

A modern interior space featuring large wooden doors on the left and a wooden staircase with a handrail on the right. In the center, a white kitchen island with a sink and a red pendant light is visible. Large windows in the background offer a view of a green landscape. The floor is made of large, light-colored tiles.

Communion Architects

Getting Started On
Your Building Project



www.communionarchitects.com

A quick start guide covering what you need to know about working with an architect, and designing, planning and managing a successful build.

The Journey Starts Here

A building project isn't something to be taken on lightly. It's a journey that involves difficult decisions and has enormous responsibilities. But it is also a journey that offers incredible rewards. It is an opportunity to take an idea, develop it and see it take its place in the landscape for generations to come.



We've put together this pack to give you information that will help you when you're thinking about starting building work on your home. It is based on our experiences of working with clients over many years on their home extensions, barn conversions and listed building projects.

You'll find it useful if you're planning to commission an architect. You'll find it equally useful if you are planning to do the work yourself.

There is a section with guidance on what to look for if you decide to work with an architect.

There is a section that talks you through the four Stages that we divide a project into to help you understand the process of turning an idea into a building. It contains an invaluable exercise that will help you focus your thinking and gain clarity on what you want to achieve from your home extension.

There is a section on what it is like to work with Communion. Finally, there are three articles that answer the two questions that we are most frequently asked: 'Is it worth extending my home?' and, 'How can I identify and stick to my budget?'

Working with an Architect

If you choose to work with an architect, part of our role in your journey is to help you to enjoy it as much as possible. We will be your expert partner when difficult decisions need to be made. We will also do everything to remove as many of the unknowns as we can to ensure your journey is as inspirational and smooth as it possibly can be. At the same time we will never forget that your project is exactly that – yours. Our job is to utilise our knowledge, experience and connections to help you realise your dream.



How to Choose your Architect

Whether it's a home extension, a barn conversion or a listed building renovation, deciding to take the plunge and build is one of the biggest decisions you'll ever make. Once you've made that decision, you've got another one to think about: how do you choose the architect who will realise your ideas?

Use the RIBA Website

In the first instance, it's simple. The RIBA website has a handy 'Find an Architect' application that will help you narrow down your choice. It will also give you the reassurance that who you have chosen is fully qualified. But where do you go from there? Once you have got your shortlist of architects, how do you go about choosing the one who's right for you?

Personal Taste

It's about personal taste as much as anything else. Do you like what you see? Architects will use their creativity to open up a world of possibilities: the right architect for you is the one who delivers your wow factor. When you look at their portfolio, is each design unique to the client so it's delivering exactly what is required? Are their designs forward-thinking but also sensitive to conservation requirements where necessary?

Experience and Recognition

You might also like to think about the experience your architect has of working on similar projects. Knowing your architect has worked on similar projects in the past can give you confidence, not to mention vital funding and publicity if your project involves a public building.

Personal Connection

You need to be sure you'll be able to build a strong relationship with your architect – realising your vision will depend on this. You will only know whether you have this connection by meeting them. But it can be useful to talk to previous clients to understand more about their experiences. You might like to ask:

- » How interactive they were – were they there when you needed them?
- » How competent they were – did you feel safe in their hands?
- » How reliable they were – did they do what they said they'd do? Did they manage the process well?
- » Did they have integrity – did they try to save you money? Were they realistic about what they could deliver cost effectively?

At the end of the day, if you choose a RIBA architect, you can't go far wrong. But by taking the time to consider the more intangible things, you can build a strong relationship with your architect. It means that not only will you have the end result you always imagined, but you'll also enjoy the process of getting there.

"The recommendation proved to be perfect and delivered everything I could have wished for. I don't think there is much more I can add, Communion delivered the service that I hoped it would and much more. Nothing was too much trouble and all problems (on this tricky project at times) were always sorted out promptly and efficiently in a friendly manner. Alex has a very laid-back approach which belies his professionalism and I found him very easy to work with."

Communion Client

Turning an Idea into a Building

Here at Communion we find it is useful to break the journey of transforming an idea into a building into five independent but interlinked Stages: Idealise, Visualise, Verbalise, Materialise, Utilise.



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Stage Zero - Idealise

Testing the Principle

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Stage Four - Utilise

Living the Life



Stage Zero - Checklist



Here is a checklist you may find useful at these very early stages of your journey. It will help to focus your thinking and identify what is important to you.

Problems to solve

Think about the problems that your project could help you solve. What don't you like about your building at the moment?

Spaces Required

Think about your project in practical terms. What do you need from any new space? Another bedroom? A home office? A bigger kitchen?

Planning and Legal Constraints

Think about the planning and legal requirements involved. Will your project need planning permission? How likely is it to receive it?

Immediate Issues

Think about the immediate issues involved. Has your conservatory reached the end of its life? Do you have a flat roof that is leaking?



Impact of Problems

Think about how these problems manifest themselves. Do you spend less time together as a family than you'd like? Are you unable to entertain friends and family easily?

Dreams and Desires

Think about what your dream space would allow you to do. Could you host big dinner parties? Could you enjoy breakfast bathed in morning sunlight or sip a glass of wine looking at the sunset?

Timescales Required

Think about when you want your new space to be ready. Is there a deadline such as the arrival of a new baby? Is it better to get it done right than done fast?

Budget Available and Value

Think about cost and value. How much are you willing or able to spend on your project? Is the value you'll gain from improvements to your lifestyle more important than some of the financial considerations?



Stage Zero - Idealise

Testing the Principle

According to Jim Rohn, “Fundamentals form the beginning, the basis and the reality from which everything else flows.” Testing the Principle is the process of ensuring that a project is fundamentally sound.

On smaller or more straightforward projects, this process is brief and uncontroversial, so we carry it out as part of our first on-site meeting. On larger or more complex projects, Testing the Principle is a separate piece of work that assesses the strength of the project and allows you to make an informed decision about how to take it to the next stage.

Testing the Principle considers the legal, financial and practical implications involved.

This includes:

- » Agreeing the problems that will need to be solved and how they will impact the project.
- » Establishing the spaces that are required.
- » Considering the planning and legal constraints.
- » Planning the likely timescales.
- » Listening to your needs, wants and desires, and making note of where these may conflict with other issues.
- » Advising on budgets and helping you to prioritise what is truly important to the project.



1

Stage One - Visualise

Establishing, Designing & Gaining Consent

Stage One takes your project from an idea to the point where you have a design that meets your needs, you have a reasonably good idea of costs and timescales, and you have permission to carry out the work.

This Stage involves:

- » Surveying the existing building to produce accurate measured drawings; on larger projects we tender this to ensure that you gain maximum value for money.
- » Preparing proposed design options based on your needs, wants and desires.
- » Working with you to discuss the options and developing one of them to create a design that you are excited about.
- » Providing initial budget costings which seek to give you a “ballpark” level of investment required to deliver the project.
- » Submitting a Pre-Planning Enquiry, negotiating on your behalf and applying for Planning Permission.
- » Overseeing the Application while it is in for planning and responding to any queries that need to be addressed.
- » Providing a Project Programme so you can make appropriate arrangements for planning the project.

“From the initial contact, we were asked questions we weren’t expecting: how do we live and how do we want to change how we live, what do we want to achieve. It was very much those ideas shaping the design rather than us having a fixed idea or being pushed into a fixed idea about how it needed to look at the end. I think that really made a difference as to how the building looks and feels now and how it’s affected us as a family and the way we live in the space.”

Communion Client

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Stage Two - Verbalise

Designing the Finer Details & Agreeing the Price

By the end of Stage Two you will know exactly what your design looks like, how much it will cost to build, the company that is going to be building it, and when they will be starting work. If you are happy with the level of investment involved, you will be in a position to start work on site.

This Stage involves:

- » Appointing the specialists who will provide the technical expertise needed to bring your project to life.
- » Gaining Building Regulation approval to ensure your building will comply with all legal requirements and construction standards.
- » Obtaining a competitive price so you can be confident the price you pay is the best market rate.
- » Selecting a 'preferred building contractor' who will build your project.
- » Undertaking a value engineering exercise to optimise and – if possible – reduce the costs of your project further.
- » Developing the contract information for the building work to give you significant legal protection as your project is constructed.

"All the tenders came back over our budget, but we were able to sit down with the design and keep it essentially the same but take out the bits that weren't quite so important and look at how to do things in a different way to keep the costs down."

Communion Client



A photograph of a modern house with a glass extension and a gravel driveway. The house has a white exterior and a red brick chimney. The glass extension has wooden frames and a flat roof. The driveway is made of gravel, and there are some plants and flowers in the foreground.

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Stage Three - Materialise

Delivering the Project

Stage Three takes your project from paper to the point where it can transform your space and your life.

This Stage involves:

- » Establishing and administering a contract between you and the contractor.
- » Inspecting the works regularly on-site to ensure quality and agree design details.
- » Providing financial reports and advising you on payments to the contractor.
- » Being on-hand to resolve any site issues.
- » Ensuring that all work is completed to a high standard before signing off the project.
- » Agreeing extensions of time for additional work if required.
- » Issuing the Practical Completion certificate, ensuring a successful handover to you and confirming compliance with Building Control Regulations.

"We used Communion for Stage Three and the project management of the build. We were glad we did because it helped keep everything on price when there were inevitable changes and things we hadn't thought about or expected. Having Alex there kept everything on track."

Communion Client

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Stage Four - Utilise Living the Life

The start of Stage Four is a momentous moment in the journey of your project because it is the point at which your building is ready for you to use. However, there are still a number of things that need to take place before your project can be considered fully completed.

This Stage involves:

- » Checking the building regularly to ensure everything is working correctly and actioning any necessary work.
- » Commissioning professional photographs to celebrate completion of the project.
- » Getting detailed feedback from you to help us continually learn and improve.
- » Returning to site after 12 months to carry out an inspection and making sure that any defects are 'made good' before agreeing the final account.
- » Issuing the final certificate that confirms that all works are complete, all defects have been made good and all monies have been paid.

It is a lovely house to live in, and works so well for our particular life-style. Our concerns about changing from country life to town life were completely unfounded. We spend roughly 80% of our time working or relaxing in the kitchen/dining/living room, enjoying the space and light.

We move to the snug in the evening.."

Communion Client



What is it Like Working With Communion?

This is an extract from an interview with one of our clients, Felicity, describing what it was like to work with us and how her project progressed.

"A huge amount of work was required: the internal proportions of the original house were very small and we felt that one of the most important things for us was to have a big family living space.

It was a challenge to extend a Grade II listed building which had already been extended so part of the skill we needed from an architect was an ability to design something and to negotiate with the planners to get it approved.

I spent a lot of time researching local architects. Because we weren't local ourselves we had to begin with directories and Period Home magazines. I whittled the list down to five who I interviewed over the phone. I then invited three to the house to give us their first thoughts and see if we thought we could work with them. We gave the three architects we interviewed a very clear brief that I had written telling them what we needed from the house and how we wanted to live in it.

I think that Alex at Communion convinced us through just walking around the house that he understood the brief. We chose Communion because we felt that Alex had a huge amount

to offer and was on our wavelength. We felt he had an affinity with listed buildings. He knew the Herefordshire planners. We felt he would do what we needed: he would listen to what we wanted but he would come up with his own ideas as well.

The project from inception to completion must have taken at least two and a half years. The first year was about getting planning permission and getting tenders out to secure the work. All that was done with us being both in Herefordshire





and in London so it was quite complex. We also had the house tenanted for a while during the planning procedures. Alex was great in terms of meeting us in London when we needed to get together to talk around plans and put marks on paper, as we did a lot.

Our first plans were knocked back by the planners, but Alex was extremely calm and said 'this is not the end of the world, we will find a way'. That was one of the things we valued most about Alex and the way he worked with us: when problems arose, as they inevitably will in any building project, he was able to find solutions.

During the build we had regular monthly site meetings which I felt were essential. They helped to keep the lines of communication open between us, the contractor and Alex, something that was especially important because we weren't living on site.

We felt it was essential to work with an architect rather than going directly to a builder. The result would not have been anything like what we have here. The expertise of an architect in terms of detailing and in terms of material choices and design just lift it. As a landscape architect I can probably run a project, but I would not want to contract administer my own project because you need the intermediary between you and the contractor. At the end of the day that's what is fundamental to the success of any build: a clear contract and strong contract administration."





Contact Us

We hope you've found this guide useful.

If you would like to find out more about working with us on your project, please email us at info@communiondesign.com

When you contact us for the first time it's useful for us to know what you want your project to achieve, your timescale and your understanding of the likely costs of your project, and the value it will give you. If you would like more guidance on these points, the articles on the following pages will help you.

When you contact us, we will get back to you to arrange a time for a phone conversation. During this conversation there are three questions we will seek to answer about your project:

- » Is it legally possible? (i.e. if planning permission is needed, will it be granted?)
- » Is it technically possible? (i.e. can your vision be physically realised?)
- » Is it financially possible? (i.e. are your vision and your budget, broadly speaking, aligned?)

We will only advise that we proceed with your project if we are confident that we can answer 'yes' to all three questions. When we've had our conversation, if we both agree it's a good idea to take things to the next stage, we'll arrange a time for us to visit you on site.

Further Reading

We have developed two further guides that we give to all our clients to help you along the way.



Making it Happen

This is the project guide we give to all our clients. It outlines all the Stages of their project with us so they know what to expect and when.



Materials

This guide introduces materials we have found useful in creating successful spaces. We show how these materials have been combined into distinctive palettes on some of the projects we have worked on.

Move or Extend: Which is Right for You?

Whether it's better to move home or to build an extension is a question many homeowners face. The right answer depends on a multitude of factors that reflect the financial and emotional realities of owning a home.

The Financial Considerations

The first issue to resolve is whether moving home is a better option than extending.

This is relatively straightforward and can be illustrated with a couple of simple scenarios.

Let's say a great alternative home in the right area would cost you an additional £200,000 (factoring in the cost of the property and the cost of the move). However, for £100,000 you could build an extension that would give you everything you need in your current home. In this case, from a financial perspective, it makes better sense to build the home extension.

On the other hand, let's say a great alternative home in the right area would cost you an additional £50,000 (factoring in the cost of the property and the cost of the move). An extension to your current home that would give you everything you need would cost £100,000. In this case, from a financial perspective, it makes better sense to move.

The Emotional Considerations

However, the reality is that for many people, even given the amount of available housing stock, there really isn't that much choice. Perhaps you can't find anything in the right location. Maybe other properties lack the years of family history that you associate with your current home and you can't imagine living anywhere else.

Selling and buying a house is also stressful and time-consuming. If you have had one or two attempts fall through, building an extension can

start to look like the better option. Indeed, some clients come to us after trying to sell, but then realising it would be a win-win situation to stay where they are and make their existing home work for them.

You should also consider any work that might need to be done on any new home you purchase. If you've already completed this work once on your existing home, it can feel frustrating to undertake it again on your new home. The advantage of building an extension is that it gives you the opportunity to design something specifically for you and that is centred around your needs, wants and desires.

Balance your Options

In general terms, we advise you to look carefully at your options before committing to a construction project. There are costs and opportunities on both sides, and you need to take time to decide which side of the balance is right for you.

Building an extension is undoubtedly disruptive and expensive. If there is a cheaper, easier option in moving home, you really should consider this seriously.

On the other hand, you should also consider the opportunities a home extension could give you. Most of the UK's homes are built to a standard template of one sort or another. When you take the time to think through what you need from your home and consider factors such as where the sun rises and sets and how you access your garden, you get a much better designed space that works for you perfectly. In doing so, you create something very special and give your home a wow factor you won't find anywhere else.

If you're wondering whether to move or extend, we would be more than happy to discuss the extension option with you. For an informal chat, please get in touch.



Is it Worth Extending my Home?

Many of our home extension clients ask the same question: Does a home extension make financial sense? It's a good question to ask. A home is one of the biggest purchases many of us will make, so we need to think carefully about the money we invest into it.

At Communion, we suggest our clients consider three things to answer this question:

- » timescale
- » financial situation
- » what 'worth it' means to them

Here's what we mean...

Home Extensions Make Sense as a Medium to Long-term Investment

In terms of seeing a financial return, a home extension is something you should be thinking of as a medium to long-term investment – say five or more years.

As house prices typically double every ten years, if you plan to stay in your home longer term, it is likely that your home extension will become, in terms of financial profit, worth it. You will also have had years of enjoying your home extension.

Short term, it's best to think of an extension as an investment for you – your enjoyment, quality of life and comfort – not an investment for profit.

If you're not planning to stay where you are for the long term, we suggest a better way to realise value is to gain planning permission for the extension, but not build it. The value that planning permission will add to a property is typically far more than the cost of securing it, making it a 'quick win' in comparison to actually building the extension.

Your Situation Determines the 'Value' of a Home Extension.

We encourage our clients to think about their situation before making a decision about a home extension.

Let's say your property is currently valued at £250,000 and you want to add an extension that will cost £100,000 to build. If you add the extension, your property may only be worth £325,000. In simple financial terms, the figures don't really add up, but in some instances, our clients will build the extension, as they believe it to be of sufficient 'value'.

Let's look at two simple scenarios to explain why.

In scenario one, the mortgage on your property is £200,000 and you would need to extend the mortgage by £100,000 to finance the extension. In this scenario, the home extension would not be worth it, because you could be at risk of negative equity.

In scenario two, your mortgage is much lower, say £50,000, and you could finance the extension with savings or only a small extension to your mortgage. In this situation, although the crude numbers don't add up (that is, £250,000 + £100,000 does not equal £325,000), your equity in the property is much greater than the cost of the extension. In this instance, you may feel that a home extension is worth it.

Other Ways to Assess Whether a Home Extension will be Worth it

If you are planning to stay in your home for the long term and you can justify the financial investment, there are other things you might consider to help you assess whether a home extension will be worth it.

Look at Alternative Properties

If you're thinking about a home extension, it is worth reviewing the market to see if your perfect home is already out there. There are three reasons for doing this.

Firstly, if you can find the right house in the right location, with little or no work needed, moving may be a better option than extending what you already have.

Secondly, it gives you a comparison to work with. It helps you identify a budget and answer the crucial question: is an extension on my current home worth it? For example, let's say a great alternative home in the right area would cost you an additional £200,000 (factoring in the cost of the property and the cost of the move). However £100,000 is the full cost of an extension that would give you everything you need in your current home. In this case, it makes financial sense to build the home extension.

Thirdly, research may show you that the house you want doesn't exist. Perhaps you can't find anything in the right location. Maybe other properties lack the years of family history that you associate with your current home and you can't imagine living anywhere else. Whatever the reason, if you're not able to find a good alternative, a home extension could become of much greater value to you.

Remember that Home Extensions Solve Problems

As well as considering potential financial gain, it's also worth considering the solutions to problems a home extension can provide. Could it fix the problem with the ageing, leaking conservatory? Will it give you a bigger kitchen that will be easier to live life in? Will it improve the flow of your home? Will it mean you can open the back door and go straight into the garden? Will it give you space for an office? Does it provide a room so people can come and stay? Home extensions can be a great solution to these common problems.

You can go one step further and consider what's to be gained from a home extension. If you have a bigger kitchen diner, will you be able to spend more time together as a family? If you move the position of the sitting room, could you enjoy the sunset in your favourite chair?

If your home extension creates your dream home and one you delight in living in, there will likely be a 'value gain' far greater than the financial cost. Or, to look at it another way, people spend a few thousand pounds each year to live in a beautiful villa for two weeks when they go on holiday. For a similar sum each year in mortgage repayments, you could have a home that you live in and enjoy all year round.

What's More Important: Cost or Value?

You can – and should – look at a home extension in terms of cost. You need to be sure that the investment you make in your home extension is one you can afford to make financially and won't leave you in negative equity. But you should also look at a home extension in terms of the value it will give you.

If a home extension gives you the right amount of space in the right location and allows you to live your life as you choose, then we think it's definitely 'worth it'. Though the financial investment can be significant, the return on the investment is often greater still.

"One of the things that's very important to both of us is a house that allows you to live the way you want to live. We do a lot of entertaining and it really is a very functional house and it flows. We're more than delighted with what we've got and we very much feel that it's a house that's unique to us."

Communion Client



How Can I Identify and Stick to my Budget?

Understanding the finances of your project and having financial visibility is one of the most important things on a building project. Quite simply, it can make the difference between finishing it and not finishing it.

If you are just about to start work on a building project you are probably wondering if you will be able to finish it within budget or not. Building projects are notorious for going over budget. However, with careful planning and management from the start, you can make sure you stick to your budget.

Here are a few things to think about:

Firstly, a simple question.

When you say you have a budget, where has that budget come from? In our experience, when people say they have a budget they mean one of two things.

The first thing people mean by budget is the amount of money that is available to spend. When this money is spent, there is no more money. If this is you, you need to be sure that this is sufficient money. If it isn't sufficient, don't go any further because doing so will only cause heartache.

The second thing people mean by budget is the amount of money they think something will cost. If this is you, you need to make sure you've costed the project properly so you know the figure you have in mind is broadly accurate, not just a feeling.

Here's what one recent client of ours had to say about budget:

"We went through a very painful learning process, the build cost at any level would be much more than we had expected. We were arbitrarily setting our own expectation on price for work to be done

based on the money available, not the reality of known costs."

The further a project progresses, the further our tried and tested process gains control of costs for our clients.

When we first meet our clients we use our experience to give them a ballpark figure for the cost of their proposed project. It is a figure that is generally only accurate to the tens of thousands, but it provides a useful starting point for our discussions and helps to set expectations. We call this the Test the Principle Stage and it's Stage Zero of our five stage process. It involves trying to develop a vision for your space and the budget you have and then ensuring that they are both consistent. If they are not, we look to address one or the other.

Getting an Idea of Cost at Stage One

In Stage One of our process we draw up ideas and plans. These are used to gain planning permission (if planning permission is needed). They are also used to get a more accurate figure for the cost of the build.

When we have undertaken the site survey and put together an initial design, we can give you our first informed thoughts on the budget that will be needed. By the end of the second design meeting we will have a design we can issue to a Quantity Surveyor who can provide a more detailed budget. The budget provided at this stage is usually pretty accurate when compared to the final price of the build. If the budget the Quantity Surveyor gives and the budget you have are too far apart, it is possible to adjust the design accordingly. Because we have got more cost information than at the beginning, it is not a question of starting from scratch, more of refining what we already have.

Gaining Control of Costs at Stage Two

In Stage Two of the process we develop the design in much more detail. We specify every element of the build from floor to ceiling and everything in between. We then ask five experienced building contractors to quote for the work based on the details we provide, with the intention of getting three quotes. Doing this gives us two things. It gives us peace of mind that we have got the best market price for the work because it has been competitively tendered. Secondly, because we also know the price for every element in the build we can be fairly confident (barring anything unexpected when we start work on site) that the price given at this stage is the price that will be paid at the end.

We estimate that by the end of Stage Two, our clients will have spent 7-8% of the final budget for their project. This relatively low investment has given them an extraordinary amount. It has delivered: a design that is completely unique to them, gained valuable planning consent, all the technical details they need to build their project, a fixed price gained at competitive tender and a building contractor who will complete it at the agreed price.

Protecting your Budget during Stage Three

Stage Three is when the value ascertained at tender is protected by legal force. This ensures the original agreements hold and that the works are carried out correctly, in the timeframe and to the quality and prices agreed.

There will always be some unexpected events, but even these are not outside our control. They are usually paid for out of an agreed contingency figure, which is typically equal to around 3-5% of the overall project. Even with these 'unexpected' events, before any contingency monies are spent, any changes required are costed before they are agreed, so that we can ensure that the overall budget is held to.

The success of keeping to this cost plan at Stage Three is in the strength and completeness of the detailed designs provided in Stage Two. It is

often incredible to think that all the hours, days, weeks and months of work on site are controlled by the conversations held, and the drawings, schedules and specifications that we provide for our client, at Stage Two.

Generally, the only change to the agreed prices comes down to additional client request: that is to say, "Well, while you are there can you just...". When this happens we ensure that before any work is carried out a complete price is provided. This ensures that the all-important budget for the project is carefully maintained. This additional work doesn't affect the price agreed for the work at Stage Two; instead, a new budget is created that covers this separate and new piece of work.

Before you Start Work, Ensure your Budget and your Vision Align

Understanding the cost involved for a project is vital because, unless you have complete clarity when you start, there's a danger it won't be finished. It is so important in fact that we won't start work on a project unless we feel that the budget and vision align.

However, as vital as it is, we also recognise that cost is only one element of a building project. There are many more things that are important factors. After all the pain of understanding the costs involved, here's the client we quoted previously, speaking after the project was completed:

"I love, love, love my house. We come in from the garden, sit at the kitchen island with all the beautiful sunlight and watch the sun setting through the windows over an uninterrupted view. When people come they say:

'This is amazing'."

Communion Client

Transforming Space, Transforming Lives

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