

Working with a Designer

Planning to hire a pro to design your log home? Here's some essential advice on how to get the most bang for your buck.

©Murray Arnott, 2003

This article is reprinted from Log Home Living Magazine, June 2003
Copyright Home Buyer Publications, Inc., 4200-T Lafayette Center Drive, Chantilly, VA, 20151-1208
www.loghomeliving.com

As a designer, I often run into people who wonder whether they need a professional to turn their ideas into a set of plans. Some are afraid of what it might cost. Others are concerned a designer may not interpret their ideas accurately. Still others aren't sure they'll be comfortable working with someone who doesn't know them or someone who may not even live anywhere near them.

These are all valid issues. Design fees can be expensive, and not all designers provide the same type or level of service. In addition to having different types of training and expertise, designers have their own personalities and unique approaches to the process. Good designers, however, are well worth the investment. Designing a home is not simply drawing walls and a roof; it is a blend of art and science. It requires an in-depth understanding of both technical and aesthetic disciplines. Good designers know how to combine materials, structural integrity and the building process with form, balance and beauty. They won't simply draw up plans from your sketches, but search for the source of your ideas to help you fully develop your vision. They will then take that vision and extend it beyond where your imagination stops.

If you decide to work with a designer, you'll want to interview candidates carefully, paying particular attention to these four concepts: roles, relationship, communication and process.

Roles

Before hiring a designer, you should decide what you ideally want from the design process—not only in terms of the size and quality of your house, but in terms of the experience. To whom will you turn if you have questions or need support? How active a role do you wish to play in the design process? Are you comfortable letting your designer have a level of creative control? The answers to these questions will help you to clarify your designer's role.

In addition to putting your ideas down on paper, designers can play an active and crucial role in estimating costs, helping you find a builder and general contractor, and coordinating with other consultants, such as structural engineers. They can evaluate bids and often provide invaluable help supervising construction and administering contracts. Above all, they can help put together a team dedicated to achieving all of your goals. Professional advice in any of these areas will contribute to a more sound home, but ultimately it's up to you to decide the designer's level of involvement.

Relationship

Before engaging a particular designer, you'll want to carefully assess the candidates' qualities, both professionally and personally. As much as designers need technical expertise, they need to be a good fit with you. You're going to be working closely with this person for quite some time, and you want that working relationship to be comfortable.

In any relationship, one of the most important qualities is respect, and I believe a designer's respect for your vision is key to the entire process. They must not try to push their agendas or ideas on you; nor conversely, try to appease yours if the basis for it isn't solid. They must listen carefully to your needs, yet question you if they feel a suggestion doesn't support your overall vision.

They also must be open-minded and flexible, trustworthy and patient. Designers must be leaders, capable of putting together complex sets of information, materials and human resources. If you don't get the impression that the designers you interview have these qualities, then these individuals likely are not the right people for your job.

Communication

If you can find a designer in your local community who has experience with log homes, is fully qualified and is a good fit, consider hiring that person. But I believe it is more important to have good communication than close proximity. That is not to under-emphasize the importance of establishing a close relationship with your designer. A successful project requires a successful marriage of client, designer, log provider and general contractor.

With electronic communication, the design process can be managed successfully over long distances. Line drawings and renderings can be readily transmitted by e-mail or fax or posted on web sites, and inexpensive telephone rates make it easier to maintain regular and close contact.

If you choose to work with a designer who is located far away, I strongly advise you have an initial face-to-face meeting, preferably including a visit to your building site. Although there is an expense to this, being able to fully communicate your vision initially will reduce design

alteration costs later. A comprehensive initial meeting also establishes a level of trust that is so important to the design process, and it allows your designer to review your property and evaluate its constraints and opportunities.

Throughout the design process, give your designer as much clear, specific information as possible. Often clients will advance to the detailed sketch phase without fully evaluating their needs, lifestyle or building site. I find it helpful to back things up to the basic goals and find out the “why” behind the “what” clients want. This gives background and meaning to the numerous design decisions that need to be made.

Communication doesn’t begin and end with you and your designer. It’s just as important—if not more so—for you and your family members to communicate your needs and desires with each other. Before meeting with a designer, address each family member’s needs, then communicate where ideas for the home are shared and where they differ, so the designer can explore solutions.

Process

Your design process should be methodical and deliberate. A home is a significant financial investment, and it is worth getting it right the first time. A relaxed schedule gives you ample time to review design options and make thoughtful decisions. You’ll also want to work in a logical and sequential manner. For example, you shouldn’t think about details, such as cabinetry, without first working out the basic design of the kitchen.

It helps to break the design process into a number of sequential stages or components. The starting point is a conceptual design, which will establish the size and feel of your home, room dimensions, room relationships and flow. This is followed by design development, which

transforms the concept into a three-dimensional form encompassing aesthetics, functionality and technical aspects. During this stage, you will be refining the plan continually; however, keep in mind that major changes can mean a substantial reworking of the concept, which can increase costs.

Next comes the construction drawings (also called blueprints), which are what the builder will use to construct your home. These may also include door and window layouts, finish schedules and specifications. Once this stage has been completed, you should have a fully developed plan. But before you start to build, thoroughly review the plans. Changes after this stage can be difficult and expensive.

What's It Going to Cost?

Designers should be able to estimate the cost of your home, “ballparking” at the beginning, refining the estimate as the design progresses and letting you know how design decisions and alterations influence cost throughout the process. During actual construction, they also can ensure that your home is built the way it was conceived and drawn.

The cost of design is a reflection of the expertise of the designer and the scope of work for which they are retained. The value of hiring a designer is in the results. From your original goals, it means a home that meets your family’s needs and situation, a concept that is designed efficiently and is cost-effective to build, a design process that is exciting and educational, a construction process that goes smoothly and a positive relationship with a team of builders and contractors.

Avoid fee arrangements that are based on a fixed cost-per-square-foot. You are more likely to get drafting-orientated plans. What does that mean? Drafting is akin to translating a

document from one language to another, whereas design is akin to creating the document in the first place. A well-designed home requires considerably more thought and creative input and expertise than one quickly conceived. If you want a custom home with numerous features and details, it usually will cost more to build and require more design time, so most thorough designers request fees based on a percentage of the building costs.

Using a designer doesn't necessarily mean your home will cost more in the end. In fact, with efficient planning, a well-conceived design and accurate construction documents, your home will likely cost less to build. The savings could be more than the design fee, and you will have a much better home!

Working with a designer should be an educational and rewarding experience. It should help clarify, reflect and enhance how you live. It should give you knowledge about log construction. But most importantly, it should result in a house that meets your needs and expectations—one you can be excited to come home to day after day.

Murray Arnott designs custom log homes throughout North America and serves as a director of the International Log Builders' Association. If you have a question for Murray, write him in care of Log Home Living, 4125 Lafayette Center Drive, Suite 100, Chantilly VA 20151, or e-mail [murrayarnott@ loghomeliving.com](mailto:murrayarnott@loghomeliving.com).