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Essential advice on making your dream project a reality

Real Homes
PROJECT PLANNER

DESIGN YOUR EXTENSION

In the first part of a new series, we look at the best ways to get your dream project off the ground

Our Project!

OPEN-PLAN LAYOUT
This side return extension to a London home was designed and built by Build Team. A series of Velux roof windows and bi-fold doors bring in plenty of natural light and open up the spacious kitchen-diner to the garden. The project cost £75,000 (plus VAT)

So, you want to extend your home. You're committing, therefore, to spending tens of thousands of pounds and enjoying the delights of significant disruption to your home for months. All of which isn't much fun, so you had better be sure that what you're creating is going to a) look wonderful, b) add to the overall enjoyment of the house and c) achieve your ambitions for the project.

It's also at this very early stage where many projects set off on the wrong path. In order to achieve your goals, it is crucially important to actually have some in the first instance. So many projects actually get designed, built and lived in without any clear idea of why they happened in the first place. It's then hardly surprising that they feel like a waste of time and money – there is no clear goal to achieve. Your house being small isn't enough to require an extension. Doing it for the perceived sake of improving the house isn't enough in itself to justify an extension. What's needed instead is a very clear objective and an honest, even-minded assessment of what the problem is. You can only work out what the solution should be if you understand the problem.

This will help you form those all important objectives, which will make the basis of a brief. As anyone with a boring office job knows, KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) are aims you might set out at the beginning of a project. It's a useful tool to employ when planning an extension project, too, for two reasons – they can be used as a measure to see if the project was a success when it's

finished, but mainly, they can be used at a high level to help guide the hundreds of decisions you'll make as you go along.

A typical list of KPIs would be:
> New master bedroom suite for us.
> Bigger kitchen with dining included.
> Better connection with the garden.
> Better flow between rooms.
> Architectural 'wow'.

After you've crystallised what it is you want to achieve and why you're doing the project, it's time to begin the fun part; gathering ideas. There are plenty of different ➤

ANOTHER LEVEL
Above Designed by Architect Your Home, this two-storey rear extension to a house in east London has created space for an open-plan kitchen-diner on the ground floor, as well as a third bedroom and bathroom on the first floor. The project cost £140,000

sources of ideas – not least the new Realhomes.com website – but you need a considered approach to this exercise, otherwise you could end up feeling swamped with a slightly incoherent collection of pretty things.

This part of the process should be as practical and pragmatic as the rest. There are two good principles to use here. First, design from the detail upwards. What is it you really want to achieve? Is it a large island in the kitchen or a nice bath in an en suite? Concentrating on the smallest detail and working up ensures that the end design meets your specific goals, rather than being a random collection of ideas. Second, list the way you see yourself enjoying the new house. This might look like the following:
> Cooking while being able to see children do their homework.
> Sunday morning drinking coffee while lunch is cooking.
> 'Sanctuary' en suite experience.

Rather like the KPIs, this exercise will help you assess the practical merits of the final designs you work on. How many of these 'experiences' will your proposed design give you?

Now is also the time to assess the viability of the extension project in its broadest terms. What are the practical limitations on the scope of

PERFECT BLEND
Right Designed to be in keeping with the original property, this brick extension by MW Architects has transformed this family home. A large amount of structural steelwork was required to open up the lower-ground floor and support the upper storeys, which meant the project cost around £140,000 to build, including the glazing and large roof lantern

the project? Does a tiny garden make a single-storey extension difficult? Does the ceiling price of houses on your street make spending £70,000 on an extension financially unwise? How will your extension affect the roof shape of your house, and how will it be incorporated? All of these thoughts will help you not only ensure that the project makes financial sense, but that it provides sufficient parameters for the start of the design process.

One last constraint to consider is planning permission. One common

mistake is to put the planning context at the centre of the design process – in particular designing an extension purely so that it can qualify under Permitted Development (PD) Rights. (PD Rights are a list of alterations you can make to your home without needing prior planning consent). Design the extension you want first. If it qualifies for PD, all the better – but if you have to apply for permission to get what you want, so be it.

With all of these factors taken into account, the design process can

PHOTOGRAPHS FRENCH + TYE, WILLIAM ECKERSLEY

WORDS JASON ORME

begin. It's at this stage you can also mitigate against one of the biggest risks in any extension project: the design not being achievable within the money you have to pay for it. Creating a design based on your budget is a key part of the design process, so you need to feed this into your briefing.

The best way to ensure 'buildability' of any project is to allow the builder to be involved as early as possible – ideally before the design process has fully kicked in. Good builders always complain about not being able to influence a project early enough – so make sure your builder-sourcing comes at a point to allow this to happen. They can also make practical suggestions on how to maximise value for money.

In terms of the design process itself, the amount of intervention you need will depend on the scale of your project. It's worth outlining what the point of the design process actually is here: is it as a blueprint to guide the builders, or is it to fully explore all available options and solutions before honing one into a final, inspired piece of architecture? That depends on how restrictive those constraints actually are: for example, if the best solution to your problems is to knock down a few internal walls and build a modest, relatively straightforward extension, most good builders will be able to handle that from a design point of view; if you are struggling to find the solutions to your problems, then a professional house designer will be invaluable in unlocking the project. Don't expect innovative design ideas from a builder; but equally don't think you necessarily need huge amounts of time coming up with creative ideas on every single project. Another benefit of including good builders as early as possible is that they can help you identify good local designers.

Given the need for a professional house designer, who should you choose? In simple terms, the guiding principle should be this: hire the experience and the person, not the title. Many brilliant house designers are architects; many are not. As previously mentioned, use good local builders and projects you've seen (online as well as in person) to draw up a longlist of potential designers. Invite them to your house and discuss your overall brief with them. Don't expect any ideas yet. Some will happily come up with a few quick proposals for free; most will need a fee to pursue things further. As a result, those early discussions are critical in forming a view of whether they will be able to deliver what you are looking for (don't forget, the best designers can give you solutions you hadn't necessarily considered, rather than simply draw what you had in mind) and, just as importantly, whether you can communicate effectively.

What else should you be looking for at this stage? Clarity of the service offered by the designer (usually up to completed construction/building regulations compliant drawings, but occasionally full-service management of the contractor if you want it) and the likely time scales and fees. Also, are there limits on the amount of times you can amend and hone the design, and if not, how is this charged? Does the designer have professional indemnity insurance (PI)? This is a useful back-up if anything the designer does incurs significant unexpected costs. All of these things should be discussed openly, and result in a written exchange outlining your agreement. In terms of fee expectations, every project is different. Most homeowners who use designers for projects like this tend to pay in the region of £2,000-£6,000, although for complicated schemes, fees can easily go north of £10,000.

The design process is, in many ways, the most exciting part of the extension project. It should be full of enthusiasm, energy and optimism: three critical traits that will be much in demand later. Yet taking a practical, clear-minded, objective view of what the design is for should always be the starting point on the road to a successful extension. ●

MODERN UPDATE
Left The aim of this redesign and extension project was to create a large open-plan area where the family could cook, eat and spend time together, so Simon Whitehead Architects designed a contemporary space with full-height sliding doors leading out to the garden. The entire project, including the full house renovation and extension, cost £300,000

NEXT MONTH HOW TO MANAGE YOUR EXTENSION PROJECT