



Do I need an architect for my extension?

There are several different options when it comes to who can design an extension for you, but which one is best suited to your project? **Georgina Crothers** investigates

Above: Life Size Architecture, a Brighton-based team of architectural designers and technologists, designed this stunning rear and side extension in a conservation area setting. The rear external facade had been covered in render years prior, so they chose to expose the brick and use similar materials for the new additions, preserving the house's historical character

Engaging an architect can be a fantastic way to achieve a high-quality home extension – but there's no legal obligation to use one, and not everyone who can successfully design a building is a fully-qualified architect. Ultimately, you'll want to find someone who understands your needs and budget, can add value and ideas through their experience, and will provide a quality service that helps to ensure a smooth journey through planning, Building Regs and into the construction works. "It's important to hire somebody who has construction knowledge and can prepare a set of drawings, so that you can get the relevant statutory consents, such as Building Regulations approval and planning permission," says Steven Way, chartered building surveyor and practice principal at Collier Stevens.

There are numerous ways you can go when deciding who will design your extension. The right path depends on the project in question and what it might require. "As the complexity of your extension design rises, so does the need for qualified architectural input," suggests Steven.



Gresford Architects was behind this multi-storey extension of a Victorian terraced property. The existing awkward layout was replaced by smooth-flowing spaces via a wraparound rear addition and roof extension. The project combines energy efficiency with innovative design to create stand-out results



Far left: Architects Studio Weave were appointed by the owners of this cottage in Devon to design an extension that blends in with its rural context while achieving a contemporary aesthetic. This timber-clad cubic addition is the result, spanning two storeys and using timber battens to create a geometric design on the exterior

Top: The owners of this East London terraced home approached architects DGN Studio to open up and extend the ground floor of their north-facing home. They used reclaimed London stock bricks inside, treated with a mineral paint to soften the decor

Above left: Located in a conservation area, architects Loader Monteith designed this rear extension in line with strict planning rules. They ensured the pitched roof adhered to the language of other buildings in the area, so that it would not appear too obtrusive from the outside

From a general contractor to a RIBA chartered architect, here are the benefits of the main routes to designing your extension, and what to bear in mind when deciding.

Architect

To use the title architect in the UK, a designer must undergo extensive training and be registered with the Architect's Registration Board (ARB). It typically takes seven years to qualify, combining five years of study and two years of practical experience. Once a member of the ARB, architects can also pay to become a chartered member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to demonstrate their commitment to high-quality design, sustainability and excellent customer service.

When it comes to designing your extension, the more complex your project, the more benefit you're likely to gain from using an architect. "If you're extending a listed building or a property in a conservation area, your designer has to have a keen eye," says James Brindley, RIBA chartered architect and director of Design Haus Architecture. "The addition must either suit the language of the rest of the property, or do something of its age. To create an extension that contrasts the original building in a way that's still appealing is a very difficult thing to get right." This is where those years of training – which should be combined with demonstrable experience in the type of project you're taking on – are indispensable.

Architects have a strong understanding of design, both in terms of spatial visualisation and the context in which the building is set. The right professional will be able to understand your brief and work with you to bring it to life. Looking at their portfolio of past projects is a great way to find someone who can cater to your design preferences, but equally as important is having a good relationship with them. "You've got to get on with your architect," says James. "Remember that even if their projects aren't necessarily suited to your taste, they will be to their owners", demonstrating that the architect is able to effectively deliver a brief. A good professional will hold your hand and take you along this journey."

You'll want to look for someone who works day-to-day on domestic residential projects like extensions, so they're familiar with all the ins and outs involved. Their experience and contacts in the industry means such architects can often recommend local contractors well suited to the job, working with your best interests in mind rather than those of the builder. "Architects can ensure you're getting a tight, well-negotiated quote from your builders that's fairly priced," says RIBA chartered architect Tom Gresford, founder of Gresford Architects.

Designing your extension with an architect can also prove extremely valuable for planning applications. "Dealing with planning permission is an architect's bread and butter," says Tom. A good architect will simplify the

CASE STUDY DESIGN & BUILD PACKAGE



Location Surrey
Route Design & build
Company Plus Rooms

This double-storey rear extension hosts an additional bedroom and bathroom on the first floor while allowing for an open-plan kitchen and living space downstairs. The owners came to Plus Rooms with an idea in mind for their extension, as well as some initial plans which were redrawn by the company's in-house designers to secure the necessary statutory consents. This route meant the homeowners had a strong idea of what the overall build would cost from the outset, and the finished project came in on budget.

Plus Rooms also took care of details like securing gas safety and electrical certificates, and the owners found it helpful that this could be managed under one point of contact. The construction phase was also impressively quick, with the team completing the extension four weeks faster than anticipated.

process by producing high-quality designs and presenting them in a way the local authority can understand. In some cases, it can be beneficial to work with a designer based in your area who is familiar with the local planning authority (more on this on page 98).

Architects don't come cheap – and rightly so, given the value they can add to a project. You can expect fees to start from around 15% of the extension contract costs, or more if they manage the whole project on your behalf. The key is to ensure you and your architect are aligned in understanding your brief and what you want.

If you're open to working with a professional that can brainstorm more innovative design concepts, this route could be right for you. But it's up to you as the client whether you want to adopt them – and good designers won't push you into adding features you don't want.

Architectural technologist, technician or designer

An architectural technologist is another professional who can produce imaginative extension designs and the detailed drawings from which a contractor can work. They also have a qualifying body – the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists (CIAT) – to maintain high standards of practice and conduct within the industry. It typically takes five to six years to qualify as a chartered architectural technologist, including practical experience.

The services a chartered architectural technologist can offer are broadly similar to that of an architect. "Both a technologist and an architect can fulfil the role of designing an extension, and that can include getting them through statutory requirements such as Building Regulations, planning consents etc as well as onsite management," says Tom Gray, an MCIAT chartered architectural technologist at Robert Shreeves Associates.

Traditionally, architects tend to be more design-led in their approach, while the training of an architectural technologist focuses more on construction details, the materials used and how everything is put together. "If

a client has a certain design in mind they don't want to stray from, they might lean towards an architectural technologist," says architect James Brindley. However, these pros can be equally as creative – so you shouldn't rule this route out for innovative or complex projects. "There are architectural technologists with a scientific, engineering-based approach, and others who are more design-orientated in their mindset," says Tom Gray.

Only the 'chartered' part of the architectural technologist title is protected by CIAT membership – so individuals can label themselves as technologists or technicians without having gone through the same training. That's not to say non-chartered designers can't do a good job; but it becomes even more critical to ensure you thoroughly vet their qualifications and experience before deciding if they're right for you.

Simple steps include scrutinising online reviews, speaking to past clients and asking to see evidence of their insurance status (see box on the next page).

Below: This side return extension is the work of design and build company Simply Extend. The homeowner was attracted to the firm's fixed price contract. Detailed stage payments were laid out prior to work starting on site, so they knew what to pay and when, making it easier to stick to budget



CASE STUDY ARCHITECT-DESIGNED EXTENSION

Location Edinburgh
Route Architect
Company David
 Blaikie Architects



The owners of this terraced house wanted to use both the indoor and outdoor spaces more effectively, so they sought the help of David Blaikie Architects to bring their brief to life. As well as making alterations internally to the basement level of the property, the architect added a new extension to accommodate a bright and airy living/dining room.

Careful consideration has been given to ensure a functional yet complex design that complements the character of the existing build. Part of the extension has a flat roof, which is directly connected to the existing property, with a pitched roof on the section adjoining this. This rearmost volume is elevated on a projecting floorplate that creates the illusion the extension is floating. Frameless corner glazing fosters a stronger connection to the garden and opens up the indoor space, allowing more natural daylight in. The architect's experience was key in planning and successfully delivering the detail of these design features.

Design & build firm

Hiring an architect or other designer means there's another person within the project to manage and oversee, meaning you'll need to coordinate their work with your builders. You might find this a help or a hindrance, depending on your own experience and how closely you want the design to be realised on the ground. But if you want to parcel things up more, some general contractors offer their own in-house design services, bundling together everything from the drawings to the construction – so you work with them on the look and specification, and can let them take care of everything else.

With this route, the drawings are often put together by an architectural designer or similar individual, although some firms do use fully-qualified architects. "A top design and build company has all the specialists you need in-house and will coordinate them to work on your project," says James Bernard, director of Plus Rooms. "There's no hassle about finding a builder or home designer yourself. They can also handle any planning consents and permits your project may need."

The key benefit of this approach is a simplified process, as you'll know that everyone on your build is on the same page and you have one point of contact. You also tend to have more clarity in the overall project cost from the beginning, as you won't have to seek contractor's quotes, making it easier to budget. This service often works well for those wanting a straightforward extension or loft conversion, or for schemes where a definitive timescale is a priority.

Design and build firms are becoming more and more popular in the UK for those reasons. However, it's worth bearing in mind your choice may be more limited than if you were to source a designer and contractor separately. So, as with every route, do your own research and be sure you're comfortable that you're getting the level of service and creative input you want. "Look for someone who can show you their past projects in person, who specialises in the kind of extension you desire, and who has a track record of successful projects delivered over an extended period of time," says James Bernard.

QUICK GUIDE PROFESSIONAL INDEMNITY INSURANCE

Before hiring anyone to design an extension, it's important to check they have adequate insurance that protects you from any mistakes or defects in their work. This is known as professional indemnity insurance. The ARB and CIAT both require that their members have a suitable policy to cover them for design liability, but non-chartered architectural design professionals aren't necessarily obligated to have this. Ensuring that the person who designs your extension is properly insured means it will be much more straightforward to make a claim should anything go wrong as a result of their work. If a contractor produces the drawings for your extension, check that their insurance includes design liability – a builder's insurance usually only covers construction liability, which is different.

You might also come across architectural designers. Again, this moniker isn't a protected title. Some might be architects-in-training at Part 1, Part 2 or Part 3 stage of the process; others may have other related qualifications (such as surveying); and some might not have any formal training at all. So, it's up to you to do your research and determine if they're experienced enough to deliver what you have in mind for your home's extension.

As a rule of thumb, the more qualified a designer is the more you can expect to pay for their services – but much depends on the project itself and what it requires, as well as the skills, experience and qualifications of your chosen professional. So, a chartered architectural technologist could offer great value for money for designing your extension, but don't assume their fees will always be lower than what an architect would charge.

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