

Working With an Architect?

Learn How to Get the Most Out of Your Experience

Commissioning a house to be created just for you is every homeowner's dream. If you are thinking of working with an architect or design/build team, there are steps you can follow to help ensure the process is productive and highly rewarding.

1. Select someone you will enjoy working with.

A good relationship between client and designer is paramount to the success of any project, so choose an experienced architect that you feel comfortable working with. You should feel at ease asking questions and be comfortable voicing concerns and dislikes.

2. Have an idea of what you want.

Make sure you have some understanding of what you want out of your new home before the first concept meeting. If you can begin to communicate your vision to the architect, he or she will be better equipped to develop a design that meets your expectations.

Start by looking at other houses. Review your architect's or design/build team's project portfolio and note what catches your eye. Drive through neighborhoods and take pictures of design elements you admire as well as features you do not. You can also draw inspiration from the pages of your favorite home magazines. Then, start a "wish list" file including images of everything from architectural styles and window treatments to landscaping, cabinetry and appliances. It is also helpful to collect samples of materials, finishes, and colors you'd like to consider using in your new home.

3. Consider what will work best with your lifestyle.

Think very carefully about how you will use your new space and what is important to you. It's also helpful to consider what works and doesn't work in your current living space. To help with this process, we provide our new clients with a lifestyle questionnaire. The questionnaire touches on topics like current and anticipated future family size, the amount of time spent in different rooms, room uses, required space for hobbies, as well as space for special pieces of furniture and artwork.

4. Dare to dream.

Consider unique features you'd like to have in your new home. Does your family have a maritime past? Perhaps your home could be crafted to include nautical design elements. Do you value having your own private space to retreat to? Maybe you'd like to consider a loft hideaway or private porch.

These kinds of personal touches are what custom design and construction are all about. One of my favorite examples is a home we completed recently for a Maine couple. They had discovered two heart-shaped rocks on a nearby beach and wanted to incorporate them into the structure. We built the stones into the granite fireplace, just above the mantel. This small detail helped personalize the home for the couple in a very meaningful way.

5. Come prepared.

Feel free to share as much or as little as you'd like during your first meeting with the architect. This can include the images, lists, and material samples you may have been collecting. These aids will

help you explain your vision in accurate detail. You should also be ready to discuss desired square footage and what you are prepared to spend on the entire project.

With this information in hand, the architect can then begin to design your home accordingly and make sure your expectations are in line with your budget. Alterations to meet the budget can be made in the design phase by upgrading or downgrading materials as well as decreasing or increasing space. This is one of the reasons several versions of the schematic design are necessary and expected.

6. Be willing to consider alternatives and new ideas.

When you're talking over your ideas with the architect, keep an open mind. It's important to go into the process understanding that some of the things you desire may not be workable the way you envision them due to structural or budgetary concerns. Rest assured though, most architects will be very eager to work with you in finding creative ways to achieve your overall vision. They can also suggest their own ideas that could enhance the appeal of your home and save you money.

7. Schedule field trips.

You and your architect should visit the site where you plan to construct your new home several times during the design process. This will help ensure the look of your home complements its surroundings and enable the architect to draw inspiration from the natural features of your property. It's also important to get a look at the lot to determine if there are any challenges that will need to be accounted for, such as low lying land or a steep grade.

In addition, if your property is surrounded by great scenery, your architect and builder should survey the site with you to determine how the home can best take advantage of the views. We often set up scaffolding at a site to aid in understanding the important views from various locations in the house during the design phase. The scaffolding is adjusted until our clients are satisfied with what they see. This is how we determine the siting of a home as well as the positioning and style of some of the windows.

8. Make sure you are completely pleased with the design before moving on to construction.

Review the sketches prepared by the architect and provide candid feedback. Take your time and carefully consider every detail. The best time to make changes is in the design phase. Major alterations during construction can have a significant effect on the timeline of the project and your budget. Finally, remember this is your house! Ensure that you are totally satisfied with all aspects of the design. If not, don't hesitate to point out what you don't like.

At Houses and Barns by John Libby, we often build full-scale footprints of proposed designs with platforms at floor levels on the sites in addition to presenting sketches and realistic computer models. We feel this really helps clients visualize what the finished product will look like and minimizes the need for design changes during construction.

9. Stay involved.

Once construction begins, keep in touch with your architect and builder. If you can't visit the construction site regularly, request interior and exterior images and project updates so you can track the progress of your home as it is being built. If your architect and builder are not located under the same roof, it's also a good idea to periodically touch base with both to ensure the lines of

communication remain open between the two parties. By involving yourself in the process, you can ensure the end result remains true to your vision.

10. Consider using a design/build team.

You can go about developing a custom home in one of two ways. The first option is to work with an architect and then, when the plans are finalized, contract with a builder to construct the house. The second option is to hire a design and build team. This “total package” should include an AIA accredited architect and construction crew that work together on your project from start to finish. The builder is involved with the plans as they develop; eliminating the possibility of costly structural alterations after a design is finalized because the plans are not practical from a construction standpoint. It also facilitates an accurate assessment of how much it will cost to implement the architect’s design.

Houses & Barns by John Libby provides architectural and construction services under one roof. The architect, builder, and client are all involved in conceiving the project on paper so our projects move smoothly into the construction stage, and you can begin looking forward to moving into your new home.

I hope the information I have shared has provided you with some helpful insight into the process of working with an architect. If you’d like more information on our architectural services and design/build approach, please contact us at info@housesandbarns.com or 866 866 4169. We encourage you to explore our site and learn more about our design capabilities and fine craftsmanship.

By John Libby, President

Houses and Barns by John Libby