



Homework

There are a number of things that you can prepare on your own to facilitate the architectural process both before you've engaged the services of an architect and once you and your architect are working together. If you're naturally drawn to shelter magazines, house design chatter, showroom browsing and generating lists, you'll find these assignments a breeze. If you're not, stick with it, it's worth it.

Shelter magazine/book clip file

Clip or copy images of the built world that reflect your aesthetic goals for your project. Add notes that describe exactly what it is about an image that has captivated you. Keep examples of what you loathe as well, and note why you find it so disagreeable; it's all helpful information to someone working with you.

Your clip file can be something tangible, or it can be virtual. I generally share virtual notebooks on Evernote with my clients. If you don't already have an Evernote account, I suggest you set one up. It's free and a great organizational and communication tool.

Sort, annotate and edit the images you've collected to form a coherent representation of your preferences. Of course, you're not going to flip through a magazine or click through a website or blog and inadvertently happen upon an image that exactly addresses what you hope to accomplish on your site. Not to worry, you and your architect will create a custom solution that addresses your particular objectives and site. Make a color copy (tangible or virtual) of your clip file for your architect to refer to as she begins your design.

Create a wish list

Generate a written account of what you'd like your new or renovated space to include or to be like. Consider answering the questions below in order to do so. Critical, thoughtful answers will set your project off on the right course. Challenge yourself to imagine how your new/renovated space may shape the life you truly aspire to live. This, in turn, will suggest how you might shape your new/renovated space. Set conventional assumptions aside. This is your opportunity to create a unique, new/renovated space that is responsive to your personal goals in the context of your neighborhood, your community, and your environment. The more energy you invest in analyzing your aspirations now, the more fruitful the design process.

If you cannot yet answer all of the questions relevant to your project type, fear not; answer those that you can for now. Ask your architect to help with the questions that you're unable to answer at the moment. Keep in mind that your architect will make suggestions that aren't on your wish list and recommendations to eliminate or change items that are on your list. That's good. That's what you want her to do; you've retained her for her professional insight, advice, and experience. Your list is a starting point.

Overview for new and/or renovated spaces

What are your primary functional goals?

What are your aesthetic goals?

What are your other goals: i.e. sustainability, accessibility, phasing the work, etc.?

How will you use your new/renovated space?

How would you like your new/renovated space to feel?

What building, space, place, thing, and/or memory is an inspirational reference for your new/renovated space? Why?

What have you learned from your existing space that you can apply to your new/renovated space?

What is the story your project should help shape about you and your life?

What's your budget?

After completing your wish list revisit your budget. Is your budget roughly compatible with your wish list? If not, what are you willing to consider revising: your budget, your wish list, or both? Remember, the primary factor in construction cost is the amount of new/renovated square footage. The smaller your new/renovated project, the better quality finishes and fixtures you'll be able to afford.

When do you hope the construction will be complete?

Siting for new construction

What is most important to you about how your new construction is sited?

How would you like your new construction to relate to open space? To your neighbors? How do you imagine it relating to the street?

How would you like it to relate to the outdoors? Will you be cooking outdoors? Entertaining outdoors? Do you desire an outdoor shower? What about an arbor and/or pergola?

Are you interested in having an open porch, a screen porch, a deck, a patio? Attached to the house or freestanding in the yard?

Would you like an outbuilding or outbuildings? If so, for what use or uses? Do you want a guest house or a detached bedroom?

Do you need a garage? A car port? To accommodate how many cars? Would you want it attached or detached? How else might you use a garage? What else might it store? Would it be a finished space? Would it be heated? What kind of doors?

What kind of driveway appeals to you? How many cars do you imagine parking there?

Approach for new construction

What is important to you about the approach to your new construction?

Do you envision courtyards, fences, landscape walls, trees, hedges, meadows, gardens, walkways, framed views...? Describe.

Do you desire handicap accessibility?

What kind of site lighting do you prefer?

Entry

How will the entry be experienced from the outside? How large should it be inside? Dramatic or informal? For guests, everyday use, or both? What type of entry door?

What type of closets? Would you like a mudroom? If so, what would you store there? Open storage or behind cabinet doors?

Circulation

Is there a particular sequence in which you would like to circulate through new/renovated space?

Will any spaces require their own, private circulation paths?

Do you want stairs or single-level living?

Would ramps or an elevator be appropriate?

If you want stairs, how many staircases do you envision? Why?

Do you have a preference for a particular type of stair?

What else is important to you about circulation?

Living Space

Do you foresee a distinct Living Room, Family Room, and Dining Room or are these living spaces combined in some fashion? How formal or informal are these spaces? Is a particular view, orientation, or proximity key in locating them? How should the living space feel?

Is there a distinct kid play space? If so, where?

Is there a fireplace or woodstove? Wood-burning, pellet, or gas? How prominent a feature would this be?

Is there a T.V.? If so, how significant a role will the T.V. play? What size is the T.V.? Would it be housed in a cabinet, on a piece of furniture, or wall hung?

What kind of ceiling do you imagine? Flat, tray, vaulted, beamed, coffered, and/or cathedral? How tall? What type of materials and/or finish? Are you interested in skylights?

What kind of windows do you prefer in these spaces: style, size, material, finish? Why?

What type of wall materials and finish do you imagine?

Would you like built-in cabinets or shelves in these spaces? What will they need to accommodate?

What type of flooring do you prefer?

What type of lighting?

Quiet Space

What types of quiet spaces, if any, are you interested in incorporating?

Do you imagine a separate library, office, and/or den or are these spaces incorporated in some form in a nook, bay, loft, and/or a balcony off the main living spaces or a sleeping area? Will one of these spaces double as a guest room?

How will the quiet spaces feel?

Will there be a fireplace or woodstove? Wood-burning, pellet, or gas?

What type of windows: bays, window seats, clerestory, skylights, etc.?

What type of ceiling?

Will there be a computer area? If so, how will you use it?

Would you like built-in cabinets or shelves in these spaces? What will they need to accommodate?

Is there a T.V.? If so, how significant a role will the T.V. play? Would it be housed in a cabinet, on an open cart, or wall hung?

Is there a distinct exercise space? If so, where?

Kitchen

How will you use your kitchen? What will its relationship to the rest of the house be? How should it be oriented? Will it warrant a primary view? Should it be distinct from adjacent spaces, semi-open, or fully open to other spaces? How should it feel?

Do you desire a breakfast nook? Breakfast counter? Island? Desk area? Fireplace? Woodstove? Sitting area? T.V.?

What type of cabinets do you prefer? Door type? Open shelving? Material? Finish? Do you want overhead cabinets? Full height pantry? Pot storage in drawers, on pot racks, or other?

What type of counter material do you prefer? Why?

What type of windows and ceiling?

What type of flooring? Why?

What type of lighting? Why?

What are your appliance/fixture requirements?

Do you have any other special kitchen requirements?

Sleeping Area

How many bedrooms do you imagine? How large? Will sleeping spaces have an alternate use during the day?

Do you desire a sleeping porch?

Are you interested in a separate bunk house/space?

How many overflow guests would you like to be able to accommodate?

How much privacy do the sleeping areas require?

How should the sleeping areas feel?

On what floor levels should the sleeping areas be?

What type of closets or dressing areas should be associated with the sleeping areas?

How important are views, orientation, or a specific proximity in locating the sleeping areas?

Bathrooms

How many do you desire? What size? Associated with which rooms? How should they feel?

Showers, tubs, and/or whirlpools? Where? What type?

Separate toilet room? A bidet? Where?

Pedestal sinks, built-in, or furniture style vanities? How many sinks per bath?

What are the room finishes: floor, walls, ceiling?

Mirrors: how prominent? Where? Medicine cabinets?

How distinct from or integral to the sleeping spaces should the bathrooms be?

Other special requirements?

Utility/Storage

Would you like a full basement? For what use?

Where would you like the laundry room? Near the sleeping areas, the mud room, the kitchen, the living spaces or in the basement if there is one?

How large should the laundry room be? Will someone fold and iron there?

What are your other storage space requirements?

Building Envelope/Performance

Are you aiming to achieve specific insulation R-values (U-values) with respect to the basement/crawl-space slab, foundation walls, building walls, floors, roof/attic, windows/doors?

Is there a type of insulation and/or insulating system you prefer?

Are you interested in LEED certification, ENERGY STAR Qualified Homes certification, Passive House or another certification process?

Building Materials

Are there certain materials you prefer? Are there materials you would like to avoid? Are you interested in using sustainable, recycled, and/or reclaimed materials? If so, where?

HVAC

What type of heating system do you prefer? Hot air, hot water, or hydro air? Oil-fired, gas, electric, and/or an alternative? Are you interested in radiant floors? Where? Do you wish to incorporate renewable energy like solar, wind, grey-water, biomass, or geothermal systems?

Would you like air conditioning? Where?

Are you familiar with fresh-air ventilation systems: HRV or ERV?

Do you have special HVAC requirements?

Product research

While you are gathering your clip file and defining your wish list you can begin to research products to use in your project. In fact, your clip file and wish list may trigger interest in certain products right away. At first, check things out as they occur to you. If a friend has a new wood stove that they love, ask what it is. If someone's flooring catches your eye, make a note of the material and finish. Pay attention to the different types of windows and doors that you come across in your daily travels. Look at roofs in your neighborhood; do you see a roofing material that you want to learn more about? What was it about the lighting in that restaurant that intrigued you? Visit showrooms that carry products you've spotted in your clip file and/or your recent observations. As your project progresses, your architect will make some product suggestions and ask you to focus your attention on products for particular areas, like the bathrooms and kitchen. The more research you've done in advance, the easier the decisions will be.

Better results

If you've completed the above assignments, you should be in a good place to move your project through the design process with your architect. Along the way, you will have better educated yourself about what you truly want, and ultimately, you will have made communication with your architect more efficient. The results will show the fruits of your labor. Good for you for doing your homework!