



Choosing the Right Architect

A home is **sacred** and great care must be exercised in choosing an architect as **not all architects are equal!**

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Making the decision to use a qualified architect is a commendable one. If you've read my article on "Cheeseburgers or Architects" you are likely to agree with me that an architect is absolutely necessary when it comes to one's own home. You've rightly decided against fast food and have instead chosen a quality restaurant. Unfortunately, when it comes to actually choosing the right architect, it's not as straight forward as finding the closest and cheapest restaurant. These factors are nice but certainly not important enough when considering the happiness of your family.

Finding the perfect architect to design your home takes thought and time. Imagine that your new house is the last home you will ever live in; the place you will enjoy and celebrate all those special moments in life. Take food for example, if you could only have one last meal for the rest of your life with your family, are you likely to eat just anything? You are more likely to dress up in your best outfit and treat your family to the best meal possible. You would go all out! Well when it comes to designing and building your own home, it is (for most of us) a once in a life time opportunity. We should therefore dream as big as we can and give it all we've got. Yet so many people skimp on quality build and design. A meal is but a moment on the lips but a house that you've invested in generously can generate happiness for generations.

So which restaurant is the one for you? Wanting an authentic Thai or Indian meal is comparable to choosing an architect that specializes in a particular classical style, and there are indeed architects who only specialize in a certain genre. Yet while specialists may be imperative in the world of Law or Medicine, it is not the same in the world of architecture. Good architects are flexible and can work in many styles. Such architects are like buffets which offer a wide variety of flavours and cuisine. But as with any buffet, quality can vary exceedingly, since a buffet at a 6 star hotel is going to be infinitely better than a 3 star one.

When it comes to your home, it is important to find someone who demonstrates quality and variety rather than a specific style. While every architect will naturally have their own style or signature, the architect must be able to adapt their style to your own tastes, otherwise you risk locking yourself into a situation where you are dealing with an architect very set in their ways.

I would always suggest choosing an architect who has demonstrated quality and the ability to be flexible in their designs and methodology. You do have to like their work but it's not imperative that you love their existing projects 100%, as your architect should be able to serve up fine cuisine specific to your tastebuds.

So having found an architect with a portfolio that demonstrates quality and flexibility, your next step must be to meet with them personally. Visit them in their natural working environment to discover the creative air in their studio. The person behind the portfolio must live up to your expectations. You would question the quality of your meal if you met your chef and found their kitchen to be disgusting and stifling. Or perhaps they lack passion and love for good food, and it is the same with architects. An architect who cares about their working environment and staff is likely to value you and your new home. Furthermore it will be a long journey together so it's important to share a vision and get along. All architects will want to show off and tell you why they are best for your project, but they must also demonstrate a willingness to listen to you and your needs. Otherwise you will be speaking to an architect who's tea cup is already full and any input from you will only make it overflow. It's your home and their designs must reflect your values and not just theirs. Of course you are meeting them because you value their work and their thoughts but

ultimately it's your happiness in the balance and not everyone's happiness can be measured by something that looks great on the cover of a magazine.

That brings me to the next important consideration - credentials. Only registered architects can call themselves architects. It may seem rude, but ask for their registration details or at least try to sight those important certificates hanging on the wall. The last thing you want is someone using the title of architect illegally. A building designer is not an architect, only an architect is an architect. Also, don't be too seduced by awards and glossy magazines with published works, for you must remember that a house that photographs well is not always a nice home to live in. There are plenty of excellent architects out there who have never won any awards or had anything published as it takes a great deal of effort and time to enter awards and have things published, and some architects don't have that time or inclination. It's good supportive material and can give potential clients a boost in confidence but keep in mind that a lot of what gets published comes down to timing, luck, connections and in some cases, simply paying for it.

"We have done it all before and know the relevant council well." Many great architects have been passed over for lesser ones for this claim. Council regulations are not rocket science and so much is subjective, but good architects producing good designs should be looked upon favourably by any council. In my opinion, an architect claiming to have done a particular type of project over and over again does not inspire creativity. No two sites or clients are ever the same and entering each project with a fresh mind on a blank canvas seems to be the better approach.

Read their published work and admire the awards but also ask them some really important questions such as - Who will be in charge of my project? In smaller firms you can be confident that the owner will have a big part in your project but with larger firms you may not be dealing with the person you had in mind. Your project could get kicked around from one junior designer to another and while a senior architect or partner may be your point of contact, the actual design work may be delegated. At the same times there are also risks if a practice is only a one man band. What if they get sick or take on more work than they can handle to leave your project lurking in the dark? Ask to see their design drawings and sketches. Can they even sketch? We live in an age where everyone uses software but it's of no use to you when there is a problem on site and your architect can't create images to help you see the design on the spot. But seriously, your home is a big investment and possibly the biggest you'll ever make. You need to be able to fully visualize where your money is going. Like test driving a car before you buy, you need to be seeing clear, realistic looking drawings in full colour. We have the technology so don't risk getting the design wrong with design drawings that you can't understand 100%.

What if you don't like the designs they produce? Is it a take it or leave it deal? Should your architect have 10, 20 or even 50 goes at it? Rarely will an architect deliver on their very first design. It's a process which takes time and will vary from one architect to the next. Most importantly however is that you are comfortable in telling your architect what you don't like, and for them to listen and persist. It's your home!

So assuming you like the work, have met and like the person responsible for the work, your next step is to verify the facts.

Photos can be deceiving and the sales pitch was probably designed and rehearsed to perfection, therefore visit the houses in their portfolio. Respecting their owners privacy means that you might not be able to actually go inside but you can still tell a lot from the exterior. Relevant interior photos can be provided by your architect. Ask for testimonials and referrals from past and present clients. If possible, call other clients and ask important questions such as:

- Is your architect responsive? Do they get back to you promptly with questions and do they work fast?

- Were you happy with the design and to what lengths did they go to get the design right?

Upon hearing positive reviews it's time to search your feelings and go with your gut. At this point you may already have an idea of their fees but don't let that be a swaying factor. The architect with the highest quote could also be the one that saves the most with building costs while also adding the most in value through clever design. Design is difficult to measure in dollars so while you may save \$30,000-\$50,000 with one architect you could potentially be losing out on hundreds of thousands at the other end. Furthermore it only takes a careless error to cost \$30,000 and good design can help reduce the chances of such errors. Obviously there is a big difference if one architect is charging 3 or 4 times more than another, and like restaurants there are very expensive ones and very affordable ones, but don't let a 30% variation affect your decision. Go with your gut on who is right for your project based on the aforementioned points. If the cost is higher than your budget, then negotiate, but if you can afford to stretch your budget that gut feeling you had will do you favours.

So there you have it:

- Like them and their work (like is the important word here - don't have to love it).

- Verify their work by checking their qualifications, visiting projects and speaking to their clients where possible.

- Search your feelings for who your gut tells you to choose as being best for you from both a design and service point of view.

- Don't be swayed by the cheapest quote. Good design avoid risks and pays dividends. Imagine it's the last meal you'll ever have.