

Why you need an architect:

An RIBA Chartered Architect will provide you with much more than just the drawings for your new home or alteration. You will be fully involved in creating a totally tailored solution for your living needs. An architect has the experience to see your project safely through to completion, overseeing the design, the planning and building regulations, the builders and your budget.

You can hire an architect to manage any or all parts of the design and construction process. All architects are trained to:

- help you to define your objectives for the project, identify the risks involved and interpret your ideas imaginatively and expertly
- work with you to develop a design that will interpret your ideas imaginatively, maximise your investment, be economic to build and run, and, of course, bring you years of comfort and pleasure
- help to secure the approvals that will be needed before your project can go ahead, including the preparation of applications to the local authority for planning consent (which certifies that the project meets rules governing the use and form of buildings) and for Building Regulations certification (which covers the functional requirements of buildings to safeguard the health and safety of the people using them)
- be able to manage the construction phase by helping you to select suitable builders, obtaining competitive prices for construction, monitoring progress, standards and safety on-site, arranging the input of other design specialists, and overseeing the co-ordination of the construction through to its successful completion.

Setting your brief:

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

Seek the architect's 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.

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? A good, thorough brief will form the basis of the professional agreement you sign with your architect

Fees and expenses:

Fee options

An architect will usually quote their fee as a percentage of the building cost or as a lump sum. In cases where the scope of their work is harder to predict, or for services such as surveys or statutory approvals, the quote will usually consist of an hourly or daily rate together with an estimate of the time required.

Expenses

These will generally be added to the fee and will be charged for items such as the costs of travel, copying drawings and documents, and for making Planning or Building Regulations applications.

Payment

An architect who is retained for the entire project will typically invoice about one third of the fee during the design stage, the same at the construction information stage, and the balance during and following construction. Invoices are usually issued monthly, but regular payments can be budgeted over a period. Alternatively, fees might be paid on completion of each work stage.

Legislation:

The building contract

This is a vital document – the legally binding commitment between your builder and you as the client to deliver your project.

Your architect can administer this contract on your behalf.

As we all know, it is not uncommon for building projects to contain hidden surprises – structural quirks or unexpected ground conditions, for example – that can impact on the design and possibly on the building cost. The best way of preparing yourself is an adequate written contract, designed to manage such events fairly from each party's point of view.

There is a range of standard forms of contract tailored to different size projects, and your architect will be able to advise you on the one best suited to your needs.