

Down East
March 2004

How to Hire the Right Maine Architect by James Schwartz

A handful of do's and don't's for people thinking about building a new house, doing a renovation, or attempting an addition.

Congratulations, you've finally done it. After months of research and more than a few sleepless nights, you've purchased your very own slice of paradise in Maine. It's absolutely fantastic and absolutely overwhelming. Now what?

Welcome to the new and exciting world of infinite possibilities! Do you build a house on that pristine plot of land you bought near the coast? Should you consider putting an addition on a shingled cottage that's picture perfect and filled with charm, but slightly cramped? Can you afford to hire an architect for projects like these? Can you afford not to?

"Let's face it, for many clients this is a completely alien experience," says Sam Van Dam of Van Dam Architecture and Design in Portland. "They've often spent a substantial amount of time and money on a piece of property or an existing building, and they're just not sure what an architect can do for them. Many have never worked with an architect before and they're not even certain exactly how to get started."

It may seem daunting for some people, but the challenge is not insurmountable. Follow a few basic ground rules and you will find an architect to guide you through the design process and answer tough questions, while helping you to avoid costly mistakes. Guess what--you might even enjoy it.

Do Communicate Clearly

Hiring the right architect always begins with good communication. Sam Van Dam believes it's essential for any client considering a building project to carve out a time for interviews and discussions with several potential candidates: "A successful project is going to be a collaboration," he says. "I advise people who are thinking about new construction or even a renovation to make appointments with several different architects, then go to their offices, spend some time getting to know them, and see if there's any chemistry there."

Those discussions are really a two-way street, he adds, since architects need to evaluate potential clients as well: “There are people I enjoy working with and some people I don’t...I enjoy clients who are curious about the process and interested in their project. I like them to speak honestly about what they want in a house but be willing to explore many possibilities. I am less interested in clients who feel they already know how to solve all the design problems, and have already figured out exactly how to give the project form.”

Your initial discussions can be general (“I like big windows and high ceilings”) or specific (We’ll definitely need a casement window over the kitchen sink that faces south”). The important thing is to see how comfortable you feel with the person across the table, and to see if he or she understands and responds to your questions.

Remember that this first encounter can also be your last. You may decide this just isn’t the firm for you, based on a gut reaction or a concern over something you’ve heard. Van Dam says he has even used the preliminary meeting to dissuade potential clients from attempting a big project: “I visited someone today who wanted to build a new dining room onto a small house, and wanted to hire us to design the addition. They were retired, with a modest income, and it was pretty clear to me that the project was not a good idea financially. I talked them out of building onto their house. ‘This is really an interior design problem,’ I told them. ‘Why don’t you redesign the living room so that you can use it more efficiently and save yourselves a lot of trouble and money?’ That was just the right answer for them. They just needed someone with a different vision to help them see it.”

Searching for the Right Architect

Assembling a list of architects to interview isn’t complicated; it just takes time and homework.

- Check with friends and neighbors in your community to learn about local firms doing interesting work.
- Ask local contractors if there are architects with whom they’ve worked with recently who are talented and experienced.
- Clip magazine and newspaper stories about houses you admire, and note the architect’s name.
- Contact the American Institute of Architects Maine chapter for information and firms.
- Work the Web. Many architects now maintain Web sites to show examples of their work and introduce prospective clients to members of the firm.

Once you have narrowed your list, it is always important to check references. Though references usually come from the most satisfied clients, you can craft questions to

elicit valuable answers: Was the project finished on schedule? Did the architect bring it in on budget? Was the client able to reach the architect easily throughout the building process? Did the firm return phone calls promptly? Could they send plans and design changes via e-mail? Was the relationship between the architect and constructor collaborative? What level of service did the client use--simple design services or the whole nine yards or design drawings, followed by construction drawings, then close coordination of the construction phase?

If the list of references does not include current or recent clients, ask why: Clients who have just been working with a firm have fresh memories and can often provide you with the greatest insights.

Whether your project involves a modern new house perched above a sandy beach or a cozy woods retreat tucked into the tall pines, Portland architect Sam Van Dam, advises meeting with several different architects to see who you click with best.

Van Dam Architecture and Design
66 West Street
Portland, Maine 04102
207.775.0443
www.vandamdesign.com