

WEEKENDING

Home

Blueprint for a better living space

However big or small your plans are for revitalising your home, an architect can help turn dreams into reality

If you thought people only employ architects when they're planning to build a whole new house or having a major extension project, think again. As George Clarke shows on his Channel 4 series *Ugly House To Lovely House*, there are myriad ways to transform a property without spending a fortune.

'Thousands of us are burdened with dated and dreary houses,' he says. 'But a fresh eye can turn even the ugliest house into a dream home.'

The houses on George's television show are brought back to life by some of the top architects in the country, but there are plenty of others with the skills, expertise and vision to help anyone achieve similar results.

'Architects are professional problem solvers,' says Sarah Miller, a project manager for the Royal Institute of British Architects (Riba). 'Even the tiniest building on the tightest of plots can be reordered to make the best use of it. Architects are trained to see the possibilities, and they can help stretch what can be achieved within your budget.'

'They can suggest new ways of utilising space and light, enrich the palette of materials, finishes or fittings, find a builder at the right price and propose design solutions that will reduce your overall running costs while maximising your home's energy efficiency.'

'However small your project and whether you're putting up a new building or adapting an existing one, your architect will apply impartial and creative thinking.'

The property shown above, for example, was built in the 1940s and had virtually no insulation. It looks totally different after its makeover, but the work wasn't major – the garage was converted into an additional room, the front of the property was squared off and the windows changed. Then the whole building was wrapped in insulation and rendered. The end result is impressive, and the house is now much more energy efficient.

'Clients often say they'd like an extension, but often when I look at their home the issue



TIME DIFFERENCE
A 1940s house before, left, and after its modern makeover, below



isn't a lack of space but a lack of "flow" in the existing property,' says Simon Mack of Simon Mack Architecture in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, who worked on the project.

'By improving the layout, perhaps to create one large kitchen, living and dining space, the size of the proposed extension can often be considerably reduced, or the need for it can be removed altogether.'

'When I'm asked to update a building, I take what I call a "fabric first" approach – that is, getting the existing house right before I start making changes to it. That means first ensuring the walls, roof and floor perform well thermally. Making a building more airtight can have a huge impact on the cost of heating it. But it has to be done properly, or it can cause more problems than it solves.'

An architect will help make the planning approval and building regulations process as painless as possible, and select the best

materials and finishes for the job at the best possible price, so it makes sense to take advice from one, even if you use their services only as far as the planning stage. The technology they have to hand these days, such as virtual reality, makes visualising their suggestions easier than ever.

To help match prospective clients with the right architect, Sarah Miller runs Design Days in the South East, and they have proved so popular that it's likely other areas of the country will soon have them too. The days are a one-stop shop to showcase architects and other design experts in a local area. They are free and informal, and visitors are

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asked to bring photographs of their existing property, to discuss what can be done on the budget they have in mind.

'A Design Day is a great opportunity to meet architects and see who is the best "fit" with you,' Sarah says.

As Kevin McCloud, presenter of the long-running Channel 4 series *Grand Designs*, says: 'A good architect actually pays for themselves – more than once. You'll reap the rewards and the building will be hugely better and deliver much better value.'

For more about Riba Design Days, email Sarah.Miller@riba.org



CHOOSING THE RIGHT PERSON

Although a good architect should be able to work on any project, most have a particular design style and will often have specialisations too.

The Royal Institute of British Architects is the member organisation for architects, and choosing an accredited Riba Chartered Practice will give you peace of mind because they comply with strict criteria which cover insurance, health and safety, and quality management. To find an architect in your area, visit the Riba website, architecture.com.

The work shown on individual architect's websites will help you to draw up a shortlist.

Just as important as the kind of work an architect does is how you get on with them as a person – design is a very personal thing and you need to both be on the same wavelength.

'You must be able to feel you can open up to your architect and tell them honestly how you want to live,' says architect Simon Mack. 'Their role is to listen to what you want, then move the possibilities forward from there.'

'Another benefit of using an architect is that they know good local builders. It's surprisingly difficult to find a reliable builder unless someone recommends one to you.'



Photography: Alamy, Getty