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Your brief to your architect

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Your brief is usually a written document that describes your needs, aspirations and the constraints for your building project. When complete, it will form the basis upon which your architect will develop the design for your project. For a straightforward project, the brief may be little more than a list of the accommodation to be provided. For more complicated projects, or where you have particular requirements or expectations, the brief will require much more detail.

The importance of the brief cannot be overstated. It is the basis from which the design will evolve and against which design alternatives or options will be tested. It is not uncommon to find that, as the design develops, that conflicts in the brief emerge and trade-offs become necessary. As the client, you must approve the brief and any changes to it. It is important that the brief is not seen as a definitive document with little capacity to change or be modified. The brief should establish the requirements that must be met, the requirements that are desirable and the requirements that are optional. You and your architect will use the brief to review design options and this process may well suggest that the brief is modified as design alternatives are developed.

Developing an effective brief is a two-way process. Usually, long before you approach an architect, you will have thought about the design and your requirements. This information – often in the form of sketches, photos, cuttings, notes and the like – will form the framework for the initial discussions with your architect. Although you may not realise the importance or value of this information, your architect will help you assemble all of it into a structured form to produce the final brief. Your role and participation in this process is vital to the success of the project.

While your architect is trained to gather the information required for the brief, you are best placed to describe your requirements. You have the best understanding of your family or business. You know how the business or home operates. You understand how your lifestyle, business activities or other aspirations can be fulfilled by an appropriate design solution.

Some of this information is quantifiable:

- number of bedrooms or enclosed offices to be provided
- the heights or volumes of spaces
- the use of the spaces
- equipment or machinery to be accommodated
- the flexibility of spaces
- the need for future expansion or changed use
- durability and quality of finishes
- environmental expectations
- energy use expectation
- project budget
- project program

While other aspects are qualitative:

- ambience of spaces
- the corporate or personal image to be conveyed
- the use of natural light
- privacy
- colours

Developing an effective and comprehensive brief is critical to the success of your project. The most successful briefs are those that are developed cooperatively with your architect, which clearly define your requirements yet incorporate a level of flexibility which allows a creative solution to be designed for your project.

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