



2012 N. Country Club Road #9
Tucson, Arizona 85716
(520) 629-9752
(520) 798-3341
www.cdg-architects.com

What's Design Got to Do With It?

By BRADFORD McKEE

LAST year, a substantial wall stood between me and a bigger kitchen, on which I would ultimately spend \$40,000, all of it from refinancing. There were other walls, too, boxing up the living room, dining room, entrance hall and stair in my 1911 row house. The walls went up in the 1940's, when the house unmagically became four apartments. And I had only a dim idea of how to get rid of them. One thing was clear: I would not be doing the work myself.

The goal was to begin turning the place back into one whole house, ideally along the lines of the free-flowing original plan. But for months I felt frozen, not knowing whom to call for help. Did I need to hire an architect to make my plan come true? Or could I squeak by with a contractor alone?

Most people in my position don't hire architects. In 2002, homeowners in the United States spent \$173 billion remodeling their homes — 10 percent more than in 2001, according to the National Association of Home Builders. But only an estimated 14 percent of that work involved an architect or designer, said Gopal Ahluwalia, the association's vice president for research.

When renovating a house, the decision to hire an architect depends on the complexity of the project and whether you want someone to supervise the contractor. Face it, if there's going to be dust, there's going to be a contractor present with a cellphone blazing. (Dealing with a halfway decent contractor when everyone else is also renovating is like having a new lover: Who else are they talking to? Where are they? Why won't they call you back?)

Whether you draw an architect into this picture hinges on several factors. You generally don't need one to install bookshelves, replace a floor or re-tile a bathroom. But if you're tinkering with the structure of your house, it can only help to have an architect — and in some places it may be required. If you have a low threshold for conflict, you may want an architect to run interference with the contractor. If you don't know quite what you want but expect the coolest new materials, an architect usually has the handiest access to those choices in samples and catalogs.

Think of it this way: Architects are spatial-problem solvers, and they may well come up with solutions that would never occur to you. Contractors, by contrast, are essentially expeditors who are disinclined to go outside the box for answers.

You might assume that your project will take longer with an architect, as the design adds another layer to the process, but it may actually be shorter, since architects have sources and established relationships with vendors that can speed things up.

If you hire an architect, you will pay more. Most architects calculate their fees as a percentage of construction costs — usually 12 to 15 percent and up, depending on the level of detail — so the fee increases as your budget does. Others charge by the hour, with \$100 an hour typical for residential work. Still others may agree to a flat fee for a few quick sketches, estimated at the hourly rate.

“It can be a toss-up” to hire an architect, said Barbara Ballinger Buchholz of Ladue, Mo., who is a coauthor, with Margaret Crane, of “Successful Homebuilding and Remodeling: Real-Life Advice for Getting the House You Want Without the Roof (or Sky) Falling In” (Dearborn Trade Publishing, 1999).

Ms. Buchholz said she has renovated three kitchens in various homes. “I don’t think an architect is irrelevant, because you can get a lot of wonderful ideas from an architect,” she said. In her current kitchen, though, she did not use an architect. “I was gutting what was inside, and the contractor and a good cabinet company figured out a plan that really made sense.”

If you do hire an architect, you have to decide how much you want to engage them. Once the architect prepares your drawings, you can retain them to pick every battle with the contractor on your behalf, or you can simply keep them on standby for advice and pay the hourly rate.

An architect may be dispensable if you know what you want. Heath Slane, a jewelry designer in Los Angeles, bought a 1928 Italianate house in the Hancock Park neighborhood in April and is spending a sum she will define only as six figures to remove chateau-style amendments and restore the house’s original luster. From the beginning, she had a clear idea of how she wanted the house to look, and assumed that a designer was essential. When she asked her friend Leslie Corzine, a designer, to help her with the problem, Ms. Corzine simply gave her the number of her favorite contractor, Aragon Construction, and offered to observe. “Leslie said, ‘The best gift I can give you are my guys,’” Ms. Slane said. “She said: ‘You don’t need me as a designer. You’re already there.’”

Any experienced architect is going to be full of opinions, only some of which may suit you. As the person paying the bills, you are free to defy your architect. Ann LaGravenese recently

guttled and renovated her family's 2,800 square-foot apartment on Central Park West in Manhattan, and said she would have been "swimming alone" through the various approvals had it not been for her architect, Jo Machinist. Ms. Machinist also helped Ms. LaGravenese, who would not disclose the budget, indulge her desires for an onyx wall in her kitchen, limestone tile with nickel medallions in her shower and solid wenge floors. But Ms. Machinist balked at Ms. LaGravenese's idea for seven-foot-high shiny polyester-resin doors from Poliform. "She said, 'I'm not doing it,'" warning that the doors would take forever to arrive from Italy, Ms. LaGravenese recalled. But in the end she got her doors.

Architects tend to see themselves as essential, especially when permits are necessary, because permits usually can be obtained only with an approved set of drawings stamped by a licensed architect or engineer (although for some small projects the contractor may submit details for approval).

"If there's anything structural, anything bearing a load, or beams coming down, or electrical wiring or plumbing, all of that requires a permit, legally," said Allan J. Grant, an architect in Chicago who specializes in remodeling houses. "Whether people do it legally is another issue."

Once you get the stamped drawings approved, you may see your contractor change the architect's painstaking designs based on the contractor's familiarity with the house's wiring, plumbing and other inner workings, said Gideon Danziger, a contractor in Manhattan.

The contractor's changes to the architect's work may force the client to play referee. Contractors often complain that architects take shortcuts in their details by simply writing "verify in field" on certain details, or suggesting that the design be modified "as necessary," leaving the contractor to resolve problems on the spot.

"An architect, unless he's really good and has gotten his hands really dirty, doesn't know what to expect, so his details will always be modified," Mr. Danziger said. The contractor, he added, knows beforehand that the guts beneath the walls are not as simple as they seem.

I'm glad no one told me how rotted the old joists beneath my kitchen were, or I might have called a realtor. I knew I would bring in my contractor, Stephen Verges, with whom I had worked before. He is not cheap: he charges \$35 an hour per worker. But he has rebuilt houses in my neighborhood, a historic district, for about 30 years and knows them as well as anybody.

Technically, I could have gotten that big wall out of my way had my project been done without an architect. In the District of Columbia, my contractor could have done a quick sketch of the beam to be put in the wall's place and submitted it in order to obtain a building permit. He has done it before. But there were other items I didn't trust my contractor to resolve: Where should

I put the range, the refrigerator, the inevitable island? Did I want butcher block, fiber cement, Corian or granite countertops? Marble, slate or linoleum floors? What bang could I get for my budget, which doubled during the course of the project?

I called a friend and neighbor, Amy Sanderson, a registered architect whose renovation of her own heavy-duty kitchen I admire. We agreed her involvement would be minimal, because she had about as little surplus time as I had financing.

Amy drew a plan showing the first floor's configuration with all the fake walls torn down and, on yellow tracing paper, suggested three ways to arrange a new kitchen. I had been dead set on having the island run a certain way, but Amy convinced me that it should rotate 90 degrees for a better view out the kitchen window. She also ended my attachment to moving a range in one corner. "You've got to have a solid counter on either side of the range and the sink," she said. Otherwise, she said, I would go nuts crossing the room to set down hot pans.

When it came time to calculate the dimensions for a support beam, Amy called in a structural engineer, who charged \$150 to assess the load and draw up specifications. She made the notes on the drawing she submitted to get my permit, which made me feel inexpressibly safer.

I surprised myself by seeing the project to completion, and was glad I kept the business end of things fairly informal. I never signed a paper contract with my contractor. I gave him a wish list, and he gave me a quote — about \$33,000 for his time and materials, all told. (The rest went toward appliances and finishes.) I never staged the architect-contractor meeting I had always envisioned; it wasn't necessary. When it came time to settle up, I owed my contractor only an extra \$1,400.

The one major difference of opinion my contractor and I encountered involved that support beam. He argued, as contractors will, that the beam was 100 percent over-designed. I asked him to humor me and build it as specified, because architects and engineers are always going to overdesign when it comes to holding up a house. They have to sleep nights, and so do I.

Text reprinted from The New York Times
July 31, 2003



2012 N. Country Club Road #9
Tucson, Arizona 85716
(520) 629-9752
(520) 798-3341
www.cdg-architects.com