

ROSEMARY McMONIGAL, AIA / McMONIGAL ARCHITECTS

## First Step: Architect

**Q.** *If I want a custom-designed home, do I look first for a lot or for an architect?*

**A.** An architect. He or she could help set the lot criteria. One-level living needs a larger lot, for example. If you spend a lot of time in the backyard, it should be south-facing. Someone who likes gardening might need different features. However, you should be the one to narrow down the search to neighborhoods or school districts.

**Q.** *Does it make sense to buy an existing home and remodel it? Should I bring my architect along with me to look at existing homes?*

**A.** Some of the best values can be found in existing housing, and the cost is less than for new construction. But keep in mind that there is always a need for maintenance-type work, such as furnace, roof, caulking, brick tuck-pointing, etc. It's important to find a house that closely fits your needs in order to balance the cost of any remodeling or extension. If it's too extensive, it's not the best value. After you've seen a house once, take your architect back with you to identify potential pluses and minuses, make sure potential changes fit your life-style, and devise practical solutions for what's already there. I also recommend a separate home inspection.

**Q.** *How do I find an architect who best suits my needs?*

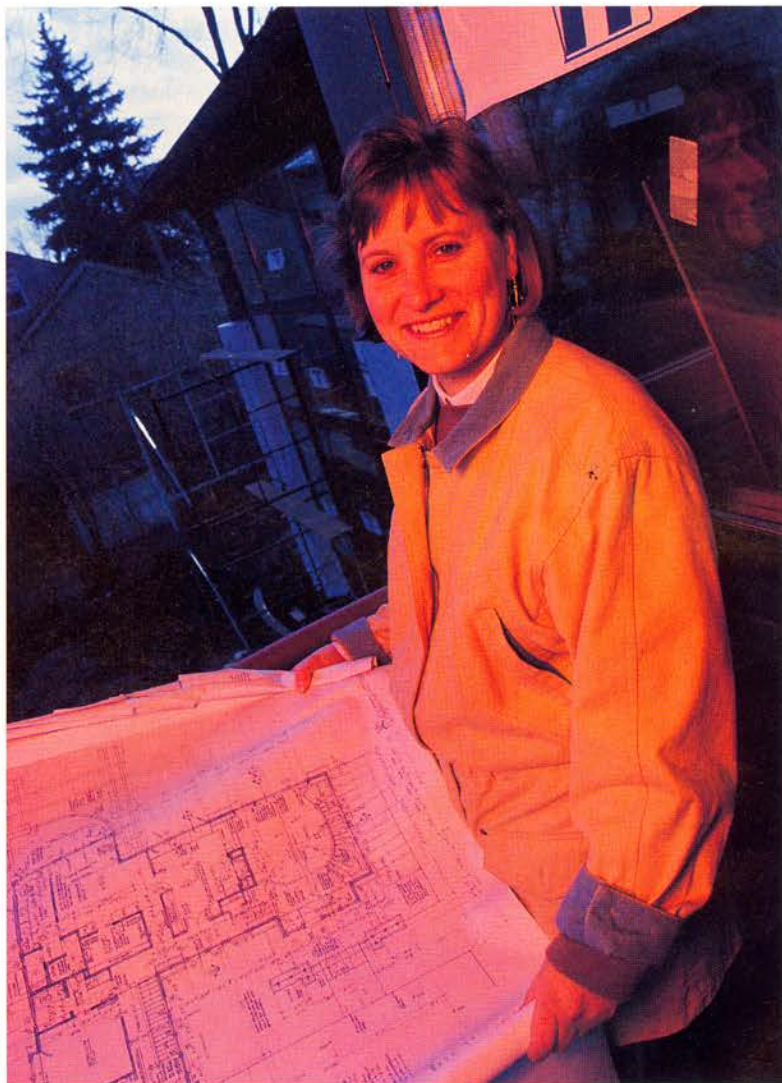
**A.** Either through referrals or in *Architecture Minnesota* magazine's annual directory. Be sure to interview the architect; good communication is the most important factor.

**Q.** *How much square footage do I need for an active family of four?*

**A.** It could be under 1,000 or over 10,000. The size varies depending on life-style. Would your children share a bedroom? Would you use a dining room every day, or do you want a separate eating area in the kitchen or stools at an island? Is a living room enough, or do you need a family room, den, and porch, too? You should visit houses in your price range and compare room sizes and layout with your existing home.

**Q.** *Do you promote any particular style of architecture, given our surroundings?*

**A.** The style should fit the surroundings, which include the site—whether it's flat, sloped, wooded—and the neighborhood. Look at the style and scale of prevalent houses and how far they're set back from the street. Also think about your life-style. Is it formal, informal, rustic? Obviously, our climate plays a big role, but if you want to understand style, spend



Write down your ideas for your new or remodeled home, then interview several architects, says Rosemary McMonigal.

some time looking at houses in older neighborhoods.

**Q.** *Will an architect figure in the practical aspects of a design, or should I just expect aesthetics?*

**A.** Architects will balance both, particularly those who do houses regularly. They know how to build to fit budget, style,

climate, and site. For instance, they should be just as concerned with issues of air quality as they are with aesthetics.

**Q.** *Should I insist on having a registered architect, or will a staff designer give me quality at a better price?*

**A.** By law, anyone calling themselves an architect must be registered. This means they've attended an accredited school of architecture, interned for three years, and passed a board registration program that indicates a high level of expertise in planning and design. Anyone can call themselves a designer or drafter, so be sure to check education, background, or experience before hiring someone. If you want something very basic and standard, a designer would probably be fine and cost less.

**Q.** *Will my architect recommend a general contractor, or should I find a contractor myself?*

**A.** Architects will recommend a number of general contractors experienced with your type of project—whether it's new construction, remodeling, or an addition—for you to interview. We also work with people who bring their contractors to us.

**Q.** *I'm afraid an architect will intimidate me with sophisticated design when all I really want is a cozy house. How do I communicate what I need?*

**A.** The first step is to write down your goals and ideas for the project. When you're interviewing architects, discuss their approach based on those ideas. Have pictures of your design concepts, or anything to help us better understand your goal. Define "cozy," for example. Is it the space, color, texture, lighting, windows? Speak up.

**Q.** *Are plan books a good idea when you're trying to save money?*

**A.** Plan books can help someone express design concepts or room flow to fit a certain life-style, but I wouldn't recommend selecting an arbitrary plan and expecting it to fit a site. We design each house individually to fit the slope of land, existing trees, zoning ordinances, drainage, utilities, driveway location, and sun, wind, and shade factors—all things a plan book doesn't take into account. By the time you adapt a plan, it would cost just as much. Besides, most people want something specific and unique. 🏠

---

*For more information about architects, see our resource list on page 32.*