what do the kids enjoy doing most on a Saturday afternoon if they're stuck inside?
- do you like a busy/neat/quiet/ loud living area?

You will get down to brass tacks including door types, floor and joinery details, even whether you would like brass tacks. All this, though, is the proverbial duck floating on the water, because below the surface your architect is paddling furiously to manage the buildability of your design, consulting with structural, electrical and hydraulic engineers, your local council and building and quantity surveyors to ensure your decisions can be realised.

In truth, there are literally thousands of decisions made when an architectural home is designed, big or small. In a non-architectural house, many decisions will be taken by builders and building designers without your input. Your architect, however, will want you to be able to make as many informed decisions as possible and is trained to guide you through that process. After all, this is one of the reasons you chose an architect.

Of course, your architect is happy to recommend solutions and make decisions on your behalf through this stage too, and the degree of this comes down to both yourself and the architect you have chosen.

As you come to the end of the months of the *design development* stage and its many drawings, sketches and perhaps even a model or two, we start preparing for the documents that will be the formal blueprint of your home.

In my next column we will talk through the next stage: *contract documentation*.

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Architects – Preparing to sign on the dotted line

In my previous column, we talked about the *design development* stage of your home. Now we will talk about preparing *contract documentation*.

Television dramas use many workplaces as the settings for their stories: police stations, emergency departments, newsrooms and schools. What you won't see are too many dramas set in an architectural office. Why? Well because 90% of the work in an architectural office is contract documentation and contract documentation is not exciting to watch (for the record, *Family Ties* and *The Brady Bunch* don't count).

Hours filled with diligent professionals at computer screens and looking through folders does not make for Emmy award-winning drama. It does, however, help an architectural project go smoothly for both your architect, your builder, and more importantly, YOU.

During *contract documentation* your architect will need to finalise your design and, as this stage progresses, it becomes ever more important that major changes are avoided if possible – the reason being that by this stage there is significant risk in major design changes being accurately absorbed into what should by now be a very considered home.

Your *contract documentation* at the end of this period will usually be a set of drawings (known as the *working drawings*), a written specification (which covers items best explained in writing rather than on drawings) and the special conditions of contract – a pre-formed set of clauses outlining the obligations of the parties involved. The Australian Institute of Architects produces standard contracts agreed with the Master Builders Association for this purpose, providing a fair standard for all parties.

Preparing *working drawings* by hand, before computer drafting, used to be one of my favourite parts of the process; it is here that all the construction details that make your home special are resolved – details you don't usually appreciate until your home is finished but which make it very difficult to ever live in a non-architectural home again.

Around this period your architect will also get an updated cost estimate from the quantity surveyor and submit your home to your local council for building approval. It's a busy time.

Of course you can't actually sign a building contract yet as you haven't got a builder. While you may have a builder you want to use and that's fine, chances are you haven't and often your architect will recommend you go out to tender for your home to be built, so....

In my next column we will talk through the next stage: the tender process.

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Architects – Love me Tender

In my previous column we talked about preparing *contract documentation* for your home. Now we will talk about going out to tender for a builder. This assumes you don't have an individual builder you want to directly negotiate with.

Architectural houses and extensions require an extra amount of care during construction, and your architect will know which local builders enjoy doing this type of work. Usually they will recommend two to four builders, depending on the size of the job, and invite them to submit a price for your new home.

Because your architect already considers these builders are suitable in terms of quality and experience, the tender is typically decided on price and timeframe.

Builders should be given a fair amount of time to complete their quote – usually three to four weeks, depending on the size and complexity of the project. During this stage it is important that all builders are treated equally and fairly. This means if there is a small change to the design or brief, all builders need to be advised in writing and their tender will need to acknowledge these communications. This process is called the *issuing of addenda*.

Builders may also ask for extra time. It's a good idea to provide this as it is better that your builder gets the price right. Again, all builders need to be given the same.

Tenders should be submitted to the architect's office where they remain sealed until the designated opening time. If you want to be there for the opening that is fine too. Your architect will need to take some time assessing the tenders and may need to seek clarifications from the builder on some aspects.

The tender process isn't a perfect science. Sometimes the lowest price is much lower than the others, or they are all higher than your budget. Ideally, one or two contractors will submit a price that meets or is near your budget.

Where there is a very low price your architect will want to satisfy themselves that the builder has accurately estimated their costs, allowed for all items required to construct the project and won't find themselves in financial stress during construction. In the event that all the tenders are high, your architect will recommend negotiations with the lowest tenderer to get your project into budget. This can take a few weeks but is not an unusual part of the process.

With negotiations completed you are ready to sign the building contract and soon begin building.

In my next column we will talk through the next stage: construction.

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Architects – Hammering it Home

In my previous column we talked about the process for choosing your builder, focussing on tendering. Finally we will talk about the construction stage itself, something you are probably already familiar with, although perhaps not experienced at how this stage works with an architect.

The first significant point is that the architect's role is to administer the contract. This is why all the prior stages were so important – your architect has a professional duty to fairly manage the building contract between the signing parties: yourself and the builder. As such, the quality of the contract, including the architectural drawings and specifications, are fundamental to minimising the risk of disputes, which is why earlier columns stressed not to rush them.

Usually the architect will hold a weekly or fortnightly site meeting to monitor the progress of your home, check adherence to the agreed design and answer any questions the builder may have. Your architect assesses your builder's payment claims and certifies payment to the builder for work done, ensuring you only pay the value of work done to date. It is advisable that you also attend these meetings as it is your opportunity to have detailed input where required.

This raises another couple of important points. Firstly, under the contract, the builder may only take instructions from the architect, meaning you need to communicate any changes or clarifications through the architect. This significantly reduces the risk of unexpected cost overruns or potentially serious misunderstandings where the builder has made changes that the architect is not aware of. Secondly, in most cases, the site is the legal responsibility of the builder (even though you own it), meaning you cannot enter the site without the approval of the builder who may insist on accompanying you. This is for the safety of both you and the builder.

Another key point is that there is usually a *contingency sum* in the contract. This is to manage unforeseen issues during building and is often used during the early stages of construction in particular. It is not intended as a sum for client alterations, although if there is enough left over it may be agreed to use it for that purpose. If you think you may want to make changes to the design during construction, you should keep aside another discrete sum of money but be aware that making changes at this stage is usually more expensive and can cause delays.

These points really just scratch the surface of construction and your architect will be able to give you a fuller description. An architect reduces your risk as a consumer. It is worth the investment to keep the architect working with you during construction to administer the contract, as it removes a lot of potential work and conflict from your already busy life, leaving you to concentrate on how lovely your new home will be. Congratulations.

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Architects – Over to You

Now that we have gone through the whole architectural process in my previous columns, it's time to answer some readers' questions.

Jan of Old Beach has asked "Why do architects always use weird, confusing language to describe their buildings?"

It's a good question. Often newspaper articles will quote architects using language that is very difficult to understand. I guess the simple answer is that all vocations use jargon and architects are at least as guilty of this as anyone, although IT professionals give them a run for their money. The issue, though, is that 'archi-jargon' does make it difficult for the community outside the architectural profession to understand what an architect is talking about. So why do they do it?

To be honest, I am not 100 per cent certain but my theory is that architects use this language for two or three reasons.

Firstly, it can be difficult for architects to accurately convey their vision or aspirations for a building project, particularly larger urban projects. Architects' renderings (which are often incorrectly called artists' impressions) do help, but in order to provide a clear picture architects use very specific language, which sometimes lapses into jargon.

Secondly, I think architects are to some degree taught to communicate this way during their education. Over the course of five years of study, they spend most of their time talking to other architectural students and lecturers, so it becomes an automatic way to communicate architectural ideas.

Finally, I think architects work to their strengths and, while many have excellent communication skills, their main strength is design so it is important to remember that they are not using confusing language intentionally.

I do think, though, it is important to speak to your audience in a way that is accessible and, for that reason, my view is that architects should leave 'archi-jargon' for the design magazines and the clients who can relate to it and use plain language for the rest of the community. And, of course, if you don't understand something an architect has said, ask them to explain.

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Architects – Over to You 2

In today's column we continue to answer some readers' questions.

Philip from Kingston has emailed in and asked "Why do all architects' buildings look the same?"

This is an interesting question, although I'm not sure I agree that all architects' buildings do look the same; in fact, if anything, I think they are more diverse now than at any other time in history – with one caveat.

Up until very recent times, architecture has generally been influenced by architectural schools of thought of their time producing predominant architectural styles. In the Western world Gothic, Neo-Classical, Modernism, Classic Post-Modernism and, most recently, Deconstructivism all brought with them a fairly strict palette of architectural planning and imagery, which tended to be copied with some modification for local conditions.

The modifications may have been climatic, such as the addition of verandahs, or they may have been material, such as the use of sandstone in Tasmania for its Georgian-era buildings (granite was more common in London), or planning differences, such as smaller, more humble spaces in more regional towns.

But for all that, the era of architecture was instantly recognisable from its key characteristics.

The caveat I mentioned earlier is that whereas cultural isolation once led to a range of separately developed styles across the world due to cultural isolation – for example, Japanese architecture is very different from Arabic architecture – today we live in an internationally focussed world where ideas travel around the globe in seconds.

For all that though, architecture no longer has predominant schools of thought limiting design and, for this reason, I would argue that it does not all look the same. That is not to say there aren't often some stylistic similarities and trends but, by and large, architects respond more to the site's surroundings, or *context*, client's needs and community expectations than in years past. Architects have diverse interests and priorities and that is why choosing an architect that is right for you is so important.

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Bad to the Bone

A friend of mine recently asked me to look at a Development Application for a house being built behind her. It was a very large house, over 350 square metres in area, and designed by a well-known local design and build company, not an architect.

I have not worked as an architect for more than ten years and assumed that, in the past decade, the standard of these types of houses had improved, but I was truly appalled when I looked at the plans for this particular house.

It was a two-storey, brick veneer house and, in itself, this was not unusual – from the outside it looked like many houses do. What really shocked me, though, was the poor planning and the lack of thought.

The house was sited so that it could not take full opportunity of sun and unfortunately, when the house is finally built, the owners will find it cold and dark unless they use heaters and artificial light. These problems were made worse by the windows – hardly any on the north and west faces – with most facing south and some to the east. The front entry faces straight into the direction of the wind and provides no real shelter, and this is in an area well known for its cold, hard winds and occasional snow.

The internal planning was even worse. The owners had clearly taken the decision to add as many large spaces as possible rather than consider the quality of those spaces, and this had resulted in a large central family/dining area with doorways everywhere to connect to a study, rumpus, kitchen, stairwell and entry. This main room, which should be the heart of their home, is now really just a fat corridor with so much space needed for circulation. This was just one of the planning issues – a quick scan of the plans revealed more problems.

I desperately wanted to talk to these owners and try to explain that they were making a big mistake – that their home was going to be cold, dark, cavernous and expensive to heat. I wanted to tell them that they had sacrificed quality for size and, while they would adapt to their home in time, it was such a missed opportunity.

I can't, of course. Everyone makes their own choices and you should ensure you are informed before you launch into such a large commitment – unfortunately these owners will never know how much better it could have been if they had invested in time with an architect.

We have got used to such poorly designed houses and, judging by the success of the company that 'designed' this one, most of us don't realise how much we are compromising. I implore you to at least do some research before either building or adding to your home. Make an informed decision.

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