

How do you know if you've got a good design for your oak framed home?

Interviewer: So if I want to have a house designed for me how will I know when I've got a good design?

Andy: There are two parts to that question a) how do you get a house that works for you? and b) how do you know what a good design looks like? They are both very common questions when embarking on a self-build project and the two are very interrelated. Let me start with what is good design. Firstly the definition of good design is very subjective and everyone will have their own view.

Our opinion is that good design is what the client thinks is good and they should be the arbiters of it and what's good for one won't necessarily be good for another. That said as architects and specialists in our field it would be unfair to leave the client to design their own house. It's unlikely that they would find the best solution themselves, if for no other reason than they don't know what they don't know.

Interviewer: So you should design their house?

Andy: We should design it with them. I think a lot of clients would say a good design gives them everything they want from the house, in a home they love the look and feel of, within their budget. There are lots of things to consider if you're going to deliver all of that for a client, things the architect needs to understand before they even begin designing a client's house.

There's the clients brief which sets out the clients aspirations, it's their ideas on everything from number of rooms, style, look and feel and so on. And I'll talk more about how we get to that in a moment.

There's budget which unbelievably is something that we find few architects and designers seem to be willing to discuss. But you can't possibly begin to design a house if you don't understand the financial aspects of the project – everyone has a budget and if they don't they almost certainly should because handing a designer a blank cheque is unlikely to lead to a good design!

There's planning policy. There are few clients who will willingly take on a planning battle because of the time and cost involved so understanding the relevant planning policy and creating a house design that is likely to garner the support of the planning officer is part of good design.

And there's planning history which like planning policy is relevant to what you may or may not be able to put on a site, so a good designer needs to understand this for the client's specific plot.

Interviewer: So do you think that if a design meets the client's aspirations, within their budget, and designed and built in a realistic time scale then it is good design?

Andy: I certainly think that you'll meet the clients' expectations. But it is unlikely that a given project will have one solution and what a really good design team will bring to the process is using their experience and expertise to give the client something extraordinary, something that will exceed their expectations. And I don't necessarily mean something quirky or outlandish or expensive but just an extra something the client didn't expect.

Interviewer: So how do you achieve that?

Andy: Well that hooks really nicely into the other aspect of your opening question which is how clients get what they really want, because both are intrinsically linked to how well the design team listens to them, and can articulate what they hear into a design. All too often architects and designers take what I would describe as a fairly functional brief – number of rooms, types of rooms, general layout and so on. But there's much more to it than that. It sounds a bit too easy but it's down to asking the right questions and listening to the answers. But I can't put enough emphasis on the word listening, that's listening and not just hearing. And it's not just the words the client uses but their intonation, the body language and indeed what they don't say as well as what they do. If you listen properly you get a much better understanding of what's important to them. And perhaps most importantly it helps you ask the right questions to help them understand what's important to them. It's often a process of exploration.

Interviewer: So are you saying that lots of architects or design teams don't listen properly?

Andy: Well, it's often a criticism made of them by clients.

Interviewer: Why don't they?

Andy: There are lots of reasons. They can be preoccupied with thoughts of what they want to design, it's like they've started designing in their heads before they've really understood what the client wants. Perhaps they have a preconception of what the client wants and struggle to be persuaded otherwise. They don't ask questions that probe deep enough and help the client understand what they mean when they say things like – we want something traditional, or we want something contemporary, or we want it to be spacious. All of these statements mean something quite specific to the person who makes them and as a designer you need to know what it means to them not what it means to you.

Interviewer: So do you think designers spend too much time offering opinion and not enough time listening?

Andy: In the early stages of the design process yes. Without a doubt they should do a lot more listening than talking. Of course I'm in danger of tarring all architects and designers with the same brush and that's unfair but I think it is a particular problem that faces the profession. We speak to a lot of people who have become disenchanted with the architect they've engaged because they just haven't listened to them. I must of course emphasise that a good architect must bring their experience and expertise to the design process. They don't spend 8-10 years training, before they even begin to get real work experience under their belt, for nothing. It's that expertise the client is paying for. But before you can bring the relevant expertise to bear you must thoroughly understand what the client wants and you can only do that by listening.

Interviewer: So how does one go about it?

Andy: Most people building a bespoke house are building it as a long term home, which means you need to understand them and how they live now and in the medium and long term. So as well as understanding the function such as number of rooms, type of rooms and so on, the architect must understand a lot more about their clients. From routines to hobbies and interests, from how often they shop to how they holiday.

Interviewer: Really?

Andy: Sure. This can throw up a whole array of things that could make their house ideal for them at no extra cost, it's just good design. Let me give a very simple example. If the family do a big monthly shop with a small weekly shop for fresh food then their food storage requirements might be quite different to a family who do a modest shop every week or perhaps a couple who just grab what they need on the way home from work.

Interviewer: That doesn't sound like a particularly big issue to me?

Andy: And I wouldn't expect it to but to a good architect this will also make him think about access to the house. Where to put the front door, where to put the back door and even where the garage or car port might go. Because if you buy in bulk monthly, and let's just say you're getting on in years, you might want to be able to drive up to the house, park near a door, possibly undercover, that gives you easy access to a pantry and the kitchen so you can easily off load shopping and then put the car away and get back to the house without getting drenched.

Interviewer: So could a small thing like how I shop might have a much wider impact on the design?

Andy: Absolutely, that is part of good design, it's what can make a house a joy to live in. When you buy a house off the market you inevitably adapt to suit it. When you build your own house you have what is perhaps a once in a lifetime opportunity to adapt it to suit you. It shouldn't cost you any more to

get a good design than it would to get a bad one. Indeed a bad one will most likely cost you an awful lot more in the end because it quickly leads to things like building space you don't need or poor levels of building performance or failed planning applications and so on.

Interviewer: So can you try and summarise for us?

Andy: I'll give it a go. A well designed house meets your aspirations, is buildable within your budget, can be designed and built in a realistic time scale and draws on all the experience of a good design team to make sure it not just meets but exceeds your expectations.