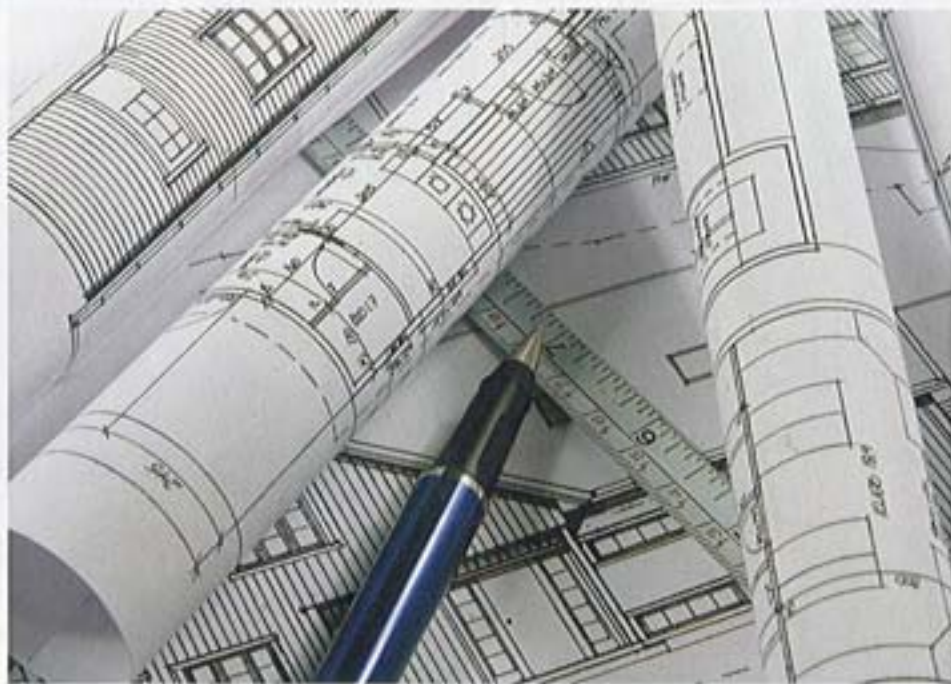


Working with a Designer

Transform your floor plan into a masterpiece.



You've browsed through magazines, torn out a page here and there, even ordered a floor plan or two. You found one you like, but will it work? Just as a home is more than simply a place to live, a floor plan should convey more than merely rooms strung together on a page. It should ensure comfort and functionality. One way to make sure your plan works for you is to collaborate with a designer. Here's a rundown of what you can expect and how to make sure you get the timber home that best suits you.

DISCOVER THE POSSIBILITIES. By choosing timber construction, you've already opened yourself to a realm of possibilities. "Timber framing is wonderful because you can have wide-open spaces without the need for load-bearing walls," says Ty Allen, design group manager at New Energy Works. "You can have areas that bleed into one another and interact, which works well with open-plan concepts."

But don't expect to just pick through some plans and be done with it. "Some people think they're just going to get some sort of iteration of previous plans, but they're not," Allen says. "In the early stages, we ask clients to think about how they live and to convey how they use spaces daily."

In fact, a designer should know more about you at the end of the design process than you ever expected to share with a perfect stranger. "We ask clients questions like what are your actions and motions throughout day?" Allen explains. "Who gets up when? How many people are brushing their teeth at the same time?"

Such questions may help determine where the bathroom should be placed in relation to the bedroom to keep light from shining in the eyes of a sleeping spouse. "The design needs to conform to what they need," Allen adds.

This process also can help cut down on revisions later. "When we work with clients, we ask questions to gather information, then we draft a preliminary plan," says Jeff Davis,

president of Davis Frame Co. "Usually we get it close and just fine tune it after that, such as altering the swing of a door or changing it to a pocket or bi-fold door instead."

SHARE YOUR IDEAS. Many people bring their own ideas, too, often in the form of sketches, clippings or other floor plans, which help designers get a better idea of what clients want. "We often draw on those concepts," says Allen. "It tells us how they're thinking instead of how things should be arranged."

If you already have land, don't be surprised if your designer wants to visit the site; understanding the land on which the home will sit is key to creating the best possible plan. "Proper home design should fit the property you're building on," Davis explains. "Taking advantage of solar views, configuring access areas — all of that is important."

Allen concurs. "The first thing we do in the design process is visit the site to get a sense of the land, slope, prevailing winds — all those external influences that will affect the shape of the home and arrangement of spaces," he says. "We create the exterior spaces as well, including the arrangement of interior rooms and how they reconnect with patios and other exterior living spaces. From the very start, we like to show those places because they influence how a home will look and be used."

FIGURE YOUR BUDGET. Budget also is a factor at this stage. "Cost per square foot is hard to estimate until you go through the design process," Davis explains. "It's not like going to Wal-Mart to shop for widgets. You have to figure out what you're doing first. We try to find out the budget first to determine what clients can afford."

Because there are so many variables, there's a huge range. Interior finishes are notorious for driving up budgets.

LEARN THE DETAILS. Once you've determined your day-to-day home operations and monetary limits, it's time to delve into some of the finer details of the home. A central living area is a frequent jumping-off point. "Most people today really like the open great

room concept, with combined kitchen, dining and living space," Davis says. "Hardly anyone today has a closed-off formal dining room. Chopped-up plans with little rooms aren't as nice."

The kitchen can be tricky, though. "There's so much that happens there and so much about it that influences how you live," Allen explains. "Just the very arrangement of appliances says a lot about how you use that space and how you will interact with guests." Revisions sometimes occur even during construction.

ENVISION MOVEMENT. Another bone of contention is room transitions. "One of the things that people will often forget — especially when they're sketching on their own — is how you move from space to space," Allen says. "What are those connections? How do you transition from the entry to the heart of home? They forget to put in a circulation space or hallway."

Don't overdo it, though: Having too many hallways is a telltale sign of a poorly designed plan because they waste of space and aren't always comfortable to be in.

Window design also can conflict with function. "Windows serve a number of purposes—they let light in, provide ventilation, allow views out," Allen says. "They're also the eyes of the home, so they need to have a certain rhythm and proportion."

CHOOSE ROOM SIZES. Room size always plays a factor. Bigger is not always better, especially when it distorts the efficiency of the space. Even your final plan may leave some uncertainty about the home. "Ultimately, people can't visualize the space until they see it built," Davis says.

READ THE WRITING ON THE WALL. Because timber frames don't rely on any bearing partitions in the frame, they leave flexibility to change wall locations. "Before builders build the interior partitions, they can snap lines on the floor where the walls will be, then bring the clients in for a walk-through," Davis says.

Other methods are available to help clients visualize the home. "We try to do, within reason, as many 3-D and 2-D vantage points as possible," says Allen.

Of course, the true test is the outcome. An effective collaboration should prove the design process worthwhile. ■