



Architectural Digest

Get inside the minds of local architects to find out how the planning process for a home remodel really works.

By J.D. Strand

There's an old carpenter's adage that says you measure twice and cut once. That's the best advice for consumers, says Steven Ehrlich, FAIA, of Steven Ehrlich Architects in Culver City. The point, of course, is to do it right by hiring a professional who understands architecture, interior design and all the myriad other building-related factors associated with remodeling or building a new home. Ehrlich, whose 30-person firm only handles new construction and contemporary design, states that whatever you're considering for your home, bringing an architect into the process only adds to the value of the project.

"If you think at least 80 percent of the budget is going into the construction, wouldn't you want the design to be the best it could be for your investment?" he asks. In this way, Ehrlich maintains that hiring an architect is actually a good way to protect your investment on the job.

Besides hiring a licensed architect, what's most important is to have the right fit not only between the client and the architect but also between the architect and the job itself. "You want the right match of someone who has interest in the project and the time," Ehrlich notes. "You wouldn't ask somebody to do a bath renovation when they're doing 20,000-square-foot homes—there won't be the interest."

Cynthia Bennett, ASID, of Cynthia Bennett and Associates Inc. in South Pasadena, would agree. Well-known for her firm's high-end residential work and her designs in past Pasadena Showcase Houses, Bennett adds that even though clients may come to her because of her reputation, she still insists on showing them her portfolio. Bennett's firm is unique because it incorporates architecture, interior design and construction under one roof. Her firm handles residential remodels and new construction. "I've always done space planning," she explains.

"Architects are more concerned with the



shell of the house, but we always plan our additions or any remodel with furniture in them as well, so you're always planning from the inside as well as the outside," Bennett explains. "That's the unique part, because we have architecture, interior design and construction."

Bennett mentions this makes a huge difference in assuring the success of a project. "You wouldn't put a window in a certain place because while it may look great from the outside, perhaps if you had put it there, you might not be able to watch TV in that room or things like that. You have to con-

sider all those elements at the same time," she says.

In terms of process, since her firm takes a project from design through to construction, all those working on the job have direct contact with each other. Additionally, the designer oversees all aspects of the construction to make sure nothing gets missed.

At the start of a project, Bennett personally gets involved. She visits the client at their home to go over their thoughts and review any pictures they might have—an important element in terms of reflecting what the client's tastes are. "At that point, I could give them some varied ideas of what they could do and give them an estimate," she says. If everyone decides to move forward, professionals from Bennett's firm then measure the space, and preliminary sketches are drawn. Bennett stresses she believes it's always important to present clients with a few ideas, which they can discuss and mix and match. This might take two to three meetings, and after that, she prepares a bid analysis—something unique to her firm. Though not a complete bid, because all that exists at this point is a floor plan, the firm nevertheless sends out one of their sub-contractors to the house with the floor plan, who then provides a bid on the

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construction. Next, Bennett plugs in figures from other similar projects, including bids on items like cabinetry and counters and provides clients with an upfront estimate. It still may not be exact, because all the hardware and fittings aren't incorporated, but all the construction and materials are included, and it's pretty close to the final cost. It also gives the client another opportunity to adjust the project specifications at the outset before any construction begins.

"If the client's budget is strict, then we need to make adjustments right there to the floor plan," Bennett says. "What happens when you have an architect who is separate from the contractor is that you go through this entire set of plans without much idea of what it's going to cost until you complete it, and then you start getting bids, and the bids are really high. Sometimes people don't end up building because it's too expensive or they have to go back to the architect. We're checking all along the way to make sure our costs are on target."

Once the plans have been tweaked and approved by the client, then all the other plans—mechanicals, elevations, specifications of materials—are created.

In terms of budgeting, Bennett's firm typically charges 10 percent of the construction costs; however this depends on the amount of hours allocated to the project and whether a significantly higher number of design hours were incurred. Like Ehrlich, Bennett maintains she tells her clients, "The best spent money on a project like this involves the design phase. Even if it takes a few more hours, you should spend it on that."

Of course, besides hiring an architect for his or her design perspective, you also need someone who can assess your project with an eye for all the other details required. Architect Clara Morgan Butcher, based in La Crescenta, notes that the architect is critical when considering all the different codes that exist in different counties of California. "Often people will go to a small builder, and they have plans that don't work," she says. "It's much better for them to go to a smaller office with an architect, because the fee structure isn't that much more, and they get the style and overall perspective of the architect, and the builder can follow the plans accurately." In terms of her fee structure, Morgan Butcher's fees are based on the square footage of the new work and the square footage of the existing space that has to be entered into. If the job is very small, she charges a flat fee—small defined as being

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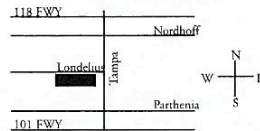


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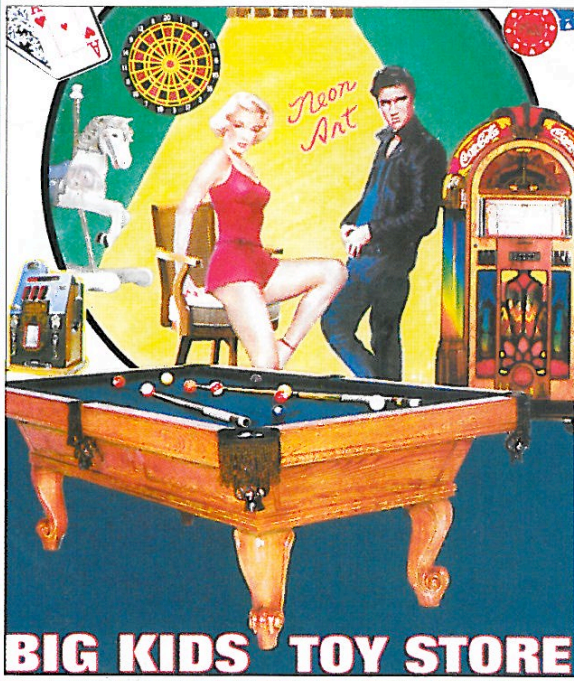


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When it comes to trends, for these design professionals, the word "green" seems to pop up invariably. Bennett notes that the "green" house concept is very much in vogue right now, as interest in energy conservation and being ecologically responsible is at its highest. Indeed, the codes in California are among the strictest in the nation, notes Bennett. All windows that have to be replaced, for instance, must be double-glazed. And beyond energy conservation, being "green" might mean using products without formaldehyde, she says. "We're using something called OSB, which is pressed board instead of plywood, which means not cutting down trees," Bennett explains. "They use chips of trees which might not be otherwise used, and they press the chips into a board that's stronger than plywood."

Ehrlich agrees, noting that there is a greater awareness of "sustainability," the new buzzword in residential design. "It's sometimes used to encompass the notion that buildings and houses should not be total guzzlers of fossil fuels and that there should be a greater sensitivity to the environment by not using too many fossil fuel resources to overpower or to pump in lots of air conditioning, but rather be more harmonious with the environment by using the right exposures and correct landscaping concepts," he explains. "I'm a big believer of modern architecture, because I believe it's that kind of work that will maximize the potential of [this kind] of lifestyle."

Another big trend Bennett mentions is the "smart house" concept, where everything is becoming more computer-centric, with computers controlling an increasing array of items, from audio to security. And it doesn't have to be all for new homes either. Bennett notes that systems using radio frequency can be employed as a retrofit to existing homes using existing wiring, and you can have different "scenes" for your living room—one for day and one for night—where by the push of a button, and several different actions (like opening/shutting your drapes) take place simultaneously.

Whatever your style, whatever your budget and your desires for your home remodel, there's a design firm that's right for you. The most important part is to get it right from the beginning, so your remodeling job proceeds more like a dream and less like a nightmare. Having a qualified architect on the job from the start can make a difference in how you sleep through your remodel experience. ♡