

## Your home in their hands



By Geraldine Bedell

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**If you hire an architect to design your house, in matters of taste you simply don't matter. You. Know. Nothing. And you're not welcome at planning meetings because, to be frank, you simply get in the way. A chastened Geraldine Bedell reports from her new home**

In pictures: see inside Geraldine's house

The point of architects, someone once said, is to save clients from themselves. When we appointed an architectural practice to build a house from scratch in north London, we knew we'd be expected to take direction. Even so, we didn't realise quite how much.

Early on, Joyce Owens, one of the partners, asked me if I thought we were brave enough for them. I answered nervously that I hoped so. The two women who ran Azman Owens, Joyce and her partner, Ferhan Azman, seemed to inhabit a streamlined world of uncluttered spaces. Even their mugs were all white, whereas our mugs at home were coloured and, in some cases, chipped. I wanted to live like that, in a world of white mugs, thinking the clear thoughts that presumably went with them.

At an early meeting, I asked in some puzzlement where, in Joyce and Ferhan's elegant scheme, all the toys were meant to go. (In our four-storey, Victorian terrace in Hackney, they were mainly on the floor.) "We have a rule in our houses, Joyce and I," Ferhan said crisply: "Only two toys out at a time." I thought of our basement sitting room, full of Lego and teddy bears, books and balls. Clearly, these women had no idea how most people lived.

My husband, Charlie, and I had never worked with architects before and, until we were presented with the opportunity of buying a plot of land, had never thought of building a house. We didn't know what we were getting into, although we were aware that we were asking for quite a lot - five bedrooms, two studies and a garden on a smallish London plot (55 feet by 70 feet), suitable for four children ranging from baby to sixth-former and two adults who mostly work at home.

Ferhan once gave an interview in which she quoted Frank Lloyd Wright: "You have to give your clients not what they want but what they need." Once she and Joyce had persuaded each other, she added, it was easy to convince 98 per cent of their clients.

So we couldn't say we hadn't been warned. A typical tactic was to show us three types of limestone flooring, one of which was the right colour, the right price and easy to keep clean. Joyce and Ferhan didn't bother to mention that there were hundreds of other types of limestone. Of the thousands of potential door handles, Joyce and Ferhan showed us two, helpfully attached to pieces of wood. We experimented with them and selected the one we preferred. But even here we might have been directed; I seem to recall that one was significantly more comfortable to use.

They were helped in their management of us by the fact that we'd had no practice in reading plans. I was particularly bad at working out what they were showing me. I'd seize on some spectacular device - like the double-height hallway with glass wall and roof - and spend the meeting thinking about that, I missing the fact that they'd put my teenage daughter's bedroom on the ground floor, where she would be woken up by the younger boys pedalling their bikes along the terrace, or simply eating cereal loudly.

The early design meetings were like an extended game of "Let's pretend..." There would be a bench in the kitchen, where people would sit and talk to me while I worked; a dressing area in the bedroom, putting an end to clothes scattered around the bed; floor lights that would glow softly when I came in on dusky evenings in autumn.

Entranced by these possibilities, I'd miss the fact that the den was in the wrong place and that they had yet to find a space for my study. There was an enormous amount of information, and of a kind that I was hopelessly untutored to process. Not that we didn't assert ourselves. Joyce once mentioned concrete walls and I made a face. "You don't like concrete?" she said. "No, I don't," I answered. Concrete made me think of multistorey car parks, and high-rise flats with streaked façades and crime-scarred corridors.

Joyce dropped the subject and I assumed I'd disposed of the eccentric concrete idea. Later, she and Ferhan started talking about "an envelope of fair-faced concrete", which sounded like a contradiction in terms to me. But not to worry; it was probably unfeasible.

For months, the question of what the house would actually be made of was a mystery. And then came the meeting following the builders' costings, when we had discovered we were £25,000 over budget. Joyce and Ferhan announced that we could get rid of the surplus easily by abandoning the concrete. And my eyes filled with tears.

Over the months of thinking about concrete (mainly, that it was a thoroughly bad idea), I had become attached to it; concrete had become for me the distinguishing feature of the house. And this is the great thing about working with architects: if you trust them, they can take you to places that you could never get to on your own.

Joyce and Ferhan expanded our horizons, in small ways and large. We had to take home a rough plan of our wardrobe, to work out whether we could fit all our clothes into it. The plan contained a shelf for something called seasonal handbags. "What on earth are those?" Charlie asked. "They're handbags for different seasons," I said superciliously, although I'd never actually owned one. But, and this is the great thing about architects: before I even had the shelf for seasonal handbags, when I merely knew I was getting one, I found it easy to accumulate handbags in sufficient quantities to fill it.

Why would anyone want to look at 200 types of handle or 330 varieties of limestone anyway? It was difficult enough to work out how many rooms we needed and where we wanted the cupboard for the ironing board. One of the pleasures of employing architects, it seemed to me, was not having to trail around shops dismissing a lot of things that were unsuitable, but being able to make choices between things you already knew were going to work for you.

I did put my foot down about lighting, though. I dismissed a pendant lamp Joyce and Ferhan suggested for the sitting room and presented them with my own choice - a disc of glass in a semi-circle of steel. They said it was overdesigned. The next one I chose was "too big". In the end, having trawled through dozens of catalogues, I had to accept that the light they'd picked in the first place was best. Ferhan once explained to me that architecture is not about taste, but about the arrangement of light and space, which she made sound like universal principles, yet there clearly was an element of taste in all this, and I didn't seem to have it.

The one piece of advice I'd been given by someone who'd been through the process before was to go to site meetings and I announced that this was my intention as soon as we started the construction. "They're very boring and long-winded," Joyce said, meaning "you'll be in the way". Then: "You won't understand them, and it'll make them longer," Ferhan said - meaning "you'll be in the way". We insisted, and eventually compromised on once a month. I missed the first one because I had to take one of the children round a new school, and the second one I forgot. Joyce and Ferhan were right: we didn't understand what was going on, and the meetings were quite boring. All the same, I found them comforting. I could let all the talk about drains drift over me and feel something was happening.

Throughout the construction phase, any meeting with Joyce and Ferhan was two parts therapy to one part practicality. They had an ability to transport us back to the delicious early phase of the relationship, when we'd decide we wanted something and at the next meeting, in a sort of architectural version of Supermarket Sweep, it would appear on the plans. And they were wonderfully reassuring: "Oh, it's going to feel so spacious!" they'd cry, as we worried about its smallness and money and why the building work was taking so long.

When we first set out to build our house, we wondered if it would be all about us and nobody else would like it. By the time we were well into the design phase, we were much more worried that it would be all about Joyce and Ferhan and we wouldn't like it. But we managed, somehow, to hold on to our trust in them - partly because Joyce, who was managing the project, was so easy to deal with and partly because we'd seen their work and knew what they were capable of.

And in the end, the trust wasn't misplaced. We could have been more confrontational, but I'm not sure it would have resulted in anything better. The house we ended up with doesn't feel like their house -or rather, it does, but it also feels like ours. Between our needs and their flair, we've somehow arrived at a house that is easy and pleasurable to be in, uncluttered and light, and full of white mugs.

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'The Handmade House: a Love Story Set in Concrete', by Geraldine Bedell, is published by Viking, price £16.99.

Ferhan Azman's new practice is Azman Architects (020 7739 8191).

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## Look and learn

Inspired by Geraldine's story of self-building, but equally clueless about how to begin? The National Homebuilding & Renovating Show, which is taking place at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham, this week could set you off in the right direction.

Featuring more than 450 specialist exhibitors, including architects, designers and plot-finding services, the highlight of the daily 12 free seminars will be when Channel 4's Property Ladder presenter Sarah Beeny joins a session with the Federation of Master Builders to discuss the financial aspects of developing properties, including the thorny issue of VAT.

Tickets are £7 in advance or £10 on the door. More information is available at [www.homebuildingshow.co.uk](http://www.homebuildingshow.co.uk).

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