



Working with an architect

Architect Sterrin O'Shea talks to Lucy Taylor about the stages that architects work through with their clients, and describes a typical job

ARCHITECTS WILL TYPICALLY work through four stages with a client: initial design, developed design, detail design and construction. At the initial design stage I have my first meeting with the client, usually in their home and am always happy if they are familiar with my work.

This meeting is important so that I can see how they live, their existing home, their style, whether they have children and so on.

Architects always remember that a client is trusting them with their money and because it will be a relationship that can last up to two years, it's critical to get a good sense of whether you can work together during this meeting.

We establish their brief or wishlist, what kind of accommodation they want and so on. We also discuss

what rough budget they might have and whether this is realistic for the kind of work involved.

I come up with ideas, we discuss the scope of service and associated fees – and whether they want me to be involved in all four stages of the process. Currently some clients only want an architect for a limited service, for instance, up to stage two or three.

The client will be given an RIAI (Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland) Client Architect Agreement and also the RIAI cost guidelines which set out approximate build costs per square metre. These documents also help formulate the architect's fee which ranges from 12-18% of the build cost for the full RIAI service.

As construction costs are down at the moment fees are down too.

Recently some people have preferred to agree a fixed fee.

We also discuss planning issues and the feasibility of what the client is trying to achieve. I then take some key dimensions to get some idea of scale. Later on a full measurement survey is carried out.

If I am appointed I go and prepare a sketch design. Two or three design proposals will be presented in the form of plans or layouts. Then, depending on the scale of the job, I might use models or 3D drawings.

Stage two (the developed design) involves agreeing a final design, adjusting the budget and fees if required, and drawing up a project programme.

Incorporated into the design are planning or building regulation issues, for example Part L (Conservation of Fuel and Energy) which, among other things, dictates the insulation requirements which impacts on the thickness of walls and roofs.

It can take up to three months to design a scheme before the

planning application is lodged. The time is usually dictated by the complexity of the job but also the client's speed at making decisions. Planning applications are submitted at the end of stage two and include drawings at a scale of 1:100, together with the architect's report (which may include photos of neighbouring properties to show site conditions and/or examples of precedent), the site notice (which is erected on site) and a newspaper advert.

Stage three is detail design when, assuming a positive response from the planning authority and the client's instruction to proceed, planning drawings are brought up to scale 1:50 and every aspect is explored in more detail. Drawings will show what part of the existing structure will be demolished, what is planned at each level, the mechanical and electrical plan and bathroom and kitchen layouts. These drawings are used for the builders to price from and will later become construction drawings.

Preparing tender documentation can take up to three months during which time I will be liaising with the quantity surveyor, structural engineer, sometimes a mechanical engineer, conservation architect (if it is a protected structure), potential sub-contractors for the likes of window systems, kitchens and fitted furniture. I incorporate all of this information into the tender drawings and prepare a detailed specification which will include everything from the type of tap in the kitchen to the paint on the walls. This document is then issued with the tender drawings to the selected builders for pricing. During this stage there are a



number of meetings with the client to decide the finer details such as finishes.

The final stage of the process is the construction. An architect will evaluate tenders from the builders with the quantity surveyor to ensure there are no errors/omissions and then advise the client on the choice of builder, taking into account issues such as price, relevant experience and availability.

The client enters into a contract with the main contractor. It is the architect's job to act as an independent agent or advisor and to check that the builder is fulfilling the terms of the contract. During the construction process the architect problem-solves and keeps the client informed.

I always advise the client that they should not instruct the contractor directly as this may lead to extra costs and delays later on.

We usually have a site meeting every fortnight with the main contractor but would also be on the phone regularly. Towards the end, I might be on site twice a week as this is usually when all trades are on site working under pressure in an effort to complete the project on time. The recession has made

people much more cost-conscious. They want to maximise the existing space in their home and remodel rather than extend. They can now take advantage of the fact that this is a cheaper time to build and there are more builders available. I am focusing on cost-effective solutions and sustainable designs.

It is certainly more challenging but it also forces you to be more creative, for instance, with the choice of materials.

I think architects should be selling quality of life. People who want work done on their homes are doing it because they want to improve their life or are undergoing life changes such as having children, rather than wanting to profit from it.

An architect can bring enormous value to even a small remodelling project. It is important to realise that if an architect is not involved during the construction stage, the client is not going to get the same product at the end. There is a risk that it can take longer and be more expensive in the long run. Most people are only going to do it once so it's critical to get it right.

www.sosa.ie

Left and above: An extension by Sterrin O'Shea Architects