

RIBA



Royal Institute
of British Architects

Working with an architect

You have got a shortlist of RIBA registered practices to choose from for your building project. What do you do next? This leaflet explains how to select an architect and establish an effective working relationship





Stock Orchard Street, London N7, Sarah Wigglesworth Architects. © Paul Smoothy

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Why you need an architect

02

When you are making major alterations to your home or building an entirely new one, an RIBA registered practice can help you to manage the design, the builders and the money.

- Architects are trained to make the most of the site, space and materials to maximise what you can get for your budget and reduce your future bills.
- They are familiar with the construction industry's working methods and with legislation, regulations, and standards, and can guide you at every step of the project.
- They interpret your ideas with imagination, creating spaces that can be used, enjoyed and valued for decades.

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House in Arthur Road, Wimbledon, Terry Pawson Architects. © Richard Bryant/Arcaid

There are stages to engaging an architect on a project. Do your homework upfront on what services you need, on which architect to use and on your brief for the architect, and your project will be off to a good start.

Before appointing an architect for your project, you need a clear idea about what you want and the services you will need, and how much these will cost. An architect can initially assist you in defining your project and the services you require from them. Architects' practices vary in size and offer a wide range of services beyond design, from site analysis and building surveys to project management and tenant-related services.

Balance what you need with what you can afford. It could be just an hour's general advice, help with planning approval or project supervision all the way to completion. To help you, the RIBA publishes a Plan of Work which sets out in stages the services you may need.

The architects fees

An architect's fees may be charged as a percentage of the total construction cost or, depending on the service supplied, at an hourly rate or as a lump sum. As a general guide in January 2005, hourly rates ranged from £55 for general work by a qualified architect to around £150 per hour for complex work by a senior practice member.

Value for money

In paying for an architect's services, what may seem like an additional cost will normally turn out to be money well spent. As professional problem-solvers, their input could be invaluable in developing design solutions that cut construction bills, reduce running costs and add long-term value to your property.

By now, you should have a shortlist of architectural practices from RIBA Client Services. Call each one, outlining your project and the services you need, and find out if they are able to help. If they are, ask them for more information about the firm's qualifications and experience. If they cannot help, contact RIBA Client Services on 020 7307 3700 and we will supply a replacement name for your list.

Do a little research

Visit the websites of your shortlisted firms and look at their entries in the RIBA's online directory (www.ribafind.org). Listen to recommendations and contact their previous clients to discover what they are like to work with. If possible, visit finished projects or ask to see a portfolio of work.

Get talking

Choose an architect whose work you like and speak to them. You need to be sure of their creativity and ability to get things done, and your ability to work together. Good architecture needs collaboration and dialogue. You have to respect each other's views. For clients, that may mean banishing the commonly-held but misplaced idea that architects will impose their own tastes and ideas on their clients – on the contrary - your architect's aim will be to follow your brief closely and reflect the aspirations it contains.



VXO House, Hampstead, London NW3, Alison Brooks. © Dennis Gilbert/View



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The project brief

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The quality of your finished building will reflect the quality of your brief. This is the key document defining your vision of the finished building, and also of how the project will be managed. For your architect, it is the central reference point that will guide the direction they take and the services they provide.

How to get it right

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

Seek their 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. Some architects may charge for the consultation but others will be happy to advise you without charge on the understanding that you are going to appoint them as architect for the project. 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?

The agreement

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A good, thorough brief will form the basis of the professional agreement you sign with your architect. Clarity on services, costs, timings and procedures is vital to the relationship. The RIBA Code of Professional Conduct requires its members to define and record the terms of their agreement with you to provide professional services.

The RIBA Small Works Contract (SW/99)

This is a standard form of agreement designed for use on projects with an expected building cost of under £150,000. It comprises a short menu of services and a sheet of conditions relevant to the appointment. Ask your architect to run through it with you.

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No.1 Centaur Street, London SE1, De Rijke Marsh Morgan. © Michael Mack

Planning, preparation and performance

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House in Aberdeen Lane, London N1, Azman Owens Architects. © Keith Collie

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Now you have a practice signed up, the project can start in earnest.

Your architect can advise you on all the issues regarding planning approval, Building Regulations and health and safety legislation, and will probably offer to deal with the various authorities on your behalf.

Once planning approval is granted, they will be able to recommend the most appropriate form of building contract and prepare drawings of the agreed proposals for builders to cost.

Once work on-site is underway, your architect can take on the role of monitoring the standard, efficiency and cost of the builder's work.

Good luck!

Further information

For more help in selecting and appointing an architect,
contact the RIBA Client Services office in your area:

RIBA Headquarters and London cs@inst.riba.org 020 7307 3700

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