

HIRING AN ARCHITECT

By Jennifer Hiller - Express-News

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large porch was installed on the front of this house to better capture prevailing breezes, redefine the entry and make the home look more inviting from the street. CHRIS COOPER/COURTESY JOHN GRABLE ARCHITECT

You should hire an architect only if you have a big, fat budget and want a home with an ultra-modern design, right?

Not so much.

“People are afraid of a cliché or a stereotype A of an architect who wants to impose their vision onto them, that they won’t be able to control,” said San Antonio architect Jim Poteet. “Most good architects are attuned to translating the feel that people want into built form.”

Hiring an architect is not exactly a widespread practice for homeowners. But many architects say they wish that more people would consider hiring a professional to design a new home or tackle a major addition or remodel.

And with a slowdown in the construction industry, now is as good a time as ever to seek the help of a professional. Many architects who normally stay busy with work on commercial projects and high-end homes are likely looking for work to fill the time.

Or if they can’t add another project to their plate, they definitely can refer you to someone who can help with a new home, an addition or a remodel.

“This is the time when architects will say yes to smaller projects,” said San Antonio architect Stephen Colley.

So you shouldn’t be intimidated or embarrassed by the size of your budget, or fact that your house looks more “Little House on the Prairie” than “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.”

“Architects are kind of like doctors. You don’t have to apologize to them when you have them come look at a home that is in shambles,” Colley said.

San Antonio-based architect John Grable said that even having a short conversation with an architect — whether or not they are hired — can help lead homeowners in the right direction. “Despite the scope of work, despite the price point, I think it’s always nice to hire an architect whether it’s for three hours or three days or three weeks or three years,” Grable said. “I always like go out and talk to people and look around. What I see in the architect’s eye is very different than the eye of an owner.”

Architects are trained to notice things such as the prevailing wind direction, view corridors and sun angles — things that can make a major difference in home design, comfort and energy bills. Here are a few situations in which it makes sense to hire an architect:

Specific Wants

Some home buyers need a certain number of bedrooms and a certain number of square feet. But others have more specific ideas about what they would like in their home — a place in the kitchen for the kids to do homework, or a big front porch or a master bedroom with a garden view.

The more specific you are about what you want in a home, the more you’ll get out of working with an architect.

You may want particular design elements, the latest in green building or something unusual such as a planted roof.

“Look for somebody who has a track record in that vein,” Poteet said.

And if you’re in it for the long haul and want to stay in your house for decades, an architect can make that possible, and comfortable if, for instance, aging relatives or boomerang children need to be accommodated.

Building a home the right way the first time can help a family avoid repeated moves every time a new baby arrives or someone leaves for college.

“Because of the changes in the economy, you’re not going to have these spiraling values that encourage you to build bigger,” Grable said. “People are going to be more entrenched in their homes.”

Historic property

Additions or renovations to homes in older neighborhoods, especially historic neighborhoods, are one situation where hiring an architect probably makes sense.

Not only is it easy to screw up the design or construction of an addition to an existing home (think mismatched architectural styles), but in historic neighborhoods, San Antonio homeowners must go through the city’s Historic Design Review Commission for approval for exterior changes.

“A lot of our work includes historic review,” Poteet said. “That is a very intimidating situation for the layman. But for architects, it’s a way to make that process easier for people to get through.”

Plus, Poteet said, the HDRC is likely to see a homeowner hiring an architect as a sign that they

are committed to the neighborhood and are serious about making a lasting improvement to their house.

An Empty Lot

An empty lot, whether it's in an existing neighborhood or in a rural area with few neighbors, can make for a home design and construction challenge.

Architects can help if a site has poor drainage or difficult topography. Or they can help a new home blend with an existing neighborhood.

"You don't want to ruin what is right about a site," Poteet said. "(Frank Lloyd) Wright always said you build on the worst part of a site to improve it."

Architects can create a master plan for a site. So if you want to add buildings later or build an addition at some point, you'll have a roadmap to follow.

"Then people could stay put instead of having to move all of the time," Poteet said. "There's a trend that housing is disposable at some level and materials aren't meant to last. Anyone who is building for longevity, who wants something that will last and hold up against trends that will come and go, should talk to an architect so they will have something that reflects their personality."

An Expensive Home

Contrary to popular belief, architects do work on projects at affordable price points. But the more expensive a home is, the more it makes financial sense to hire an architect.

"You're spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a house," Colley said. "You might as well have it done right."

Poteet said that custom homes and architect-designed homes tend to appreciate in value at a higher rate than other homes on the market.

"Excellent design has an appeal to people who appreciate other fine things," he said. "The better something is done, it's not going to have a wider appeal, but it will have a deeper appeal."

The industry standard is that architects charge around 10 percent of the cost of the home — a fee that also includes engineering work — and that they will see the project through to the end. But Colley said some architects charge a flat fee, some have a flat fee up to a certain number of hours, after which the charge is hourly. Others will design the home and then step away from the project, letting the contractor take over.

"I think the biggest advantage of hiring an architect is the ability of the architect to be on your team," Colley said. "An architect is working for you, helps in choosing the right builder and is able to intervene. A lot of times there are surprises you can't account for during construction."