



choosing A BUILDING DESIGNER

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Good design is the keystone to any building and the importance of selecting a building designer who suits your particular needs is paramount

Bold use of colour and textured finishes add excitement to this striking kitchen from a Graham Jones Design in Mount Martha.

FEATURE



Matthew Mallett Photography

Building designers provide a range of services including:

- Assessing the site (views, privacy, site access, location of neighbouring buildings, solar orientation etc)
- Liaising with the local council in order to gain planning permission and building approvals as well as submitting any other documentation that the council may require
- Obtaining a brief from the client that includes the client's budget and what the client wants from the building
- Preparation of a design concept and preliminary designs
- Preparation of working drawings and specifications for the budget
- Creating artist's impressions of a building or extensions required
- Project supervision
- Project management

The complexity of modern buildings means that building design is so much more than just drawing a set of plans, putting a few rooms together and adding a roof. Ever-changing legislation, lifestyles, trends and environmental issues need to be addressed by an informed professional.

Designing your home is a personal experience that explores your unique lifestyle and the designer you choose should work hard to determine the most cost-effective and practical solutions that not only look good but also meet your requirements. Whether you are planning a new home, an extension or renovation to an existing building, you want someone who will work with you to enhance your lifestyle without sacrificing your home's visual appeal or exceeding your budget.

So what are the first steps to finding the right professional for your project?

According to Brian Morrison, executive officer of the Building Designers Association of Victoria (BDAV), asking friends or family members to recommend someone with whom they've had a positive experience is a good starting point.

"Many building designers obtain the majority of their work by word-of-mouth. Therefore, a good place to begin your search is by checking with family and friends to see whether they can recommend a building designer who satisfied their expectations.

"Alternatively, people may look up the BDAV website to search for a particular designer and get an understanding of what building designers are located in the immediate area where they intend to build their house. However, it isn't essential that a building designer is located in the same vicinity or municipality," Brian says.

Once you have done some preselection through word-of-mouth, visiting industry

association websites or looking through the Yellow Pages, call to arrange a time to meet those who interest you and prepare a detailed wish list.

"Building designers are always pleased to show clients a portfolio of their designs and this enables you to get an idea of whether that building designer will be able to reflect your needs, expectations and requirements."

Brian recommends asking for the addresses of at least three of their past projects so you can see the building designer's work in three-dimensional form. If possible, talk to those clients about their relationship with the designer and ascertain whether they were happy with the relationship and the design work carried out.

Of course, it is also essential to choose a building designer who has the requisite skills and knowledge to complete the project. Ask to see their qualifications, find out their level of experience and ensure the designer holds professional indemnity insurance.

Keep in mind that every firm has its own way of doing things. Some will be less expensive but offer less service. Some will offer a wide variety of services while others will do things only one way. Some will have a favourite style that they work in while others will work in a variety of styles, depending on what their clients are looking for.

Building a relationship

Equally important is finding someone with whom you can communicate easily, who listens to you and who will offer constructive advice that enhances what you have in mind.

"Good communication is a critical aspect of the relationship between the client and the building designer. The client should feel as though they have an essential and vital role in the design as much as the designer," says Brian.

Darren Evans from multi-award-winning firm

Solar Solutions Design and Drafting agrees that good communication during the initial stages of the design brief is essential to realising your goals. "It's a long process that you're about to embark on and if the personalities don't get at the start of that process, things aren't going to improve," he says.

"One of the main things we do prior to engaging a client is have an initial meeting and discuss all the client's requirements — how they want to live in the home, what they want to get out of the home and also the feeling they want from it — and then talk about how we will interpret those requirements.

"At this stage, the client and the designer should be very open and honest as to whether or not they feel that connection has been achieved. If you don't get that connection, it's going to be a long, hard battle throughout the process and somebody is not going to be happy at the end of it.

"Most designers have their comfort zone of what they like to design and the client should be focused on that answer before they make a selection."

Money matters

Fees can be a deciding factor for some people when choosing a building designer. As fashion designer Gucci once said: "Long after the price is forgotten, the quality remains." Nothing could be more apt when it comes to the design of your new home.

Choosing a designer based on price can be a costly mistake. You need to choose the designer you think will do the best job. You may save a couple of thousand dollars in design fees but will spend more fixing design problems during construction and end up with a house that you are not happy with.

Check with the designer up front to make sure that you are at least in the ballpark with your



expectations — that what you are planning is within the realm of possibility, given your budget. If not, the designer will be able to tell you early in the process, saving both of you a lot of time.

Michael O'Sullivan of Vibe Design Group, a leader in top-end dwelling design, says he can "glean pretty quickly" whether a client is "on the same page" in terms of budget and expectations.

"We get people wanting 60 squares on a \$400,000 budget and, without offending them, we suggest that Vibe isn't right for them. I believe there is a big issue in the marketplace at the moment with construction costs versus the public's expectations of what they're going to get because they align it with all the project homes. The project builders' square-metre rate is very difficult to achieve with anything individually designed for the block and the sustainability aspect truly requires that individual attention to make it work.

"The money you spend on a designer who knows what they are doing is the best money you can spend because they create the script for the whole process and they also protect your investment with the design."

According to Brian Morrison from the BDAV, there are no recommended or prescribed fees that can be provided to you relating to the work carried out by building designers. "Fees will vary depending on the nature and



complexities of the design brief, the site itself and planning issues such as neighbourhood character. Fees may be based on an hourly rate, a lump sum basis or as a percentage of the total construction cost," he says.

The elements of good design

Every building site is unique, with its own set of problems and possibilities. It is the task of the building designer to overcome the problems

Above This stunning home by Vibe Design won the 2008 BDAV award for Most Effective Use of Glass. Above top A commitment to creating unique, functional, energy-efficient designs has earned Graham Jones Design more than 10 industry awards for excellence. Left Energy efficiency can be incorporated into any house design without compromising style, says Darren Evans from Solar Solutions.