HARPER LATTER
ARCHITECTS

THE 2026 GUIDE

DESIGN YOUR **OWN HOME**

A practical guide for homeowners in South West London, from first thoughts to a home you will enjoy for years.

HARPER LATTER ARCHITECTS | RIBA & ARB ACCREDITED | WIMBLEDON

INTRODUCTION

YOU HAVE ALREADY **STARTED**

It happens in small moments. Standing in a dark kitchen and realising the room always bottlenecks at breakfast. Looking at a tired house and seeing exactly where the garden room should connect, where the staircase should turn, where the daylight ought to come from.

That instinct is the beginning of every good project. But instinct alone does not produce a house that secures consent, satisfies Building Regulations, works structurally and still feels calm to live in five years later.

> Designing your own home is making hundreds of linked decisions in the right order.

In South West London those decisions are shaped by conservation areas, listed fabric, awkward Victorian footprints, basements, neighbours and ever-higher energy standards. The clients who do it well turn ambition into a disciplined brief, test options early, and accept that good design is iterative.

THE JOURNEY AT A GLANCE

1 BRIEF & BUDGET — 2 SITE & CONTEXT — 3 PLANNING ROUTE — 4 DESIGN STAGES — 5 YOUR TEAM

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

THE FULL ARTICLE →

A NOTE FROM YOUR ARCHITECT

MEET **JAMES**

Every home I work on starts with a conversation. Before a line is drawn, I want to understand how you live, what matters to you and what you want the house to do for you.

My job is to guide you through the decisions in the right order, so the house you imagine is the one you end up living in. I specialise in private residential projects: new homes, basements and leisure spaces.

If this guide helps you get clearer on your own brief, it has done its job. I would be glad to talk it through.

JAMES LATTER

Managing Director, Harper Latter Architects

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

MEET OUR TEAM →

STEP ONE

YOUR VISION: **THE BRIEF**

The brief is not a wish list. It is a design tool. Describe how you live now, where the current house fails and what must change. Be exact. "Open-plan family space" is not enough.

WRITE THE BRIEF AROUND LIFE, NOT ROOMS

- **Morning routine.** Where does the first hour feel congested or badly lit?
- **Entertaining.** An island, a dining room, or several linked spaces?
- **Work.** A study that closes off, or a workspace within family life?
- **Longevity.** Will relatives stay, or accessibility matter later?
- **Privacy.** Which rooms are public, which insulated?
- **Storage.** What needs concealing, what deserves display?
- **Garden.** Ornamental, family-led, or an extension of indoor living?

THREE LISTS BEFORE YOU SPEAK TO ANY DESIGNER

01

NON-NEGOTIABLES

What the project must deliver.

02

ASPIRATIONS

These may move with planning, cost or structure.

03

REGRETS TODAY

Often the most revealing: what daily life has already taught you.

> Layout is the luxury. So is proportion. So is light in the right place at the right time of day.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

BRIEFING YOUR ARCHITECT →

OUR SERVICES →

STEP ONE, CONTINUED

FEEL, BUDGET **& ENERGY**

DECIDE WHAT IT SHOULD FEEL LIKE

Define a few architectural principles rather than a mood board: restrained and textural, or contemporary inside a heritage shell, or joinery doing the visual work while surfaces stay calm. These shape massing, openings and materials from the start.

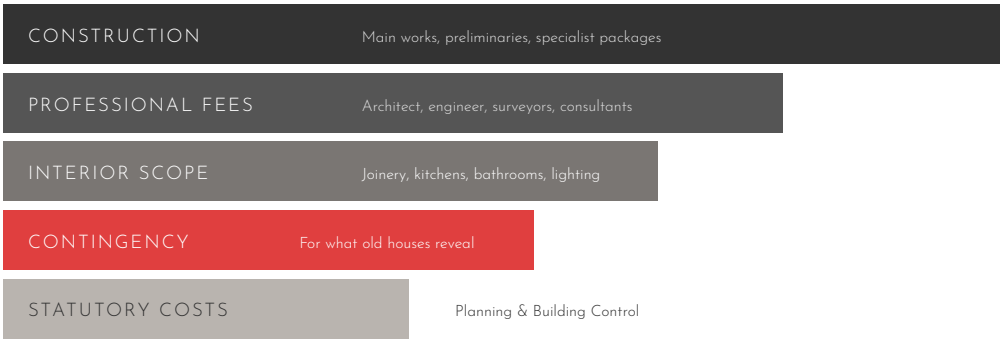
State what you do *not* want too: wasted corridors, fashion-led materials that date quickly, visual clutter around appliances, glazing that overheats a room.

PUT ENERGY IN THE BRIEF NOW

Set energy goals at the briefing stage: insulation, airtightness, ventilation and heating work best considered together. England's Future Homes and Buildings Standards are due to apply to most work from 24 March 2027, subject to transitional provisions. Ask your design team what applies to you.

BUILD THE BUDGET AROUND THE WHOLE PROJECT

A budget has to include more than the contractor's price. Think in layers:



Illustrative only: bar lengths show the layers to plan for, not proportions of any real budget.

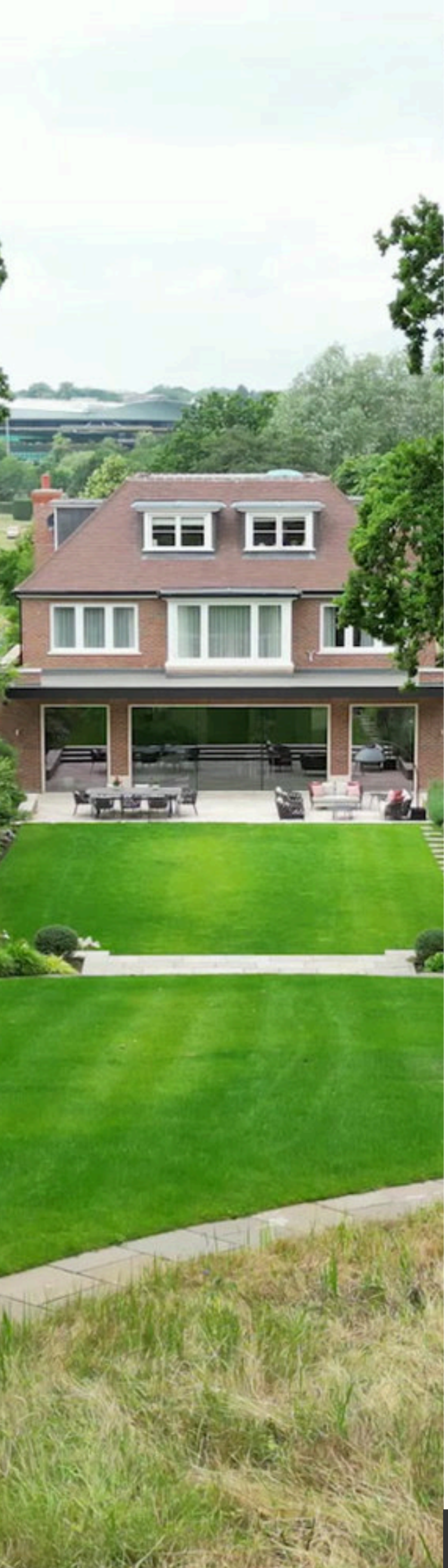
Difficulty often comes from spending too early on the wrong thing, such as an expensive façade before structure, drainage and consent risk are resolved.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

WHAT ARCHITECTS CHARGE →

HEAT PUMP DESIGN →

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN →



STEP TWO

YOUR CANVAS: **SITE & CONTEXT**

A house in South West London is never just a house. It is a planning history, a plot shape, a neighbouring relationship, a level change, a tree constraint, a daylight pattern and often a heritage argument. Site analysis comes before design confidence.

Start with orientation. Where does morning light enter? Which rooms suffer glare late in the day? Where are the best views? In a refurbishment, a modest shift in a window or a ceiling opening can transform a space more than expensive finishes.

A SERIOUS EARLY REVIEW COVERS

- **Measured information.** Existing drawings are often wrong.
- **Levels and structure.** Floor changes, drainage falls, load paths.
- **Trees.** Root protection can govern buildable area.
- **Neighbours.** Overlooking, rights to light, party walls.
- **Designations.** Conservation area, listed status, local policy.
- **Access.** Especially for basements and larger refurbishments on dense streets.

> If a house has an awkward shape, do not fight it too early. Understand why it is awkward first.

An irregular plot is often where the value lies. A narrow site may reward a sequence of spaces over one broad room. A sloping garden may suit a part-sunken level that still gets daylight. A difficult side return can become the hinge that makes the whole house coherent.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

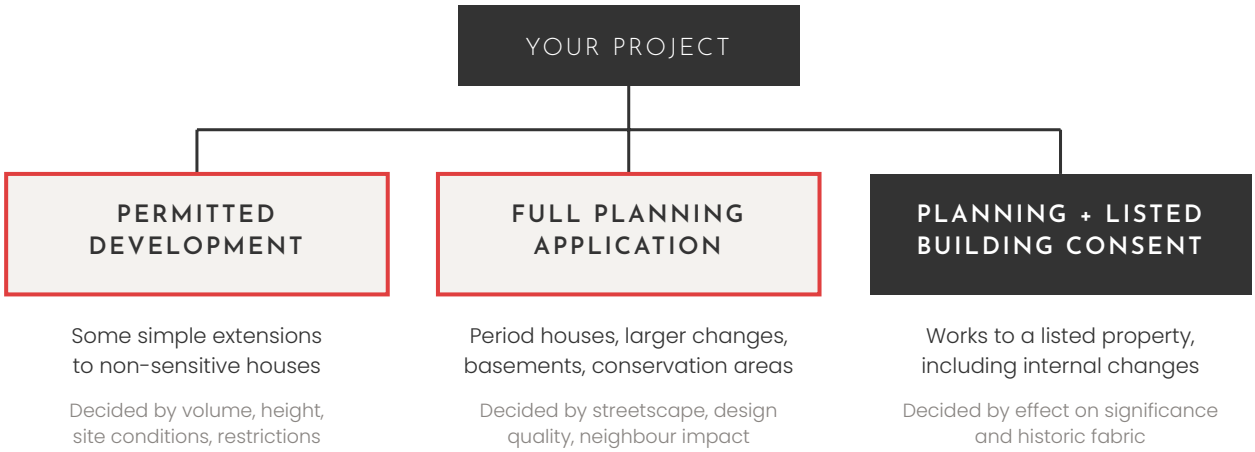
MEASURED SURVEY COSTS →

BASEMENTS →

STEP THREE

PLANNING: **FIND THE RIGHT ROUTE**

For most private clients there are three broad possibilities. The wrong route wastes time and can damage the scheme if you shape the design around assumptions that do not apply.



PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT IS NOT A STRATEGY

In England, some single-storey rear extensions can fall within permitted development, but height, land designation and other conditions still apply. It is a technical entitlement, not a design strategy. Check every limit and local restriction before designing around it.

FULL PLANNING IS ABOUT JUDGEMENT

The council asks whether the proportions are credible, the roof resolved, the materials convincing and the neighbour relationship considered. The strongest submissions answer through the design itself.

LISTED BUILDINGS ARE A DIFFERENT TEST

Listed Building Consent is needed for works that affect special character, and planning permission may be needed too. Staircases, joinery, fireplaces and apparently modest internal changes can all be relevant. "We are only changing the inside" is not a safe assumption. A good scheme improves the house for modern living and makes a disciplined case for why the changes suit its significance.

> Planning officers respond to schemes that look inevitable: not bland, not timid, but well judged.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

PLANNING TIMESCALES →
WHAT IS PLANNING PERMISSION →
LISTED BUILDING CONSENT →
HERITAGE DESIGN →

STEP FOUR

FROM CONCEPT **TO COMPLETION**

Planning is the middle of a project, not the finish. A house becomes buildable in stages, each answering different questions. Compress them and you do not save time: you move unresolved decisions into construction, where they cost more.

Our eight-step residential process. The stages and our role are agreed around your project and the services you appoint us to provide.

1. **OUTLINE PROPOSAL & BRIEF**
   Your plans and budget, costed so you know where you stand.
2. **SKETCH DESIGNS**
   Hand drawings, computer drawings and 3D models.
3. **PLANNING APPLICATIONS**
   Early discussions with the council, then the formal submission.
4. **DESIGN DEVELOPMENT & DETAILED DESIGNS**
   The design is finalised and modelled from every angle.
5. **TENDER & CONSTRUCTION DRAWINGS**
   Consultants such as quantity surveyors and structural engineers contribute.
6. **TENDER NEGOTIATION**
   Contractor references reviewed, past work visited, advice on the best fit.
7. **ON-SITE CONSTRUCTION & ADMINISTRATION**
   Our involvement depends on the service you choose.
8. **COMPLETION**
   Sign-off, statutory requirements closed out, and the vision realised.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

OUR FULL PROCESS → | RIBA PLAN OF WORK → | CHOOSING A CONTRACTOR →

WHERE IT GETS REAL

EARLY STAGES: PREPARE PROPERLY

You test the brief, gather reliable survey information and establish whether the house is listed, what planning constraints apply, and whether a basement is plausible. An inaccurate survey contaminates every later drawing.

CONCEPT: OPTIONS, NOT ONE IDEA

A good architect tests several routes: a formal arrangement, circulation pulled through the centre, split levels or rooflights to unlock a constrained plan. Cinemas, gyms, wine rooms and joinery are planned as architecture, not squeezed into leftover corners.

SPATIAL COORDINATION: STILL QUESTION IT

Room sizes tighten, openings are refined, the structure and services are coordinated with the layout, and materials begin to matter. Iteration is still healthy here. It is better to refine a staircase, glazing rhythm or roof profile before submission than to regret it later.

TECHNICAL DESIGN: THE STAGE MOST UNDERESTIMATED

Junctions, structural coordination, services, insulation, drainage, waterproofing, thresholds, lighting positions and specifications all become precise. Decisions skipped here do not disappear: they resurface on site.

> The strongest houses are rarely the most complicated. They are the ones where the brief, the site and the technical detail agree with one another.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

RIBA PLAN OF WORK STAGES →

OUR PROCESS →

STEP FIVE

WHY YOU STILL NEED **AN ARCHITECT**

"Design your own home" is a useful phrase, but it can mislead. You should shape the vision: the house should reflect your habits, priorities and taste. Planning law, heritage policy, structural movement, waterproofing, Building Regulations and the coordination of consultants are professional work.

AN ARCHITECT SOLVES PROBLEMS YOU DO NOT YET KNOW EXIST

The best reason to appoint an architect is not drafting. It is judgement: seeing that stair headroom will tighten once structure is introduced, that a glazing line conflicts with drainage, that a listed-fabric argument is too weak, or that a bathroom layout leaves no sensible service zone.

The result is a house where the steel disappears into the architecture, the lights sit where the joinery needs them and the basement stair borrows daylight because someone thought about the section, not only the plan.

JAMES LATTER
Managing Director, Harper Latter Architects

THE WIDER TEAM

On dense London sites these roles are not administrative extras. They are part of the design.

READ MORE ON OUR WEBSITE

ARCHITECT OR INTERIOR DESIGNER? → | MEET OUR TEAM → | ABOUT THE PRACTICE →

COMMON QUESTIONS

CAN I DESIGN MY OWN HOME WITHOUT PROFESSIONAL DRAWINGS?

You can create the vision, the priorities and even rough layouts. But a house that needs planning permission, Building Regulations compliance, structural coordination or work to a listed property requires professional drawings and specialist input.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE?

It depends on the scale and sensitivity of the project. What matters is sequencing: time spent getting the brief, survey and planning route right at the start helps avoid delay and rework later.

START WITH A **CONVERSATION**

020 7183 0590 | office@harperlatterarchitects.co.uk
harperlatterarchitects.co.uk

HARPER LATTER
ARCHITECTS

CONTACT US →

READ OUR JOURNAL →