



The Coach House, Courteysington, Midford, Somerset, 2005. David Archer Architects. Photographer: Keith Collie

The design brief

Once you have a clear picture of the benefits and problems associated with the house, you are in a good position to start looking at the improvements you can make in detail. You should also have estimated a budget and have an idea of how long the work is likely to take. The next thing to decide is what end result you are hoping for once the work is completed. It is quite easy to fix on a solution that relates to a specific alteration, such as 'extend the dining room' or 'convert the loft', but it may be better to keep an open mind and to make this kind of decision part of the design process, rather than part of the design brief. The objective is to describe your needs, rather than how the building will change. If you can keep an open mind, you will be able to take advantage of any fresh ideas or unexpected conclusions that may come out of the design process.

An example of this way of thinking resulted from an early consultation that a family had with an architect. They wanted a first floor extension over an existing ground floor lounge to form a new first floor room. The architect realised that this would be expensive and tricky to build, but spotted a brick-built garage in the back garden, at that time used only for storage. The analysis of the family's requirements that followed showed that if the garage were upgraded into living accommodation and linked to the house, the existing spaces could be re-organised, with the finished scheme meeting all the needs of the family for many years to come. Not only was money saved, but also the result worked better for that particular family than their original proposal to add a first floor extension.

A 'brief' is the information that you give to a designer which explains your needs, along with an idea of the budget and timescale. Sometimes the brief can be given verbally, but even if this is the case, the architect should write down everything that you say and identify those parts of it that are the most important. If you prepare your own list before you meet the architect it will be a useful starting point and will save time. Apart from being of enormous assistance to the designer, it will help you and any other occupants of the house think through what

you would like to do in more detail, and expose any areas of disagreement.



Hot tip: Agree your requirements with family members in advance of meeting the architect if possible. There is nothing more uncomfortable for architects than to find themselves trying to mediate between two new clients who cannot decide on a brief.

An enjoyable exercise, which is also very useful, is to compile a scrapbook of pictures from magazines or your own photos of styles or designs that you particularly like, or that you think are relevant to your project. Just as important, is a similar collection showing things that you positively hate – it is quite demoralising for an architect to spend several hours on an ingenious way of using a dormer window to increase a roof space, only to find on presenting it that you dislike dormer windows. It is very important to decide on your absolute minimum requirements, without which it is not worth your while to proceed. This is in contrast to those things that you would like, but would be prepared to sacrifice if practicality or lack of money made them unattainable.

Some thought should be given to what extra

much can be revealed by looking at a scaled drawing, such as a plan. A change in wall thickness may suggest where an extension has been added, walls long assumed to line up on ground and first floors are seen not to and possibilities are revealed that were not obvious from walking around the actual building. The drawings must be as accurate and comprehensive as possible. Accuracy is important because

A typical drawing of an existing building.



Once a reliable record of the existing building and any surrounding relevant features has been made, the design process can begin in earnest. This usually starts with the architect developing some preliminary drawings. For a simple scheme, there may be a limited number of options, or even only one sensible way to proceed, in which case draft planning drawings may be produced almost immediately. Where there are several options, with different benefits and disadvantages, more sketchy drawings may be used at first, to examine the feasibility of each. Sometimes the only way

these drawings will be used to work out the design and detailed construction. If the design work is based on wrong dimensions, it may not be possible to build it, or may lead to some unpleasant surprises later on. One possibility could be that a planning application is invalidated when, in the course of the construction, the planners discover a building is bigger, or higher, or closer to a boundary than expected.

to find out which route is the best one for you will mean abortive work, and the abandoning of one scheme after it has been developed a fair way into the design process. This may seem like needless expense, but in fact it is considerably cheaper than finding out an idea doesn't work very well once building work is underway.

At this stage, as before, good communication between you and the designer is essential. The architect may explain ideas using freehand three-

dimensional sketches, computer drawings or even models, but in addition to these there should be meetings where the designer can explain the thinking behind what has been presented. This is the stage when misunderstandings are most likely to develop between designer and client and the best way to deal with them is by talking them through. Some of the proposals by the architect may seem to disregard or twist the original requirements stated in the brief. There may be very good reasons for this, so it is better to discuss them with the architect before dismissing the ideas out of hand. Many wonderful buildings have been created as a result of the designer thinking laterally and generating ideas that do not fit into the owner's preconceptions of what was needed.

Once a design has been settled on, it may have to be developed in more detail ready for a planning application (see the later section for more information on this stage). Even if a planning application is not necessary, more detailed design drawings will be needed before the construction details and specifications are drawn up. It is a common misconception, particularly where extensions are concerned, that the design process is more or less completed once the planning drawings are finished. In fact, the detail that is worked out after this stage is just as influential over the final appearance as the design decisions that have just been made. The details should follow through from the ideals that were set when the overall design was created. Who will carry out this design work is up to you. It may be the architect, who can produce information in the form of drawings and specifications for the builder to follow. It may be the foreman of the building company, or even the bricklayer as he wields a trowel on site. But whoever it is, and whether they may realise it or not, they will be making design decisions and this should really be in consultation with you and your family if you wish to ensure that the alterations express your own aspirations and tastes.

