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## Custom Design, Off-the-Shelf Budget

How Non-Gazillionaires Find the Right Architect and End Up With Their Dream Home

By Allan Lengel  
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Saturday, October 20, 2007; F01

Unique angles. Tall ceilings. Half walls. Open space.

David and Pamela Keene dreamed of building a contemporary-style house on a half-acre in downtown [Vienna](#), in a quaint, leafy neighborhood west of the Beltway.

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All they needed was a top-notch architect -- one who shared their vision, one with whom they were compatible, one they could afford.

But it wasn't easy. One architect they contacted not only dictated his non-negotiable fee -- 17 percent of the final cost of the house -- but also insisted on total control over the creative vision, David Keene recalled.

In fact, the architect even went as far as to tell them to ditch their furniture because he was going to design some himself. "It was his way or the highway," Keene recalled.

Even when they found an architect they clicked with artistically, there was the question of money. "It was hard negotiations," said David, a technology consultant. "We really sat down and butted heads."

They arrived at a fixed fee, about \$63,000, based on the initial projected cost of the house.

"We don't have a gazillion dollars," added Pamela, who works for a real estate investment trust. "The last house the architect did in [McLean](#) used \$6 million worth of material. There was no restraint in that deal, and we had a lot of restraint."

In an era of too much sameness, where tract houses and indistinguishable subdivisions rule the local landscape, the architect-designed custom home may seem a luxury beyond reach.

But as the Keenes and others have found, there are ways for non-gazillionaires to find an architect, keep construction costs down and build a dream home worthy of a spread in *Architectural Digest* for not much more than the cost of a house from a builder's plans.

For those on a tight budget, that may mean forgoing a superstar designer, cutting back on the number of bathrooms and the square footage, or installing standardized products such as doors, sinks and roofs.

"You have to let the architect do things that are cost-effective," said Randall Mars of Randall Mars Architects in McLean, who was hired by the Keenes. "We look after the budgets of the clients."

Arriving at the right fee can take work. There are different ways to pay an architect. The traditional method, preferred by many architects, is to charge a percentage -- from 7 to 20 percent -- of the final cost of the home, which can escalate during construction.

Some architects prefer to charge by the hour, often \$50 to about \$200, others a fixed flat fee based on a percentage of the home's projected cost.

In the end, whatever the method, the fee can end up being about the same, architects say.

Still, some clients prefer the predictability of a flat fee set in advance or an hourly rate. They say there's less incentive for architects to hold down construction costs if their fee is based on the final cost of the house.

Some architects agree with that principle, but others, like Peter Grina, don't. He said the architect's job is to oversee the project, watch for overruns and make sure the job is done to specifications, without shortcuts or wrong materials.

"All my work is from referrals," said Grina, a solo practitioner who works in [Georgetown](#). "The way I continue to have jobs is to have satisfied customers, and that includes trying to save them money when it's appropriate."

Either way, as the Keenes learned, some architects are willing to negotiate.

Mars, their architect, not only said he was willing to bargain but also ended up agreeing to a lower price than he would have had he realized that the cost of the 2,000-plus-square-foot house was going to escalate as it did.

"I gave them a range of fees for a project of this size, and he negotiated to the low end of the range," which was 14 percent of the cost of the project, Mars said. He based his fee on the original \$450,000 budget. The cost eventually went above \$600,000 because the Keenes upgraded materials on the exterior.

As a result, Mars said, his fee ended up being about 10 percent, far below his normal charge.

Besides negotiating, there are other ways to get the architectural fee to meet the budget.

Stephen J. Vanze, a partner at Barnes Vanze Architects in Washington, said that less-established firms may charge less than firms, like his, that have built a reputation.

He said that as a partner in the firm, if he calculates by the hour, he charges \$190, whereas someone with less experience might charge \$60 an hour.

"You're going to find that there are younger architects who are extremely talented who have a lesser billing rate," he said.

Another option: Find a solo practitioner who works from home and charges lower fees because of lower overhead.

Without question, most architecturally designed homes are aesthetically more distinctive than cookie-cutter tract homes. They also have more value, say architects such as Suzane Reatig of Suzane Reatig Architecture in Washington.

Without an architect, Reatig said, people can buy a \$500,000 home but may end up with "something only worth \$300,000."

"Someone who used an architect for a \$500,000 house gets something that's worth that," she said. "It's expensive to be cheap."

There are also ways to save on construction costs while using an architect.

One way is to hire an architect-led design-build firm, which includes both the architect and builder. Some argue that the architect can save more on building costs because he or she has total control over the construction.

Conversely, some argue that an architect with no financial interest in the contracting may be more vigilant about keeping costs down.

Francisca Alonso, who runs AV Architects, an architect-led design-build firm in Vienna, insisted that she can deliver a quality custom home and still save clients money because she also owns the building company, AV Builders.

She said she charges clients \$140 an hour for the architectural work. Then she hammers out an agreement on the price of the home. The design fees usually turn out to be about 10 to 12 percent of the cost.

Because her architectural firm and the building company are one and the same, "we get a better price all the time," she said. "They're dealing with the same group for the design and construction. It's me both times."

Clients can also help reduce the final bill. Johannes Zutt, an adviser to a managing director at the [World Bank](#), said that by keeping down construction costs on his 3,000-square-foot house in [Montgomery County](#), he also kept down his architectural fee, which was based on a percentage of the final cost.

For one thing, he said, he tried to pin down as many details as possible on the plan before building, knowing that changes during construction could be "extremely costly."

He also controlled costs by using standard rather than custom materials as much as possible for elements such as doors and windows.

"The minute you start moving away from that, you really start sending the prices up," he said.

His architect, Todd Ray, a partner at Studio 27 Architecture in the District, said Zutt also saved money by using simple ceramic tile in the bathroom and concrete and wood siding instead of brick.

Beyond the costs, there's the matter of selecting the right architect. That can take patience.

First, you must get along with your architect, with an emphasis on "must," architects and clients say.

"You need to invest time in the relationship and really be part of the team. One of our members says you have to be willing to have breakfast, lunch and dinner with these people for a while," said Mary Fitch, executive director of the Washington chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#).

"You're allowing this person, this architect, to come into your life. It's like a marriage," said Catherine K. Henry, an architect and solo practitioner in the District.

Henry said that on occasion she has rejected prospective clients.

"The first meeting is to see if we are compatible with each other," she said. "It only takes about 15 minutes to know whether things are going to work out. If they're not, I usually get chills up my spine."

Scott Frank, a spokesman for the AIA, said it's best to talk to at least three architects before picking one.

But some people, like photographer Barbara Bent, simply rely on word of mouth.

Bent and her husband, Stephen, a lawyer, are planning a 3,700-square-foot home on the [Chesapeake Bay](#) in [Anne Arundel County](#). A friend recommended Marcie Meditch of Meditch Murphy Architects in [Chevy Chase](#).

"We met her. She showed us the kind of things she had done," Barbara said. "Her style was similar to what we were looking for. She's delightful."

Others clients have gone to architects' Web sites or to the AIA's Washington chapter Web site, which showcases the work of about 300 members.

Zutt went to the AIA in person in 2001 and sifted through portfolios there before choosing a designer for his Montgomery County house, which was completed in 2003.

He has no architectural training, but, he said, he knew quite a bit about the field and had a good idea of the type of architect he wanted.

"I contacted probably five or six of them. Three of them were quite agreeable, and I followed up with a second and third conversation," he said. "I had a pretty firm idea what I wanted to do."

He said, "What I wanted to find was someone with similar tastes and visions and whether their biases ran in the same direction as mine."

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