



MASTER GLASS

Geraldine Bedell's London family home, designed by Azman Owens Associates



HOW NOT TO LOSE THE PLOT

From hiring an architect to getting fired up about floor space, there's a blueprint for building your own home. Geraldine Bedell didn't follow it, but she did get a slick, spacious London property

We didn't follow the rules when we selected architects to build our house. We chose a practice because they'd done a refurbishment of our friend Hugo's kitchen, and Hugo was the most stylish man we knew. Also, he was a food writer so he wouldn't entrust his kitchen to just anyone. We later found out Hugo had picked these architects because they had a mutual friend.

Our aim was to build a house for ourselves and our four children, a place for work and pleasure: solid and stable enough to give us a sense of belonging, but flexible enough to meet the needs of a lifetime. The usual advice is to interview several architects and discuss their working methods and influences.

I'm not sure how useful this would have been. The women behind the practice we chose, Azman Owens Associates, one from Chicago, the other from Bursa in Turkey, both talked to us as if talk was rationed. Words aren't their medium, aren't how they think. They actively dislike what they call 'intellectualising architects', and I'm

not certain they would have been capable of articulating their beliefs if we'd asked them.

In the event, we were lucky. Joyce Owens and Ferhan Azman weren't big names of the kind to spend five minutes on your project, then pass it over to minions. Nor, although this was their first new build together, were they such a young practice that they hadn't had opportunities to make mistakes. Owens ran the project, and she had a powerful sense of humour, which came to matter a lot when they were frustrated by us, and we were doubting and resenting them.

All the same, we were asking a lot of them, expecting them to understand us, to translate our ideas into materials, to substantiate our complex emotions and diffidences and enthusiasms. We wanted them to build a house we could love, and it was only having sat in Hugo's kitchen and been at once soothed and exhilarated by the space that kept us trusting them. None of the pristine pictures of their projects that they showed us had the same effect;

there was no substitute for having seen how our architects' work was lived in.

Much later, I asked Owens and Azman what makes a good client, and they said, not entirely jokingly, 'One who gives a very clear brief and then goes away for the entire design process.' Our brief called for a Tardis: five to six bedrooms, two studies, masses of storage space and a garden, all on a 21m x 17m plot in north London. As a brief, it was a bit vague, and there was no way we were ever going to get six bedrooms. Fortunately, we'd let them see how we were living already, in a four-storey Victorian house bulging at the seams with stuff.

Their initial proposal, at our first meeting, was dazzling, offering a new, streamlined, clear-headed way of life. They proposed a kind of glass doll's house, in which every member of our unruly family would have his or her place.

This meeting set the pattern for the many that were to follow: talking about the house was like watching fireworks go off – enthralled by the »



PRACTICE MADE PERFECT

How (else) to pick the ideal architectural partner

Although we can't promise to project manage for you, Wallpaper's annual Architects Directory should help hold your hand through the difficult early courtship period. We'll effect introductions with all the practices you really need to know right now, all over the world. The biggest-ever 2005 edition is launched with our July/August Design Directory issue, on sale 9 June. For UK-based clients, Wallpaper* contributor Helen Kirwan-Taylor has written *Home UK* (published by Conran Octopus on 19 May, £16.99). An invaluable source book, it offers an amazing level of detail and is packed with concise and imaginative recommendations for architects, designers, builders and almost everyone you will ever need for your new home. Tips range from the prosaic (insist on a written contract) to the poetic (Ilse Crawford briefed architects 6a for a flat looking like a 'well-worn white shirt').

display, we were unable to focus on every individual spark. We'd fix on something – in this case something they called an indoor-outdoor eating space – and, spellbound, we'd fail to notice that our studies were to be perched on the roof and my 17-year-old daughter's bedroom was on the ground floor, next to the front door.

Those meetings, every two or three weeks, were like games of 'let's pretend'. I didn't really believe I was going to live in this house we were designing, partly because we were working it up in defiance of the planning department, who were trying to make us to stick to the footprint of two houses already approved for the site and partly because I'd never seen anything like it.

At this stage, it was easy to trust Owens and Azman. They were responsible for the regular spritzes of excitement I felt as they turned over their sheets of A2 and showed how they were about to impose order on our family. And thanks to them, I could go about telling people that the house we were designing would have an indoor-outdoor eating space and an open-air shower.

I seized on these twinkly things because they were dramatic and, in doing so, I failed to concentrate on the things that mattered: the size of rooms, the light and the traffic through the space. We had given plenty of thought to reconfiguring existing spaces, but never had to consider making new spaces. I found it slightly brain-hurting, like thinking about that branch of physics that proposes parallel lives.

By the second meeting, the rectangular doll's house had become more of a Z-shape, described by Owens and Azman in architecture speak as two interlocking cubes. You'd think that a moderately sentient client would ask why they'd done this, and perhaps we did, but if so, I can't remember what they said. Thinking about it now, it must have been because they couldn't get all the rooms we required into their original idea.

Tectonic shifts of this kind occurred from time to time: architecture is a process, a uniquely social art. Sometimes architects come up with a better idea, sometimes they're told by the structural engineer that what they've proposed won't work. But I suspect they prefer to appear to be working by mystique rather than by mistake.

Owens and Azman's favoured method was to flourish a plan and some vague justification – 'we thought this would be better' – then set off a lightning flare by announcing, say, that they were moving the den so that the children's noise wouldn't be heard in the kitchen, which was so obviously a good idea that it distracted us from asking why they had moved our studies off the roof or why, indeed, they had ever thought they would work there in the first place.

As we embarked on the detailing phase, Azman gave an interview to the *Financial Times* in which she said (quoting Frank Lloyd Wright),

'You should give your clients not what they want, but what they need.' She and Owens had a honed method: when presenting us with limestone, for example, they would show us two types. One would be easy to clean, competitively priced and they'd have worked with it before; the other, an expensive mystery product that was a nightmare to wash. The choice was ours.

The sense of being managed didn't bother us during the design process – we'd hired architects to give us good design – but it became painful once we got on site. There was a long delay in getting the slab laid. It transpired that the site investigation hadn't shown up gravel, of which there was a great deal, with the result that the pile-driving machine wouldn't work, while the one sent to replace it was too big to get into position. No one was really to blame, but we didn't discover the full story until much later. It was frightening when information was withheld, because we imagined something much worse.

One of the few pieces of advice I'd been given by friends beforehand was to make sure I attended the weekly site meetings. Owens and Azman resisted this until I insisted. The first site meeting I attended featured an interminable discussion about drains, of which I understood not one word. But I let the talk about sealants and insulating materials drift around me, and felt something was happening.

Any meeting with the architects by this stage was two parts therapy, one part practicality. 'Oh, but it'll feel so spacious,' they would cry, which, of course, I didn't believe at all, but, it succeeded in making me feel more confident.

So, with hindsight, what might we have done better? We didn't give environmental issues as

high a priority as we would if we did it again. The architects asked us about green issues and we said we'd like to incorporate as many environmentally sound features into the house as possible, without building a yurt. And that was the end of the conversation.

We didn't get a maintenance contract with the builders, or with anyone else, which I would insist on next time, before I paid my final bill. (The bath started to leak just after the one-year defects period ended, so it took ages to get the builders back. The underfloor heating behaved erratically – again, the workmen were wholly uninterested in returning.)

I'd focus more clearly on the things that really matter. The indoor-outdoor eating space would have been too small to be practical. The open-air shower disappeared due to budget cuts. This is not to say the house isn't dazzling, but it's the combination of light, materials and organisation, that makes it so, rather than the flourishes.

I'd try very hard to be less insistent about my own design ideas. The best work, I now believe, comes when clients have a strong idea of their needs (in our case having four children of vastly different ages and two adults who work at home) and trust their architect to deliver a design that meets them. Once or twice I made the mistake of letting the desire to control every detail rile me, and insisted on asserting my own taste. I chose some kitchen lights: when they arrived, they were so hideous I had to stop the builders putting them up. I rejected another light, for the sitting room, opting instead for one Owens said was 'overdesigned'. She was right; I had to swallow my pride and acknowledge that hers was better.

Perhaps, if I did it again, I would be better equipped to understand what was going on. But I'm not sure that this would result in a better house: to have been on top of our project would have entailed a more combative relationship with the architects than we wished to have.

In the end, what carries you through, and what results in the best work, is trust, which is not the same thing as giving your architect carte blanche or going away for the entire design period. Owens could usually make me laugh, and even when she couldn't, I still fundamentally trusted that she wasn't doing this for the photographs in architectural magazines or for awards, but because she was trying to build a house we could enjoy living in. And it turns out that we do. What she created fits us, makes us feel happy and even encourages us to live better (or at least, more tidily). She has left her practice to work in Florida, sadly, but we're visiting her soon. ★

The Handmade House, A Love Story Set in Concrete by Geraldine Bedell (£14.99, Penguin). Azman Owens Associates, tel: 44.20 7739 8191 (UK), www.azmanowens.com