



## A GUIDE TO BUILDING A DREAM HOME

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT ARCHITECT AND HOW THEY CAN HELP YOU  
BY AWARD WINNING ARCHITECT, JOHN DYER GRIMES

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BY

JOHN DYER GRIMES



John Dyer Grimes – age 2

## ARCHITECTURE IS IN MY BLOOD

My father was a celebrated architect, and I followed in his footsteps around construction sites as a child until working in his studio as a man. I started in the days of pen and tracing paper and learned practical experience laying bricks and digging holes on site. At 24, I opened my own practice, and 18 years later I have the great pleasure of leading a world class team at Dyer Grimes Architects.

From our Putney practice on the banks of the Thames, we produce creative, practical designs to transform ordinary places into amazing spaces. Everyone in our team of ten has their own specialist skills, united in a design ethos dedicated to deliver beautiful homes. We keep our scale small, intimate and personal so we can provide the best possible client experience. It's not about ego, it's not about showing off. It's about listening to the client and building everything around their dreams and aspirations.

In my lifetime I've seen my discipline transform as new technologies, materials and methods help us create better, more beautiful, more sustainable homes. I'm learning every day, but I feel it's time to start sharing the knowledge I've built up over my career. There are certain questions and concerns that have kept popping up over the hundreds of projects I've completed, so I've prepared this guide as a convenient and comprehensive means of answering those queries.

I hope this guide helps you to take your first step in creating a space fitted perfectly around you.

**John Dyer Grimes**

Managing Director, Dyer Grimes Architects

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## 10 THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE CONTACTING AN ARCHITECT

Converting your home, or building a new one, is one of the most exciting events you can experience. It can also be one of the most stressful. When things go wrong, differently to how we expected or we find demands outweigh our capacity to meet them, cracks form in our plans and our wellbeing. To ensure your build is a time you'll never want to forget, rather than a time you can't wait to, here are 10 easy to remember considerations which will have you better prepared for what to expect and what is expected of you.

### 1 WHAT ARE YOUR NEEDS?

Whether you want to be practical or extravagant, the first step to planning your build is to honestly and thoroughly consider your needs. It could simply be a matter of needing more space, or you want a home built around your personality from the ground up. Think about how you use the house and how long you're likely to live there. Do you enjoy holding social events, or is it a space just for you? Will it be designed to satisfy the single life or do you want to fill it with a family? By determining your needs early, both current and future, you'll be able to plan every aspect of the design specifically for you.

### 2 HOW CAN THOSE NEEDS BE ADDRESSED?

Every problem comes with a range of solutions, and those that seem obvious at the start are often not the most ideal. Space, for example, is a commonly misunderstood concept. More is not always better, and clients are often surprised at how comparatively simple conversions to their existing homes can create a more open, welcoming environment. It's fun to think big, but it isn't always practical. Whether you're extending your current home or building a new one, consider the methods of maximising space while minimising scale.

### 3 WHERE DO YOU WANT TO LIVE?

It's common knowledge that location is an essential factor in choosing a home, but where you live needs to be considered even more closely when you're building a new one. Cities have many conveniences, amenities and lifestyle options, but all this comes with a hefty price tag on the land. Land in the countryside is cheaper and there'll be less

planning to negotiate, but facilities and schools may not be readily available. No matter where you choose to build, will you still want to live there in ten or twenty years?

#### **4 WILL PLANNING PERMISSION BE REQUIRED?**

Whether you're modifying your current home or building a new one, the first step is finding out from the relevant authorities whether planning permission is required. This is especially pertinent in areas with a lot of old buildings or a certain local character. There are specific conservation areas where significant deviations from the traditional style are all but impossible. An architect with local experience will be able to work with local councils to increase the chances of having your plans approved.

#### **5 HOW MUCH CAN YOU INVEST IN THE PROJECT?**

Where you live, what you build and what you build it out of is determined by how much you can afford to spend on the project. An extension is usually funded by savings, while a brand new house typically follows from the sale of an old one. Very, very few houses are a no-compromise construction, so setting out a firm, realistic budget will allow you to figure out what features are most important to you. Costs also change throughout the project, so make sure you have enough to cover every stage. Remember that a smart design can significantly increase the resale value of your house, so an investment now may make you a return in the future.

#### **6 WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE DESIGN?**

How hands on you want to get with the design process varies from person to person, but if you enjoy sketching out ideas then putting pen to paper – or mouse to software – can help you to develop a sense of your spatial and functional requirements. You may find you need to widen some walls to fit your prized furniture, or that the layout of rooms doesn't flow as well as you expected. No matter how vague or precise your ideas are, the right architect will translate your imagination into reality.

#### **7 WHAT WILL THE INTERIOR OF THE BUILDING LOOK LIKE?**

Leading on from the layout of the house is the interior design. Much of this will be determined by the design of the structure itself: the height of the walls, the amount of natural light, whether it's open plan or separate rooms. But people don't move into empty boxes. Think about how your furniture, fittings, carpets or tiles will complement the design of the house. Certain colours can create entirely different moods and transform from day to evening. Some features, like the paint, can be changed easily, while others, like floorboards, require more judicious selection. If you're planning entirely new furniture for your new house or extension, make sure to consider these costs in your budget.

## **8 WHAT WILL THE EXTERIOR OF THE BUILDING LOOK LIKE?**

We all want to make a good first impression, and the same applies to our homes. Do you want to have a striking design which stands out or one which fits elegantly into its surroundings? Do you want a modern or a period look, or perhaps a combination of the two? Remember when choosing exterior materials to consider how they will age, especially exposed wood or stone, as well as how they react to extreme temperatures. Present your architect with some examples resembling what you want to achieve, but remember that planning permission will determine much of what is possible. An architect with local experience can negotiate the design with the authorities and can navigate local constraints without significantly compromising on your vision or your needs.

## **9 WHO IS REQUIRED FOR THE PROJECT?**

Some architects will be involved in the entirety of the build and will supply project managers to oversee the construction and find contractors and suppliers, while others will provide only the design. You may also not need the architect to be involved entirely, either because you can oversee aspects of the project yourself or you have separate professionals helping at different stages. Make sure you've found the right people for every stage, including service engineers, CAD and party wall surveyors.

## **10 HOW LONG WILL THE PROJECT TAKE?**

It's much easier to deal with the long wait and disruption of building work if you know exactly how long it will take. While you may want to oversee the process yourself to save money, an experienced project manager will deliver a project on time, saving you a great deal of stress in the process. If you're building a new home, make sure you've secured alternative accommodation for the duration of the construction period and that you've counted the costs of this accommodation into your budget.



John Dyer Grimes – Period Architecture – Hemingford Road

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## 10 STEPS TO CHOOSING AN ARCHITECT

Your home should be the most precious place in the world. We all need a space where no matter how many stresses and worries there are in the outside world, you can shut the door and enjoy comfort and relaxation. Creating such a haven requires delicate planning and close attention to detail, so if you're leaving your home in the hands of an architect, you need to make sure you find the right one. You need an architect you can trust implicitly, with whom you can form a bond of understanding and creative vigour.

To help you narrow down your selection, I've prepared 10 steps to finding the ideal architect.

### 1 ARE THEY A REGISTERED ARCHITECT?

As with any professional from whom you require services, you want to make sure your architect has official, accredited evidence of their skill. A registered architect is fully trained and professionally qualified, covered by indemnity insurance and bound by the Architects Act of 2003 and the Architects Code of Conduct and Practice. Choosing a registered architect is absolutely essential. It means that not only is your build likely to be completed to a high standard, but if anything goes wrong during construction then your significant investment will be protected and the architect will be held accountable for any breach of their promise.

### 2 DO YOU KNOW THEIR SPECIALITY?

Everyone works best within their area of expertise. As much as an architect may enjoy the challenge of the new, you don't want your project to be their very first home build. An architect who specialises in offices, shops or tower blocks may be able to bring over much of their knowledge, but designing and building a house requires a unique set of skills and disciplines. After all, a home has a very specific function for you, and you probably don't want to live somewhere that reminds you of an office. Seek an architect who intimately understands the comfort, versatility and flow that goes into the design of a perfect house.

### 3 HAVE YOU SEEN THEIR WORK?

Once you've found an architect who specialises in homes, you need to look into whether they build the kind of home you want to live in. There are as many variations in house design as there are people to live in them, and you no doubt have some very specific and personal requirements and tastes. Any decent architect will be proud to show you examples of their work, so feel free to request examples and don't hesitate to ask to see the little details which can make all the difference. While a style you find attractive is a good place to start, also look for evidence of versatility in their work, as an architect who only builds in a single style may not be willing or able to adapt to your vision.

### 4 DO THEY HAVE REFERENCES?

Ask your prospective architect for a shortlist of their previous clients with contact numbers so you can ask directly about the quality of work and personality of the architect. Most people are more than happy to share their experiences, so find a time when they can give you a detailed account of the whole process. If the clients are of a similar taste or lifestyle to you, then you'll be able to ask more personally relevant questions. Ask if they would personally recommend the architect to you, and arrange a home visit if possible so you can see their work first hand.

### 5 IS YOUR PROJECT TO THEIR SCALE?

An architect who primarily works on alterations to an existing house which cost around £100,000, won't be ideal or even capable of a brand new build with a budget of £1 million plus. The opposite can be just as true, as a large scale architect may put your project on hold or not dedicate their full attention to it, if a more expensive project is available. Remember a bigger budget doesn't just mean a different design, it also balloons the management costs and responsibilities as the volume of moving parts, the type of work and the number of contractors increases. An architect used to your scale won't just produce a more suitable design, they'll have the experience to plan and manage your project correctly.

### 6 ARE THEY KEEN AND AVAILABLE?

When you describe your desired project to the architect, do they seem genuinely interested in taking it up? Are they happy with your budget and do they think that what you want to achieve is realistic? Are they confident that the build can be completed within your required timescale and are they able to fulfil your brief right up until the end of the job? If an architect is excited by your project, that excitement will be evident in every aspect of the build, from design to dedication.

### 7 ARE THEY PERSONALLY SUITABLE?

Your home is the most personal space in your life, so it's only right that you have a personal bond with your architect. You need to be able to communicate clearly and

candidly what you want from your home, what lifestyle you lead, what your future plans are. Talk with your potential architect and develop a sense of whether they empathise and understand you. Ideally you will have a friendly rapport with them, and they will listen to your needs and explain how they can meet them with patience and without pushing their ideas on you. Remember that the role of an architect is to transfer your vision into reality, not make their vision your reality.

## **8 DO THEY HAVE LOCAL KNOWLEDGE?**

An architect with recent local experience and contacts in your area, along with a thorough knowledge of council permissions and other particular controls, will have a far better chance of having your designs and planning permission approved. They will also know the best contractors and suppliers, as well as the general character of the area to maximise the value of your house. Local knowledge does not necessarily require being based locally, as many experienced architects are widely travelled. Many clients make the mistake of overrating an architect because they're based round the corner. More important than whether an architect is based near your planned area, is whether they've worked there before.

## **9 CAN THEY OFFER THE WHOLE SERVICE?**

Aim to find an architect who is willing and experienced to provide the full service, from consultation to design and project management. Some architects won't do work on site, others are not geared for providing interior design or producing technical drawings. Make sure you're aware of every service they offer so you can plan around any additional professionals that need to be brought on to the project. If there's a particular service your architect doesn't provide, then they will likely have trusted recommendations for someone who can fill the gap.

## **10 HAVE YOU COMPARED THEIR QUOTES?**

Every architect offers a different level of service with a different fee attached to it. You need to balance what you're willing to pay with the services you prioritise, as you would when choosing an airline. One may be a budget airline with no frills, no luggage space or food and drink, subject to delays and inconveniences. In contrast, there is a business class flight with luxury seats and service, a VIP car collection to and from the airport together with an exclusive lounge to relax in while you wait. Of course, there's a whole spectrum of options in between, and the same is true with architects. Additional services like a thoroughly tailored design, out of office hours meetings, 24/7 support and guaranteed turnaround times may be important to you, or perhaps you just want a standard, off the shelf design which offers value by sacrificing bespoke service. Compare your selection of architects based upon the level of service and price that you feel comfortable with.



John Dyer Grimes – Contemporary Architecture – Park Fields

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## 10 COMMON MISTAKES

After a lifetime of building homes I've had the pleasure of witnessing hundreds of projects fulfil their owner's wildest dreams. I've also witnessed people fall foul of mistakes which cause their dreams to crumble before them. Some are seemingly insignificant, some should be common sense – either way these are the 10 common mistakes which can undermine the foundations of a project and waste time, money and effort.

### 1 STARTING WITHOUT A MASTER PLAN.

Many people start on small-scale renovations without considering the full implications for the house as a whole and the budget required. It's easy to contract a partial repair, such as a having a door mended, but when the builder comes on site the project may start to expand. Rarely can significant work be done in one area without affecting another, or the change you make may no longer sit well with the rest of the house, causing you to want to pursue further alterations. Before you know it, you're working without a plan and things start going wrong.

Failure to plan may also result in failure to research and notify the relevant local authorities. Over the years I've met many clients who have started work on a project only to find out half way through that planning permission is denied, or they never bothered requesting it in the first place. Working with an experienced architect can help you avoid any nasty surprises down the line.

### 2 UNDERVALUING YOUR PROPERTY.

Whenever undergoing any property related endeavour, it's wise to understand the property market. You may want to disregard the world around you and build a house only suitable for yourself, but considering how to make your property saleable in the future is essential in protecting your investment. Life changes no matter how certain our plans. If a few years pass and you find yourself needing to sell, you don't want to find you've inadvertently decreased the value of your investment. Those two bedrooms you converted into a living room may have granted you extra space, but at the cost of making your house unavailable to families. It's a delicate balance between enjoying your daily life while maximising resale value, so seek advice from your architect on how to design your perfect home without compromising its future potential.

### **3 ONLY THINKING SHORT TERM.**

It's tempting to build or modify a house to satisfy our immediate needs, but if you haven't considered how the space will be used in the future you may find yourself torn between your dream home and your dream life. You want to keep the two united for as long as you can, so think ahead to make the design adaptable to the changes you expect. Can your home accommodate any children you may want? Will it be able to cope with the strain of them growing inside its walls? Are there disabled or elderly relatives or friends you want to be able to visit in comfort and safety? People are living longer than ever, so if you plan on staying in your house through your golden years, consider where you place your bedrooms and showers and whether you may need lifts installed. Share your dreams and lifestyle with your architect so they can advise on how to future proof your home.

### **4 SKIMPING ON THE DESIGN TO SAVE MONEY.**

You may consider design fees an unnecessary cost and feel capable of working with builders directly to save money. This is particularly common with those operating on a limited budget. However, the truth is, the best advice is more valuable when you have less to spend. Someone with deep pockets can afford to make mistakes, while if you have only one shot you need to make that first attempt the last. You want to achieve exactly what you want the first time and to the highest level possible within your budget. It means you can plan the whole project and reduce the costs of hiring suppliers and contractors. Using an expert to design and source the myriad of options available will ultimately save you time, money and from potentially disastrous errors. Remember that a registered architect provides the necessary insurance to protect your property.

### **5 NOT ASKING THE ARCHITECT TO SAVE YOU MONEY.**

I don't need to tell you that it's an architect's job to be skilled at planning and design. What you may not have considered is how those skills can be applied to your project to cut costs over both the short and long term. You may be low in space and determined to have a costly extension added to your house, while an experienced architect will look at space differently. They may see that your existing structure is poorly planned and they can provide you with additional space without having to add to the property. Most people don't need more space, they need more intelligent use of space.

You should also ask how money can be saved for you long term. There have been great advances in sustainable design, materials and technology over the past years, which mean that new builds have ongoing maintenance and running costs simply unachievable by older structures. Many people forget to include the long term costs in their budget, so plan carefully with your architect how your design today could save you money tomorrow.

### **6 TRYING TO ESTIMATE PRICES FROM PLANNING DESIGNS.**

The designs you submit to the council to be granted planning permission are primarily concerned with the exterior of the building and only provide a basic sense of the entire

structure. These documents should not be submitted to builders in order to estimate prices, as incomplete information will inform only vague estimates. This will lead to the incorrect items and materials being delivered and onsite changes to the design, making you vulnerable to ballooning prices and delays. Make sure you're working from thoroughly prepared designs from your architect, detailing every material from the foundations up to the roof and everything in between, from tiles to tap fittings.

## **7 IMPATIENCE.**

Every client I meet is eager to have their project completed, and every architect understands that the wait for moving into your new home can be agonising, but patience is essential in making your home exactly what you want it to be. Take your time at every stage and give yourself room to change your mind. A project needs to be able to adapt to your desires, which can often evolve through the process. Changes are far easier to implement before the concrete hardens. By giving the project the space it needs to grow, the end result will be a home you can love for a lifetime.

## **8 NOT HIRING SUITABLE SPECIALISTS.**

As covered in this guide, there are many factors to choosing the right architect for your project. After whether or not they are registered, the most important consideration is whether they specialise in the type of build you require. This extends to everyone who is working on your project. Specialists will cost more, but if you want to cut costs by hiring Jack-of-all-trades then expect lower quality results after multiple delays, as they try and familiarise themselves with the work on the go or force incompatible methods onto your build. An architect who specialises in homes will also know the relevant specialists for all aspects of the project, so hiring the right person from the start is the first step in ensuring you have the best minds in charge at every stage.

## **9 NOT STATING BUDGET ACCURATELY.**

Most people understate their building budgets. If your budget is not clearly stated then there will be difficulties and delays for you and your architect. An architect designs precisely to the budget you've given them down to the decimal. If you understate the amount you're willing to invest in a project, you may end up with a design you're not satisfied with. Adding more funds halfway through a project may seem like a good idea, but as the design is so thoroughly intertwined with the budget, more money to play with just means more work and delays. Plan a concrete budget with your architect and make sure it is set before the design phase is complete.

## 10 NOT UNDERSTANDING QUALITY AND VALUE.

Only an elite few can simply ask for what they want regardless of cost but even the wealthiest client still wants to maximise their value. Spend time with your architect to determine what level of quality and finishing detail you can afford and make sure to avoid any disappointments. Prices can vary hugely on relatively minor details. Prioritise your spending on the aspects of the design most important to you, where you want only the best materials and where function is more valuable than form. Would you rather invest extra funds into the bathroom or the kitchen? Are there alternative materials which can provide the same look and feel for a fraction of the cost? Is something that seems expensive now actually cost effective in the long run? It is very important that you know exactly the right level of quality and value you're going to achieve.



John Dyer Grimes – Contemporary Architecture – White Lodge

## THE DYER GRIMES DIFFERENCE

We're an award winning architectural practice who have proven our skill and dedication on over 200 homes. Most recently we were honoured to receive the Best Family Home Award from the Sunday Times British Homes Awards 2013. As gratifying as it is to be officially recognised, we thrive on the pleasure of turning a client's dream into reality, and we approach every project with the same attention, care and high standards of craftsmanship. It's not about ego, it's not about showing off. It's about listening to the client and building everything around their dreams and aspirations.

Through such experience we recommend only the highest quality and most reliable contractors, and our local knowledge means we have contacts in council planning offices, estate agents, local suppliers and builders. With our own interior design and planning teams, you get the full package built from the inside out.

Your project will be overseen by our specialist project managers who possess exacting attention to detail and vast experience managing and liaising with builders. They'll ensure your house is delivered on time, on budget and at the standards which will meet or exceed your expectations. Along with project managers we can recommend a vast array of trusted specialists, from structural and service engineers to CAD checks and party wall surveyors.

Our projects are guided by a three step plan we call CONCEPT, PLAN, BUILD.

*"We found John to be a true professional. He listened and took on board exactly what we were looking to create and worked very closely with us. We found him to be highly motivated, very communicative, flexible and very easy to deal with. He assembled a great team around him and delivered on everything. I cannot recommend him highly enough."*

Tony Maude, White Lodge client  
Winner of Sunday Times and Design Et Al Best Family Home Award 2013

## 1 CONCEPT

So you've had this brilliant idea which you've gone over and over in your head until it aches. But will it work and what's it going to cost? Rather than plunging headlong into the more costly stages of getting detailed plans drawn up, why not get your idea road tested by our team of architectural designers here in London?

Based on your ideas, we'll sketch out some initial design concepts and tell you what's involved to take it to the next stage and fulfil your dream. This service is stage one of the journey and can be provided in isolation or as part of a full "clicks to bricks" service.

## 2 PLAN

To take your idea to the critical planning phase, we develop more detailed design concepts and scale plans, together with full design and build budget estimates. Our team of in-house experts in our offices in London are able to provide clients with an accurate 3D 'walk through' of their new home to help them make those last minute, but crucial, design decisions.

Detailed planning application documents are developed, using our extensive experience and negotiating power with local councils to ensure the process runs as smoothly and quickly as possible. Our 90 per cent success rate in client planning approvals across London and Surrey reflects our skill and determination in this field.

## 3 BUILD

Once a project has the go ahead of planners and clients, we will provide detailed technical plans which meet all legal obligations and allow for accurate construction costs to be submitted. We will obtain fixed prices from selected contractors and organise contracts on behalf of clients.

Whilst some of our clients choose to manage the construction of works themselves, many have opted to use us to co-ordinate every aspect of the build, from managing builders and consultants, to monitoring the progress of building works through to successful delivery. We have a great track record in keeping projects on course and on budget with an unfaltering attention to quality and detail.

