



Using an architect

Because they want their new house to be uniquely theirs, many people decide to go beyond standard house plans and hire an architect.

If this is your move, how can you get the most out of the architect you hire?

Based on the ideas, wish list and plans you've come up with using other areas of the [Rhode Island Builders Association \(RIBA\) website](#), look for an architect you believe understands your ideas and can design them into reality.

First, you need the names of architects who design the type of house you're interested in and of those who design homes in your price range. Our RIBA member directory on this website, where you'll find a number of architects, is a good place to start.

Here again, do your homework! Ask friends and relatives about architects they've used. Call the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, and inquire at the building sites of houses you like. Then call the architects themselves: Ask for references and check them.

A experienced architect not only can get your dream down on paper, he or she can help you find a builder, help negotiate prices and supervise construction.

Don't get too bogged down in the fee question: If you can afford an architect, you can't afford to skimp. After all, if you're not satisfied with the house, you've already wasted the money you saved.

Once you've narrowed down your choice to three or four architects, go see each one for the final test: With whom do you feel most comfortable? Which one seems best to grasp your ideas? You weren't given instincts for nothing...pay attention to them!

Give each architect you visit the basic floor plan you've worked out, what you want the house to look like, its size, what your lot is like, and your budget. A good architect will put some time into making a list of all the things you want in a house before you hire him or her. Remember: There are many things you won't have thought of. If an architect prods you for more ideas and forces you to think, you'll end up with a better house.

Once you've chosen an architect, be sure to get everything down in writing! Your contract should include everything the architect will do and how much it will cost. It also should include the procedure and cost for handling "change orders," design changes that you decide on later in the project.

Just for good measure, have your lawyer review the contract before you sign it.

Once you're all settled in with an architect, don't hold back: Remember that all information is relevant in designing a house. Do you plan on a larger family? How important is guest space? Does someone in the family work at home and need office space? Does someone in the family like to work out? Does someone have a health problem that would make a one-story home more desirable? Do members of the family need their own places to "get away"?

Again, be receptive to your architect's ideas.

Once an architect does the initial drawings, his or her work is just getting started. Next come the working drawings and the specification sheets. This is detail time for both you and your architect -- time to nail down the trim design, the wood to be used, the types of windows, doors, appliances and myriad other details.

What about price?

Typically, architectural services are priced according to the size of the project. You can find architects willing to work on terms that vary from an hourly consultation rate to a flat design fee. In custom homes, the most common arrangement pays architects 10% of the cost of the project and keeps them involved from conception through completion. That kind of full-service package covers complete plans and specifications, an estimate of construction cost, assistance in obtaining bids and awarding contracts, and administration of the contract (including inspections and evaluations of progress and certification of payments due to the contractor).

That's not a bad deal considering the reasonable assurance of years, perhaps decades, of happy living in your dream house.