

Architects at work

Hiring the right architect can make all the difference to realising your dream home.

Words Stuart Rothgiesser

Reactions to specific architects can range from the gushingly complimentary to the bitterly critical. A good architect can make your dream house a reality, on time and within budget; a bad one can see you with an unfinished house, massive bills and rains on the way ...

So how do you go about finding the right architect? The first thing to realise is that one man's 'architect' is another man's 'draughtsman.' Architects guide and interpret their clients' visions; draughtsmen do the nitty-gritty drawing work. If you know exactly what you want, you should probably be looking for a draughtsman.

The first step, then, is to assess exactly what your needs are – and the corresponding category of architectural practitioner you'll need. There are 3 500 registered professional architects in South Africa, of whom 2 000 belong to the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA), the largest voluntary professional organisation in the country.

Bryan Walls of SAIA explains: 'Some practitioners do not undertake building contract administration and limit their service to the preparation and submission of plans and documentation for local authority approval. If the client needs the practitioner to administer the building contract on his behalf, he needs to determine – before making the appointment – whether the practitioner is capable of carrying out this function.'

There's a misconception that domestic alterations and additions are simple and can be easily accomplished. Bryan sets the record straight: 'From an architectural point of view, this is not necessarily true, as such projects call for sound architectural skills, including a structural understanding of the existing building, the ability to interpret client needs and to integrate the solution sensitively with the existing architecture.'

Since 1 July 2006, anyone practising architecture for

remuneration ('architectural practitioners') must be registered in one of four categories with the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP). Those in the 'professional architects' category need five years of university training, two years' candidature and an examination under their belts. They fall within the only category of architectural practitioners currently allowed to work on projects over 500m². By contrast, 'professional architectural draughtspersons' need only one year's study at a technical institution; they're only allowed to work on simple, small-scale projects and may not prepare or submit papers to municipalities.

It's best to check your chosen architect's qualifications through SACAP. Certain regional institutes grant membership to practitioners who are not professional architects or registered with SAIA or its regional bodies. SAIA is very useful in that it keeps portfolios of architects' work and resolves disputes.

Many people choose an architect through word of mouth. You can look at architects' portfolios by visiting Architects in Africa's online directory. Or get hold of a copy of *The Digest of South African Architecture*, an annual review of work of members of SAIA, available at newsstands in January/February every year.

An architect may charge for an initial meeting. Ensure early on that you feel at ease with your chosen practitioner and that s/he understands your vision. Building and renovating a house is usually an emotional business – you've probably visualised and worked for your ideal home for a long time. So it's imperative to set everything down in writing, including what will happen if you're not satisfied with work done to date.

Architectural practitioners are obliged to set out the terms of their appointment in writing. This must include the scope of the work, the allocation of responsibilities (who's responsible for liaising with the building suppliers, for example), the fee or

method of calculating it (important in the case of additional work), provisions for termination and details of professional indemnity insurance.

Contracts should stipulate the client's requirements and budget, and a way of dealing with changes to these two factors if they cannot be reconciled. Remember that prices of materials can often go up during the course of project. SAIA provides standard client-architect agreements, available at a nominal cost from the organisation or from its regional institutes.

If your architect is a member of an institute and a dispute arises that can't be resolved, you can contact the body and lay a complaint which the institute will deal with. If the architect is not a member of an institute, common law prevails, which means you can approach a mediator or lawyer who specialises in building disputes.

Regardless of whether you're dreaming of a log cabin in the forest or a penthouse overlooking the sea, remember that the right architect can save you time and money, and make your vision a reality. ☺

CONTACTS

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 www.visserthomas.co.za **Senior partners** Jane Visser and Mark Thomas

What kind of projects do you specialise in? Jane Visser and Mark Thomas cut their teeth on residential work, beach houses, alterations and new residences. Early on though, they were commissioned to do a new winery and then additions to Ellerman House Hotel in Bantry Bay. Since then, the practice has developed and moved away from single residential work to larger commercial projects. They have recently completed a second winery, have done a new school and industrial buildings in Marconi Beam, a pre-school and sports centre at St Cyprians and are just starting a science building and art block at St Georges Grammar. They developed a design for a Science Visitors Centre for SALT in Sutherland. They've done design work for a coastal development in Morocco, and are currently busy with the design development of a hotel and large apartment block in Gansbaai. Recently they've begun with designs for the first of 12 sites in Montenegro, developing apartments, boutique hotels and small residential villages. At the same time, they are always busy with a few luxury houses.

Flagship projects? The Science Visitors centre planned for Sutherland was a public building on a magnificent site in the Karoo. The building was conceived as a backdrop to the stars - when funding becomes available, this will be a dream project. Jane Visser, Mark Thomas Architects provides a bespoke design experience for its clients and believes in tailor-made architecture. The firm

is just venturing into the design of a cutting-edge, contemporary art gallery for a South African art collector, and is currently on site with two contemporary and unique homes for visionary clients.

Awards won? Jane Visser - 1991 Manuel and Luby Washkansky scholarship, class medal, graduated with distinction in design. - 1992 National winner Corobrick 'Young architect of the year'

Jane Visser, Mark Thomas - 1996 South African Institute of Architects Merit Award for new house "Philipskraal" in Betty's Bay - 1998 Winners of invited design competition for New Sports Centre and Pre Primary School for St Cyprians School - 2000 South African Institute of Architects' Project Award for New Sports Centre and Pre Primary School for St Cyprians School - 2000 Winners of Invited competition for SALT visitors centre for the South African Astronomical Observatory at Sutherland - 2001 South African Institute of Architects' Project Award for Science Visitors Centre near Sutherland

Do you incorporate 'green' design? Each project the firm is involved with uses appropriate technology. For example, insulated floor slabs make a huge difference to thermal efficiency. Solar assisted geysers are incorporated where possible, heated water can be piped to be pumped in floor slabs. The firm stays in touch with advances in green technology and incorporates dynamic components or improvements as they are made.

Which is your favourite building in South Africa? Baxter Theatre, Rondebosch.

Which is your favourite international building? Rome!

Whose work do you admire? Renzo Piano, Jack Barnett, David Chipperfield,

Gawie Fagan of course... and more.

What inspires you to design? A combination of logic and poetry... we 'build the site', taking into account the beauty of honest materials, simple forms, proportion, light and couple this with delight.

What is the biggest challenge facing architects in South Africa? Design and professional excellence; producing architecture which fits its context. Delivering architecture which meets and exceeds the clients expectations.

