

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

My Craft: Architect Paul Kariouk

For architect Paul Kariouk, choosing the right people to work with is as important as the work itself. Here, he writes about his deeply personal approach to client projects.

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I run a small architecture firm in Ottawa, employing a team of four, each of whom have been personally invited to join my team. I make sure that our clients share our values: are they kind people with humanistic values that I share? If the answer is 'no', then I pass on that work.

One of the most important things I've learned in my career is that there's zero relation between a stimulating project and budget. The matter at hand is how trusting and open-minded the client is.



Paul Kariouk and his dog Charlemagne, and before-and-after images of one of his projects.

When I started my career, I worked in a number of NYC architecture offices, but ultimately wanting to start my own practice, I found that it's almost impossible to start one and get clients unless you happen to come from a well-heeled family, who are able to support you for years as you get established — all the while bringing in clients who are also well-heeled friends of the family.

I soon became tired of working for fancy folks doing dubiously fancy houses; I wanted to work *with* my clients rather than for them; to collaborate on projects that we both found stimulating and rewarding. So I started to pursue teaching positions in smaller places away from NYC, where a young architect could pick up a good number of projects and start a new practice.

I now teach at Carlton University, Ottawa, which has a unique, small, and artful architecture school. While it was a sleepy place in terms of design when I got here in 2001, it was exactly the mainstay I was seeking for my projects from the start. I was the only residential architect here doing what I do, so it was easy for me to get my name out there.

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While I'm a tenured professor and I absolutely love to teach, I still wanted to have active input with my clients and office team. So, as a compromise, I decided to resign half my teaching position, which allows for a stable but humble salary that's enough to ensure I'll never have to take on office work I won't find stimulating.

The clients we take on are generally younger than most folks who commission architects; they're people who are looking to make an investment for the long haul, to raise a family and stay there even into retirement. To that end, they want homes that are very efficient, but also spacious and spatial; the antithesis of McMansions further out in the suburbs that are over-scaled, cheaply-built, and actually, ironically, feel cramped and dark.

No two projects I've worked on since I started my practice look alike, simply because I listen very closely to my clients, who would be more aptly termed *collaborators*. I don't sell a canned product; I sell a slow, thoughtful process that's more like a journey — as much for me and my office team members as for them.



One litmus test for a client's compatibility with us and our values is whether or not they're dog people (or at least animal people), as I always have a large shaggy dog at my side (these years it's my Leonberger, Charlemagne). It might sound like an odd requirement to base things on, but if someone doesn't like the idea of having a dog around, with all the quirks and unexpected actions it can bring, there's no way that prospective client is going to be able to enjoy the process of building a deeply customised home with all the time and soul-searching I expect — and require — of my clients.

Although our clients are shrewd about the lifetime investments they make, they're also extremely open minded and willing to take a risk. Yes, I've lost clients when they realised I had no preconceived product to sell to them, but every single client who followed my lead and embraced a more personal journey to the end of construction has become a dear friend, with zero exceptions.

Visit [Kariouk Associates](#) for more information on Paul's work.