

# Selection Process

## *The hows and whys of choosing an architect*

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So you have decided to build a custom log home! How do you go about designing it? While many log home companies provide some form of in-house design service; a minority have Architects on payroll. On the other hand, most independent Architects and Designers have had little or no experience in designing log homes.

Almost every builder has recited ‘horror’ stories of receiving log home plans from reputable architects with no log home experience that became a nightmare for the builder and owner. On the other hand, I often receive feedback that the plans of most log home companies lack creativity and imagination. I believe it is better to have an arm’s length relationship between the Architect and the Log Home Builder. While once a rarity, there are now many Architects and Designers specializing in the design of custom log homes.

The nature of the design process itself is one of the reasons I highly recommend retaining an experienced and competent design professional. Good design is more than simply arranging a group of rooms. It is a fine blend of art and science. If a design leans too much towards either the technical side or the aesthetic side the resulting home may be compromised. Not only should Architects be experts in the construction process and materials, they need to have a fine-tuned sense of balance, proportion and form. They need to understand individual and group psychology and the effect of space,

form, light, etc. Of course, log home design professionals need to understand the limitations and possibilities of working with logs.

I recommend that anyone designing with log be a member of a major Log Building Association and fully understand industry standards and practices. They should also be familiar with a large number of log building companies so that they can help in the process of selecting the best log builder for your project. Finally, they should be familiar with construction costs, including labor and materials and, in particular, the costs of different methods of log construction.

When approaching prospective Architects, clarify your expectations. What role do you want them to play? The design and construction of a home involves several distinct phases or areas. First there is the conceptual or schematic design, then design development and finally the construction documents or 'blueprints' and specifications. Do you need advice on materials, finishes, fixtures and cost estimates? What about selecting and hiring a builder? Do you need them to supervise the overall construction or administer the financial progress of the project? Some Architects may prefer not to be involved in the construction supervision and administration and others will not become involved without the ability to supervise or administer the construction of your home.

The following information may be helpful to prospective Architects:

1. Do you already have the land? It is highly recommended not to start any design until you actually own the land although, an Architect may be helpful in selecting your lot.
2. What is the approximate floor area that you think you will require? If you don't know a gross figure, then take a moment to go room by room through your wish list, add up the numbers and add another 25 % for wall thickness, circulation, etc.

3. What is your budget? Does it include site costs such as water, septic, driveway, or amounts for the design, surveying, construction insurance, etc.?
4. Do you have a preference for manufactured logs or handcrafted logs? (see October 2000 On Design Column)
5. Do you already have a Log Builder or General Contractor in mind?

I recommend that you write down a wish list: each room with its suggested size and features, together with some general notes on preferred materials, features, etc. A clipping file organized by exterior and interior and broken down into rooms or elements can help the Architect obtain a clearer picture of your expectations.

Of course, you will want to know what it is going to cost to have your home designed. Even though it may add to overall cost of your home, hiring a competent Design professional is worth the cost for several reasons. Firstly, the value of your home, both indirectly in terms of your enjoyment and directly in terms of financial value should be considerably more. Moreover, because log building costs are higher than conventional construction, careful and efficient planning can reduce costs considerably. For example, if good design reduces your required floor area by few per cent you have probably already saved the equivalent of your design fee. In addition, a good design professional will save you money through less mistakes and advice on everything from materials to builders. There is no easy and magic formula for calculating what it will cost to design your home. Because every home is unique and the scope of work different, homes of equal floor area can require vastly different amounts of design and construction involvement. Essentially, it all comes down to the number of hours that the Architect will be working for you. It has been my experience that the ability of clients to make

clear and firm decisions influences the amount of time incurred on a project far more than my ability to do the design. The more information you bring to the Architect and the more clarify your expectations, the more accurately the fee can be estimated. There are three general approaches to determining fees:

1. Flat fees. By the square foot doesn't account for the idiosyncrasies and complexities of each home nor your individual needs. A fixed quotation is also usually tied to a set number of reviews, so you may not have the ability to make changes after design development commences. Because flexibility usually yields better design, two other methods of fee determination are common.
2. Percentage of Construction Cost. This method is regularly used by Architects because it is a fairly accurate correlation to the Architect's involvement—the more complex the home, the more design input and the higher the construction cost. This is sometimes seen as a disincentive to keep costs as reasonable as possible. Of course, they will need to administer the project from start to finish and the final fee won't be known until the project is complete.
3. Fee for Service. I use this method, usually 'by the hour' for two main reasons. Firstly, it accurately reflects the time spent and is, therefore, a fair representation of actual costs. Secondly, trust is implicit in the arrangement. Because a great home involves a sound level of trust between the owner, the Architect and the builder, it is necessary at the inception of the project anyway. Furthermore, it provides greater flexibility in the scope of services, which can be reduced or added as the project progresses.

Once you have identified one or more Architects you may wish to investigate them further. Look at photographs of their work or, if possible, you may be able to visit one or more of the homes they have designed. Often you will be able to speak with previous clients and/or builders. Tell the Architect about your vision and ask them about their approach to design. Architects should be good listeners and more interested in what you are looking for than trying to push you in a certain direction without very good reason. Among other things they should be trustworthy, honest, patient and open-minded.

Contracts with Architects vary greatly. They may be a reflection of the complexity of the scope of work or method of fee determination. I prefer simple contracts that clearly identify the location of the project, the scope of work, the determination of the fee and the timing of payments. The latter will vary with the fee method contracted for. Billing is usually done at the end of a monthly cycle or is tagged to completion of specific phases of the project. Financial institutions usually will not advance loan funds until the plans are complete so the design fees normally have to be paid up front. Because it is often the first expense incurred in a project, many people are reluctant to hire an Architect. The feedback I have received from those that have preferred to go it alone or have reduced the scope of design services is usually one of regret. Select a good Architect, get a great design and reduce your worries.