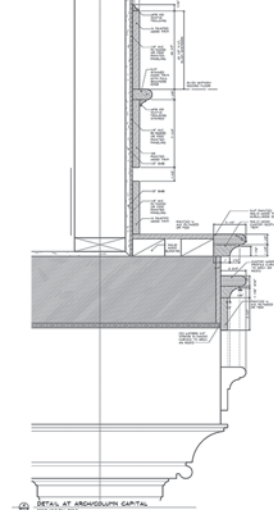


How to Afford an Architect

Proven ways to save the design team's time and your money



BY DUO DICKINSON

When David and Nancy Stein came to see me about designing a house, their biggest concern, like most clients', was cost. Their house had just burned down, and they had to rebuild. They would be reusing most of the original foundation, and they had a builder, Clark Sellars, lined up. But they wanted to know whether they could hire me to design the new house and still stay within their budget.

The Steins' budget was limited strictly to the insurance check. If the project came in over budget, they wouldn't have the money to pay for it. Given their insurance settlement and the house's footprint, they could afford about \$115 per sq. ft., including design and structural-engineering fees. Although I knew completing the project on this budget was possible, I wouldn't be able to provide a full scope of architectural services. The Steins, however, were willing to roll up their sleeves and become actively involved in the design process.

Because this extra work required the clients' time, this approach might not be for everybody. All told, my firm's design fee was about 5% of the total construction cost. This figure is extremely low, even for the strictly limited work that we did. The Steins' experience, therefore, is a

case study of the ways involved, conscientious homeowners can reduce an architect's fees.

Design options and detailed drawings are expensive

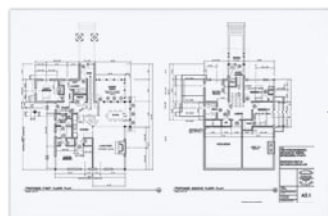
Architects most often charge some form of a fixed fee, either a certain percentage of construction costs, a dollar amount per square foot, or a lump sum. Regardless of the mechanics of billing, a client really is paying for the architect's time. If you can plead your case to an open-minded architect and explain that you will diligently limit his or her time and take on added responsibility, there is a good chance you can weave the cost of a creative, innovative, and (you hope) beautiful design into your budget.

My own firm charges all fees on an hourly basis, but we offer two different service levels: a full-service option and a consultant option. Under the full-service option, my firm serves as the architects of record and provides a full scope of architectural services,

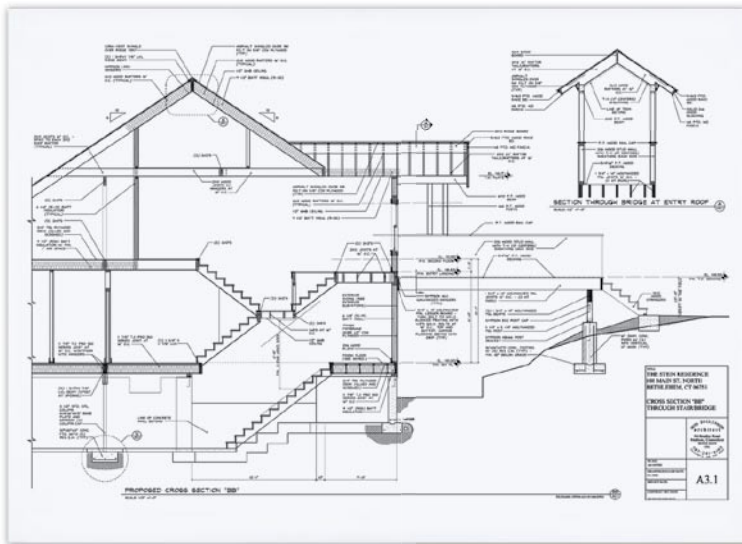
including weekly site visits during construction. In this scenario, we typically present five or six different design options to the client and react to his or her feedback. Once the client and I have come up with a consensus design, my firm draws a complete set of construction and



Modest budgets demand straightforward shapes and spaces. Part of an architect's job is to design a house that can be built on budget. For these cost-cutting clients, that meant simple framing (a basic roof shape) and simple materials (clapboards, T-111 siding, and asphalt roof shingles).



Involved, conscientious homeowners
can reduce an architect's fees.

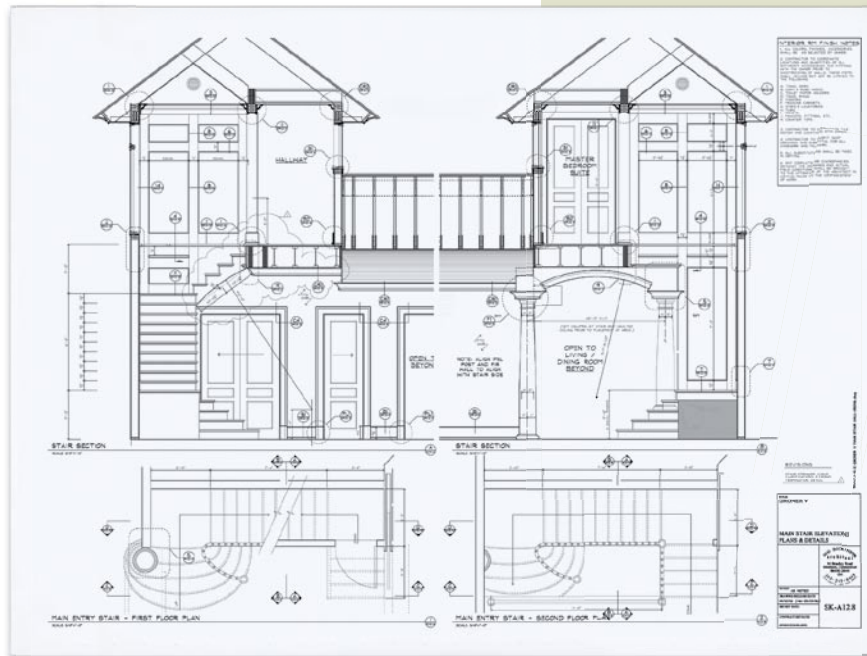


Lightly drawn stair plan

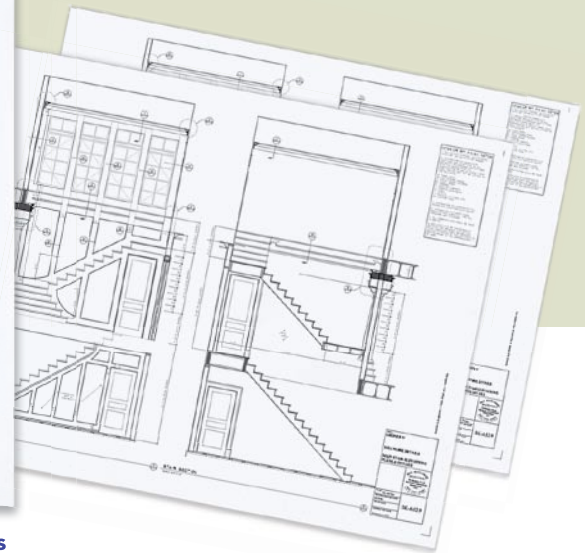
FEWER DRAWINGS, SMALLER BILL

Labor-intensive drawings account for a large part of an architect's billable hours. For the Steins' house, my firm drew about 80% fewer drawings than we'd typically do for a full-service project. Of course, this means the homeowner and the builder have much less detail to guide them. How much less?

For the Steins, who used our consultant-service option, the staircase was lightly drawn with all its details shown in a cross section of the house (top drawing). The notes indicate the headroom required, critical framing details, and stair location. By comparison, a client with a similar staircase who used our full-service option received multiple detailed drawings showing all elevations of the stairs (bottom drawings). The plans included all dimensions and trim details, including the baluster design and placement—something that was left up to the builder and the homeowners in the Steins' case.



Detailed stair plans



shop drawings, generally somewhere between 60 and 80 drawings. On average, this full-service approach costs between 16% and 18% of the construction budget.

Saving money means making more decisions yourself

With clients like the Steins, for whom limiting costs is the primary concern, I recommend our other service option. In this scenario, my firm limits the services we provide to make the project buildable for the minimum possible fee, thereby providing maximum savings to the client. We essentially serve as consultants. The client supplies explicit guidelines and design criteria. I deliver a minimum number of drawings for an accurate bid and a viable permit application. The drawings provide critical dimensions rather than complete dimensions, and the builder gets performance standards rather than product specifications.

To reduce my involvement, the client takes on greater responsibility

to interpret designs and to intercede with the builder to specify materials and finishes. In this client-architect relationship, it's important that the client and the builder have a good relationship and that the builder is involved early in the design process.

Although I'm billing an hourly rate for my time, this type of consultancy contract generally translates to a fee of between 11% and 14% of the construction budget. However, the more the client knows what he wants, the less he'll spend on design services.

With this house, we were able to reduce fees to 5% because the Steins had such a clear idea of what they wanted. David Stein had sketched a rough floor plan before we met. My firm presented the Steins with two options, and they readily approved one of them.

The Steins also took steps to reduce the time I spent on their project. For instance, they cut back on my travel time by coming to my office for design meetings and by requesting only two site visits



More than a deck. The family's outdoor life revolves around a backyard that is several feet above the first floor. To avoid an awkward traipse around the house and up the hill, a bridge from the second floor links the house to the yard. The entry from the bridge ties neatly into a landing on the house's central stairs, complete with a small office space. The location and general style of the bridge were shown in the plans, but the builder worked out the specifics on site in consultation with the owner.

during construction. They were also willing to make a million decisions on the fly as construction of their house progressed.

Typically for a house of this size and complexity with a moderate design budget and this level of design service, my firm would produce 25 to 30 drawings. The Steins received just thirteen 24-in. by 36-in. drawings. One reason we were able to get by with so few drawings is that the Steins had chosen a builder before hiring me, and he could weigh in on the design process.

Working from so few drawings meant that many features were lightly drawn, showing limited detail. The homeowners, then, had to be willing to answer dozens of questions about things like tile patterns, stair-railing details, paint colors, and hardware choices,

often at the last minute. On average, they said this involved about two hours a day of research and returning calls.

Reduced design fee still means a quality house

When designing a house without the resources to spend time drawing every detail and specifying every material and construction method, there is potential for some miscommunication and gaps in the information conveyed in the drawings. In the Steins' case, though, the process was remarkably smooth. The vast majority of the house was built exactly as drawn by my colleague Brian Ross, and those areas (the fireplace, the bridge to the backyard, and the lofts above the upstairs bedrooms) that had to be figured out in the field turned out well. Figuring out these lightly drawn areas is where an experienced and thoughtful builder makes all the difference.

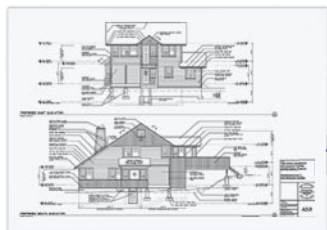
When I walk through the finished house, I see that the office area on the stair landing is smaller than I anticipated and that a few interior-trim details aren't exactly as envisioned. When I look at the code-compliant, standard stair rail, I think that it would have been fun to design a more expressive one, as the stair is a central feature of the house. But these are small points.

As built, the house turned out to be both an exceptional value and an extraordinarily apt reflection of a family's values and lifestyle. Most important, the project was finished on budget and more or less on time. Obviously, my firm helped to make that happen, but in truth, the builder is almost always the hero when time and money issues are resolved satisfactorily. In this case, his diligence, thoughtfulness, and can-do attitude very much enabled the project to be a success for everyone concerned. □

Madison, Conn.-based architect Duo Dickinson (www.duodickinson.com) believes you shouldn't have to choose between budget-friendly mediocrity and unaffordable fantasy. Photos by Mick Hales.

Simply appealing.

To build a house for \$115 per sq. ft., the Steins and their builder relied on drywall and flat stock trim as a way of limiting costs. A taper added to the fireplace shroud makes these common materials expressive.



The homeowners have to answer dozens of questions, often at the last minute.

TEN STEPS TO REDUCE AN ARCHITECT'S FEES

Nobody needs an architect. The fact that only 2% to 3% of new homes are architect-designed proves this. A well-designed house, though, should be more comfortable to live in and should save you money. That's because the details and specifications of a carefully considered design prevent unnecessary, ongoing maintenance while creating a more efficient, smaller home with lower utility costs and, perhaps, a lower property-tax assessment.

That's a lot to ask, and consequently, an architect's services aren't cheap. But there are things you can do to make the architect's job easier and less costly. It all comes down to taking on responsibilities that you could avoid with higher design fees. Working on dozens of projects like the Steins', I've learned a lot about what homeowners can do to reduce the number of hours I bill. Here are the 10 with the biggest bang for the buck.

1. EDUCATE YOURSELF

Before you begin interviewing architects, dedicate yourself to becoming a home-design and building nerd. Learn everything you can about design, the construction process, and available materials by watching TV, reading back issues of *Fine Homebuilding*, and buying boxes of books about houses.

2. KNOW YOUR BUDGET

You need to know exactly how much money you have to spend and what that budget must cover. If you want landscaping or particular appliances or furnishings for your new house, you have to factor that into the budget.

3. DON'T EXPECT LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Interview as many architects as necessary to find the right one. (And you should never hire your brother-in-law until you've considered hiring pretty much everybody else.) You should look for an architect whose aesthetics match yours and whose design process inspires you and reflects what you value, whether it's aesthetics, green design, natural materials, or wild sculptural details.

And remember: Architects are like leopards; spot-changing is not likely. Regardless of the style you want, make sure the architect has done work you love. Don't accept an architect's promises to change from what she has done in the past so that she can meet your specific needs.

4. BE VERY CLEAR ABOUT YOUR NEEDS

The more precise you are about the physical requirements of the structure and the more precise you are about what appeals to you before the design process starts, the less time an architect

will spend on your project and the less time will be spent in design development. Less time equals less money.

5. GET YOUR BUILDER INVOLVED EARLY

The best-case scenario is to have a builder whom you can trust on board during the design process. The builder can head off structural approaches that he is either inexperienced or uncomfortable with. He also can offer an immediate reality check on the cost of your and the architect's ideas. Involving the builder in the process means he won't find any surprises when he gets the construction drawings. That means few, if any, revisions caused by the builder's reactions to the design, the detailing, or the structural approach.

Your architect can refer you to a builder, but never accept only one referral. Interview three or four builders, and find the one who fits you best, independent of the architect's recommendations. Then bid out the project to the leading contenders to establish a budget, and negotiate the architect's final scope of work and design based on the builder you've chosen.

6. DON'T CONTRACT FOR SERVICES YOU DON'T NEED

When you meet with the architect, plainly state what design services you need. If you don't require a full-service architect, say so. Then make arrangements with him for specific services.

7. ENGAGE IN THE DESIGN PROCESS

Demand full explanations of all the elements of the design as it's being presented. Don't sit back and take it. Actively seek the logic behind the architect's choices so

that you understand why your house is designed the way it is.

8. DIGEST EVERYTHING BEFORE MAKING DECISIONS

Thoroughly review the architect's proposals before you provide feedback. You don't want to make a snap decision and then have a change of heart once she has incorporated your feedback into the design. Take the time for discussion with your family to arrive at a mutual decision. The more time an architect spends on revisions, the more you'll end up paying.

9. SEND AN EMAIL

Use email instead of scheduling meetings to discuss the design. It's easy to scan drawings into either a PDF or JPEG format and email them to the architect to establish a dialogue, rather than spending time and money on meetings. Regular email exchanges allow you to maintain close contact and to short-circuit an architect's normal tendency to present "perfected" proposals. This should prevent him from spending too much time developing a design that is off-track.

10. BUY A DIGITAL CAMERA

Take site photos during construction and email them to the architect every day or two as construction progresses. It's a lot cheaper than a site visit. Not only will this satisfy her urge to see her brainchild take form, but it also might improve the project. Regular photo updates can head off misinterpretations by the builder. An architect working on a tight fee simply cannot explore all the possible design ramifications, so photo updates might also suggest improvements that can be incorporated during construction.

FineHomebuilding.com

Homeowners David and Nancy Stein share how they applied architect Duo Dickinson's 10 steps when they rebuilt their home.