

Episode 118

How to find a good architect – with Adrian Dobson from RIBA

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/118

Intro: I'm trying to do a few more podcasts on specific professionals – people you're going to need on your project, and today we're focusing on architects. My guest in this episode is Adrian Dobson from the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and we're going to be looking at how you find the right architect for your project.

I started by asking Adrian to tell me a little about his background.

Adrian: My name's Adrian Dobson. I'm the Executive Director Members at the Royal Institute of British Architects. I am an architect by training and background so I have been a practising architect. I worked mainly in the education and social services sector, so really on public buildings, although I have had some experience of residential development. And then about 10 years ago I went over to the other side and became a part of the administration at the RIBA so I now work supporting architects.

Ben: It's all going to be about architects today. So let's start on a really basic question here. What is an architect?

Adrian: Well I suppose in a sense an architect is somebody who can help a client navigate the complex issue of designing and constructing a building that meets their needs. So really an architect is a trusted adviser and a facilitator. And obviously the core skill they bring is that of design. That's at the heart of the architectural process but they offer much more than that. They help you to navigate the whole complexity of the build process.

Ben: And how are they trained? Are all architects trained in the same way?

Adrian: Yes. I mean the curriculum for architectural education is set out by the RIBA and the Architects Registration Board.

It's a very very rigorous training; typically takes at least 7 years from beginning to end. So it's a fairly rigorous process. Usually done the first part in a university environment, although increasingly like lots of professions we're looking at, if you like, earn and learn opportunities, so in a sense there are kind of on the job ways in which you can train to be an architect, but predominantly through an academic training, followed by supervised professional experience. And after 7 years you can actually take the affix RIBA and practice as an architect.

Architects are slightly unusual in that the use of the title 'Architect' is protected by statute. So only somebody who is on the Architect's Register can actually use the title 'Architect'. So it isn't that only architects can provide the range of services around building design that you need to develop a property, but only architects can actually use that title of 'Architect', so in a sense you do know what you're getting: if the name is on the tin you're getting a qualified architect.

Ben: And you mention qualifications, does that mean that there's one type of qualifications or are you now going to tell me that there are many?

Adrian: No, I mean there's basically one standard qualification to become a chartered architect. That's not the end of education, I think we're in a world of lifelong learning, and so for example architects have to undertake what we call, the technical term is 'Continuing Professional Development'. But what that's really saying is they have to ensure that they maintain their competence to practise. They keep up with changes in legislation, changes in building design technologies, etc. So architects are continuously training throughout their career, and inevitably some architects will tend to specialise in some areas more than others.

So you may specialise in the healthcare sector, you may specialise by sector. You may specialise by type of service, so for example something like conservation work is often seen to be a fairly specialist area of expertise, so if you've got a project that involves a listed building you probably need to make sure that your architect is someone who's got additional knowledge and expertise in that particular area because you're going to be involved in additional planning consents around listed building status. You're going to be certainly working within parameters of what you can do with a listed building. So that would be an example where you might want somebody with a further specialism.

Ben: I'm imagining in the UK we're quite unusual that I would say, you're probably going to correct me, that most buildings have an architect?

Adrian: Well, to a degree. In actual fact, if you talk about planning applications, most planning applications are not architect designed. So there's a huge amount of very small alteration, very minor extension work that doesn't have architectural design input and I guess that's a dilemma in a sense for the domestic client at the very small end of operation: at what point is it worth bringing in professional expertise.

Clearly my view would be that even in very very small projects an architect can often release a lot of value in terms of imaginative use of space, making the best of constrained sites, but there is a level at which you've got to make that judgement. You know, whether you can just go ahead and perhaps obtain planning permission, just appoint a contractor.

And even if you've got an architect as a member of your team, do you want that architect to administer the building contract and see it all the way through to completion or do you just want the architect to assist you with obtaining planning permission and perhaps building regulations approval, and then just work with a contractor, and if you like manage the project yourself? I mean these are some of the questions any domestic client has got to ask themselves at the outset really.

Ben: Looking at an architect versus a designer, what are the benefits then really, or could you have a designer of the same merit and skill?

Adrian: Well I think it's important to stress that architects don't have a sort of unique right to design all of the built environment. So for example, to take an extreme example, like a very high end design market, there are a number of well known designers who also operate in the field of built environment and design other objects as well. So you might think of somebody like Thomas Heatherwick, who's clearly a very very talented designer and has designed buildings. So architects don't have a unique right to be the only designers in the built environment.

I think what an architect does offer you, it offers you certain guarantees about the sort of training they've been involved with, that they've got a core design skill and that they understand the legislative framework in which buildings are constructed, etc. That

they adhere to a code of conduct, so you can expect standards of professionalism from them being on the register and members of the RIBA that they're going to undertake as I say Continuing Professional Development. And you've got a certain guarantee of quality, because of the kind of accreditation that bodies like the RIBA offer around practices. So it certainly offers you some reassurance and peace of mind I would say.

Ben: I'm obviously looking to build my own house, but at what stage should I be looking at bringing an architect on board?

Adrian: Well again, there's no straightforward answer to that. I would actually say as early as possible. I mean many many clients, particularly professional clients, people that are involved in the development industry, they will have their architect at their side when they're just going to visit a site for the very first time. They want to take advantage of that kind of relationship to help them assess what the development opportunities are, is it the right kind of site for them.

So I would say that architects in many ways, they add their most value at the earliest part of the process, in helping you to appraise a site, make decisions about it, helping you to really understand what your brief is. How can you maximise the value to give you the kind of space, the kind of lifestyle that you're going to aspire to. So I think if you're going to employ an architect, to delay their engagement is actually a false economy. To really get the benefit you want them on board as early as possible, almost in the pre-briefing stage. Helping you to actually define your own brief is a key part of the architect's skill. They should be able to ask you the right questions.

Ben: From what you said there, I guess that I could employ an architect at the early stages, even when I'm looking at land. Can this be done on an hourly basis, or is this the beginning of a bigger contract?

Adrian: Well there's no fixed basis for setting an architect's fee. There's a free market in architectural services. Usually it would be a fixed fee divided over what we would call the 'RIBA Plan of Works Stages'. So an RIBA architect would work to the 'RIBA Plan of Work'. It's simply a number of stages that splits the design, development, construction process up, 0-7, starting with the brief, moving through concept design, developed design, technical design, on to construction.

In the very very early stages it possibly might be that you might have an arrangement where you pay an hourly rate for that early advice but you would probably then switch to a more fixed fee basis once you get into the actual design. So you might have an hourly rate for site appraisal, feasibility study, brief writing, but then move to a more fixed sum arrangement after that.

Ben: What does this mean when comparing architects then?

Adrian: Well clearly when selecting an architect the fee is going to come into it. So you're going to want to know what are the fees, and that is going to be one of the variables you're going to consider. I think there a whole series of other things you need to think about as well.

I mean you need to think about the reputation of the practice, can you look at other projects that they've previously constructed? Can you talk to previous clients, what's their area of expertise, do you have a particular feeling about the type of design you want? If you want a very very traditional building, not much point in working with an architect whose forte is really highly modern design. Equally if you've got an ambition to have a highly glazed building and you need somebody who can understand how they can deliver that within the parameters of energy conservation, etc., you'll probably want somebody who's got that kind of design approach. So thinking about the design approach is also going to be very important.

I think the other thing I would say is that as a provider of a service your relationship with an architect is quite a long term relationship. It's going to take several months, maybe even years, to get a major self build project from inception to completion. So I think it's important to satisfy yourself that the architect you choose is someone you can get along with over a long period of time. That you can develop a relationship of trust and that you will be able to maintain that relationship through what is quite an extended partnership actually. So that kind of personal and cultural fit I think is also quite important.

And clearly you're going to want to meet at least 3 or possibly even 4 practices and ask them about their fees, understand what their business approach is, before you make that choice you certainly want to look in the market place in a sense.

Ben: We'll talk through what might happen in an interview and how we would do that in a moment, but I just wanted to pause on that for a second, and we're very much about energy-efficient homes,

Passivhaus homes. Does that become easier to select the architect then or is there a different approach we should be making?

Adrian: Well, all architects obviously need to be able to comply with current building regulations. So in terms of energy efficiency, the building regulations lay down a base standard if you like, but as you say Ben, many many clients now have aspirations around sustainability and energy efficiency. They go far beyond just complying with what the law says they have to provide. It's a conscious choice to want a sustainable building.

You've already mentioned one of the major standards that's increasingly popular is the Passivhaus standard. I think it's particularly popular because it's really very focused on energy and it's about trying to predict the energy usage and you can measure very accurately at the end of the project whether you've achieved your objectives. So it's a very testable standard if you like. So it's become very very popular. If you're going to work with Passivhaus standards your architect needs to be trained in the use of that standard and able to design in that way. But many many architects are now taking that accreditation. It's a very very popular and successful model, the Passivhaus standard.

Ben: Has that affected anything in the course of becoming an architect or is this early days really?

Adrian: No, I mean I think in fairness to the architectural profession, its engagement with this whole sustainability agenda has been at the leading edge of the construction industry. I wouldn't like to claim that architects are the lead innovators in the construction industry in every aspect, but certainly in terms of sustainable design the profession has actually had a reputation for trying to support and encourage its clients to push at the envelope and not just be bound by legislation. So I think it's something that most architects are very very comfortable with and probably a part of their job that they particularly enjoy. I think architects do want to create sustainable buildings in every sense.

Ben: Just a design question that's popped into my head here for a moment, because I always feel that Passivhauses tend to have almost a look and a feel, which is no bad thing because you could say different eras, Victorian, whatever they all have a certain feel. I'm going to be interested going through my own build because my wife is always saying that she doesn't like boxy approaches and all of this thing. So do you think this will develop more as people understand yes they can perform to Passivhaus standard but can

do a little bit more, or are we heading for a future of perhaps just getting used to more simple shapes, simple form factors?

Adrian: No, I don't think that the Passivhaus standard is as restrictive as that in reality. I think it's like any of these standards that as they develop people take time to understand where are the elements of flexibility, how can you actually work with the standard in a more imaginative way.

I mean one of the interesting things to me about Passivhaus, a little bit off our topic for this morning, is that originally it was seen really as something for the residential market. It was about home design. You're seeing quite a lot of buildings being developed now, much larger buildings, public buildings, commercial buildings, that are beginning to utilise the Passivhaus standard and they clearly do not look alike at all. They look very varied and they're still all operating to the same standard.

I think you're right. I think in the early days there was a sense that, possibly because it was a German standard originally and it came across with probably some standard design templates.

Ben: But also things like windows that in the older buildings they might have more crossbars on the windows – I can't think what the name of those things are!

Adrian: Mullions!

Ben: Mullions – that's it! But Passivhaus windows are more, why not just use the glazing, we don't need to have all these mullions?

Adrian: The standard itself wouldn't affect something like that at all. That's purely if you like a ...

Ben: But that's what I'm saying, we're transitioning to that. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong.

Adrian: No, I think in the debate between, if you like traditional and modern design, I think what you are finding is even with very modern design approaches, even an architect that operates in a very modernist idiom, we're seeing actually a return to some, I suppose what I was saying some vernacular driven thinking. I don't mean stylistically vernacular, but a sense that using local materials is more sustainable. A sense that traditional approaches to the distribution of glazing around buildings were actually related to climate. Roof forms were related to climate. There's much more a sense that

buildings have been designed for locality and climate than perhaps they were even 10/20 years ago.

And I think that's one of the things that actually is very much driving the strong desire for self build. I think people, I'll be careful what I say to some degree, because I think there's a huge range of volume house builders out there and they produce a huge range of products of different qualities and different types. But I think the problem with the volume house building industry is it does tend to rely to standardised product in every location. There might be a nod to locality but it's really a standardised product and I think the beauty of the self build industry is it tends to focus on locality and being space specific and response to climate is part of that.

Ben: That's another rabbit hole we always enjoy jumping down there! Don't worry I'm not going to make you go down there!

So interviewing architects then. On that preliminary search, how do we narrow it down to who we want to interview?

Adrian: Well I would say, obviously working for the RIBA I would say please do contact the RIBA. We have a service called 'Find an Architect', which is a very valuable service I think. It enables you to look at a whole range of architectural practices. Perhaps it's going to be, you're probably going to want to have somebody who's in a reasonably close location if it's going to be a domestic project. We can narrow it down for you, we can use all sorts of parameters to help you refine your selection. You can see examples of architects' work, etc.

I would say though that once you get to a shortlist it's really important to meet the architect. I would say if at all possible visit some of the buildings that they've actually delivered. Get a sense for what is the product they can produce.

And I think it is about those two things really. It's about product and process. Satisfy yourself that this particular architect can produce a product of the type that you want, not necessarily an identical solution that they've given for somebody else, but that's going to be compatible with your desires. And satisfy yourself that this is somebody who understands the process. I think an important thing to ask yourself is can they explain the process to you in terms that you can understand? Can they actually explain to you what's involved in assessing the site, developing a brief, going through the design process, what's required to get planning permission, what information is needed for building regulations, can they give you a

simple and understandable strategy for how you might then select a builder to actually construct the project? Can they explain the process to you and do you feel confident that you could work with them over as I say this quite extended period? Are you happy that they can take you through that process and you can work well together?

Ben: One tip that I've heard recently that I thought was quite good about selecting a builder was to find one who is genuinely interested in looking back at their past projects and thinking how can I make this better. So does the same apply with an architect, and how could we phrase that in a question?

Adrian: I think it does, and I think hand on heart, not just architects but the whole construction industry has traditionally been very weak in this area. You will hear a lot about the so called performance gap in industry. Does it deliver what it really promises, whether that's about the energy consumption of buildings, the build quality, etc.

We haven't really had a strong, if you like, consumer focus as an industry. I think that's a fair criticism. And we should have because for example for architects, something like 45% of their future clients are actually repeat clients. So their past clients not only should they be interested in how their buildings perform because that should inform their next projects, they actually should be interested in how they perform because they're actually very very important potential future customers for them! They may well commission them again for a further building.

Ben: I didn't realise that! It's a good fact.

Adrian: So that's a positive incentive and I think we have been weak in it so I think it's a very valid question to ask, you know have you been back to some of your projects, what kind of feedback have you got, how has the building actually performed both in technical terms and what feedback have you got from previous clients as to whether... Did it create the right kind of environment and spaces to deliver the kind of lifestyle that they sought? And that's clearly, if you're going to employ an architect you really want to ensure that you've got a solution that's tailored to your needs. That's the whole point isn't it in one sense.

Ben: Any other questions that might be useful to ask them?

Adrian: You definitely want to make sure you understand the scope of services that they're providing. Your architect will need to have a

written appointment agreement with you and this is sometimes quite a difficult thing for people to understand because I think for somebody commissioning a domestic building when they first get the kind of architect's appointment document which in the end is a legal contract, that can be quite off-putting for people.

I think it's important to understand that the architect has no choice about that. The regulation says, the Architect's Registration Board Code of Conduct and actually some European directive as well, say that there must be an appointment agreement in writing. The client must know what you've committed to deliver and what their obligations are in return.

Now as part of that documentation the important thing to understand is what's the scope of service that they're going to provide. What can you expect that they're going to deliver. So at one level that can be quite simple like I touched on the point earlier of how far are you going to expect the architect to go with you down the process? Do you want them just to take it as far as planning, do you want it to include building regulations, do you want it to include the tender of the building contract, do you want it to actually include the inspection of works on site and the administration of the contract? So there may be different degrees to which you wish to employ the architect.

Ben: And why? Why would we choose to stop at one of these points? Cost?

Adrian: Yes, I mean certainly that might be a factor because obviously the more services the architect is going to provide the greater the fee is going to be.

The strong argument for involving the architect in the contract administration is it gives you that level of quality control over the build that you're going to have to ensure yourself if you don't employ the architect. But I think we also have to be clear that the economics of self build mean that in some circumstances clients will choose to manage, to do that project management element themselves.

The architect clearly has got experience. An architect is used to administering a contract to try and ensure that things happen on time, that the building is completed on cost and to the right quality. That's really what contract administration is all about. Can you meet the time/cost/quality requirements? But at the same time an experienced contractor on a small project, you may feel confident

that you can get that delivery anyway, so that's going to be one factor.

The other thing is also to understand though within the scope of service exactly what's going to be delivered at those stages. What can be your realistic expectation? It could be something simple if it's about feasibility study, are you going to be shown a number of options, are there going to be two or three options, is there going to be 5 or 6 options? It's that kind of level of detail I think is useful to ask about and then you're not going to have any false expectation on either side. The architect knows what they've got to deliver and you reasonably know what you can expect to receive.

Ben: Is there more of an argument as someone coming into this first time to build a house to employ more of the services of the architect or again is this a hazy area because the contractor might cover that knowledge gap as well?

Adrian: Yeah, I don't think there can be any hard and fast answer. As a representative of architects I would obviously want to say the architect is going to add value you at every point of the process and the safest bet is to have the architect engaged all the way through. I think it's probably not the case that it's absolutely clear cut in every instance like that.

It's partly also just a personal preference of how actively engaged you as the client want to be in the design and build process. You know, some people they really do just want to have a guarantee of a product and they're happy to entrust that to somebody to help them to get there. Some people are very motivated to be very active and very hands on and engaged in the process. So partly I think it probably comes down to personal preference as well and what level of engagement you want in the process.

Ben: We've obviously got limited time, but have we covered most of the bases of how you might select a good architect for this sort of project?

Adrian: I think so, yes. Think about what range of services you want and make sure that the architect has had experience in delivery of those kind of services. Think about what kind of building or home you desire, make sure the architect has a working style and a design style that is compatible with that. I think there's no point in trying to work with somebody where it's chalk and cheese. You've got to make sure there's a kind of empathy between the two. It is a partnership at the end of the day.

Ben: Well perhaps we could finish up on this question then. Working with the architects, how do we make sure that we keep this relationship going as well as we possibly can?

Adrian: I think the most important thing is that there's clear communication and honest communication.

So I do quite a lot of lecturing in schools of architecture to trainee architects and I do quite a lot of seminars for architects in practice and talk about... It would be false to say that projects never go wrong. There are problems on projects and architects can sometimes pick up the telephone to the RIBA when they've got themselves in difficulty. I would say most issues where things have gone badly wrong are when there's been poor communication and a difficulty in being honest. So I always say to architects if anything occurs during any part of the project that's going to affect the brief, what's going to actually be delivered in terms of the spaces and accommodation, going to affect the cost, going to affect the timescale, going to affect the quality. Regardless of whether that's something that's in the control of the architect or way beyond the control of the architect, you need to tell your client as soon as possible. You know you need to be very up front and say look there's an issue here, don't ever allow things to roll on. They need to know about anything that's going to affect any of those parameters, because in the end they're the person that's going to be most affected by it. So that's on the part of the architect, transparency, honesty, clear information about anything that's going to affect the outcome.

I think from the point of view of the client, being willing to be decisive when necessary, make decisions as required. The great beauty of the UK construction industry is it's very flexible. You can change your mind about almost anything at any point. You can change things around, but it will cost you money. You need to make the right decisions early on and once you've made a decision probably best to stick to it. So at the stage of concept design there's incredible flexibility and the cost to change is very very low. It's another hour of the architect's time. Once you've started to construct on site opportunity to change is still there but cost is enormous.

So I would say being decisive at the right times and trying to make the right decisions early on is really key. I think that will really help the relationship.

Ben: Well 100 odd podcasts in and I've only just made it to RIBA but I'm very pleased to have this chat. Adrian, thank you very much.

Adrian: You're very welcome Ben. Come back again soon!