Building Designer interview questions

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What to expect

Building Designer interviews are usually run by a principal designer, studio manager or practice owner, and they are as much a portfolio review as a conversation. Expect them to look at actual drawings you have produced and to test how you think about compliance, clients and buildability.

- **Portfolio and drawing review:** You will be asked to walk through a set of drawings you produced, explain the decisions behind them, and answer questions about how they were coordinated and documented.
- **Process and workflow:** Questions about how you take a job from brief to issue, how you set up a drawing set, and how you manage revisions and consultant input.
- **Technical and code knowledge:** Questions probing your understanding of the National Construction Code, Australian Standards, planning schemes and where you go to check something you are unsure about.
- **Client-facing scenario:** Scenarios about a client whose expectations conflict with the planning rules, a budget that will not stretch to the brief, or a client who wants to change scope late.
- **Builder and site liaison:** Questions about resolving discrepancies on site, responding to requests for information, and how you protect the integrity of your documentation.

Most practices start with a short phone or video screen covering your background, software and availability, then bring you in for a longer interview with the principal or design lead. That second interview typically includes a portfolio walkthrough, a conversation about a past project, and often a short practical exercise such as marking up a plan or answering a compliance question on the spot. Some practices ask for referees before a second round, and smaller studios may combine everything into one sitting.

1. Walk me through how you take a client brief from the first conversation to a set of drawings a builder can price.

Why they ask

This is the core of the job and the interviewer wants to hear a repeatable process, not a vague description of being creative.

How to structure your answer

Use a chronological walk-through. Move through each stage in order: initial client meeting and site inspection, feasibility and planning checks, concept sketches and client sign-off, consultant coordination, then documentation and issue. Name the checkpoints where you stop and confirm with the client or the certifier.

Example answer

“I start with a meeting on site if I can, because a lot of the brief comes out of what is actually there, the fall of the land, the neighbouring windows, where the sun lands. From that I do a feasibility pass against the planning scheme and the bushfire and energy requirements before I draw anything, because there is no point sketching something that cannot be approved. Then I produce two or three concept options in SketchUp, take them back to the client and work through the trade-offs, usually budget against floor area. Once a concept is signed off I bring in the structural engineer, surveyor and energy assessor and start the documentation set in Revit, coordinating their input as I go rather than bolting it on at the end. Before issue I run my own compliance check against the NCC and the relevant Australian Standards, then it goes to the building surveyor. By the time the builder gets it, the set should be complete enough to price without calling me.”

2. Tell me about a time you found a compliance issue in a set of drawings, your own or someone else's. How did you handle it?

Why they ask

The interviewer is testing honesty, technical knowledge and how you operate when the problem is yours.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Set up the situation and the project, describe the specific non-compliance you found, explain the action you took including who you told and how quickly, and finish with the result for the project and what you changed afterwards.

> **Example answer**
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> *“I was documenting a two-storey addition where the existing upper floor had been added by a previous owner, and when I checked the stair against the National Construction Code I found the head clearance and the balustrade height were both short of what was required. It was partly inherited, but it was in my set. I flagged it to the client the same day with a written summary and two options, one that reworked the stair within the existing footprint and one that relocated it and gained usable floor area elsewhere. They took the second option. It added a few weeks to documentation but it meant the building surveyor did not pick it up at certification, and the client ended up with a better layout. Now I do a code check on existing elements before I start drawing, not after.”*

3. A client wants a design that the planning scheme will not easily allow. How do you handle that conversation?

Why they ask

Building Designers spend a lot of time delivering bad news well, and practices want someone who can hold a client relationship without overpromising.

How to structure your answer

Use a judgement structure: acknowledge what the client wants, establish the planning reality in plain language, present options with their trade-offs, then land on a recommendation and a decision point. Show that you do not simply refuse and you do not promise an approval you cannot deliver.

> **Example answer**
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> *“First I make sure I understand what they are actually trying to achieve, because sometimes the setback they are asking for is a way of solving a different problem, like a room that needs more light. Then I explain the relevant clause in plain terms, what it permits, and what a variation or a town planning application would involve in time and cost. I usually bring options, for example a compliant design that gets most of what they want, or a permit application route with an honest assessment of the risk. I put it in writing so they can think about it, and I ask them to decide before I progress the drawings further. I would rather have an uncomfortable conversation early than have a client discover at permit stage that the design was never going to be approved.”*

4. A builder rings you from site saying the drawings do not match what is there. What do you do?

Why they ask

Site queries are a daily reality in this role, and the interviewer wants to see that you respond rather than deflect.

How to structure your answer

Use a judgement-under-pressure structure: get the facts first, check the documentation against the claim, decide who needs to be involved, then close the loop in writing. Emphasise not making verbal changes that never reach the drawing set.

> **Example answer**

“I ask them to send a photo and a mark-up of the drawing with the dimension they are querying, so I am working from the same information they are. Then I pull up the survey and the architectural set and see whether it is a documentation error, a site condition nobody could have known about, or a builder misunderstanding. If it is my error I say so straight away and issue a revision. If it needs the engineer or the certifier, I loop them in before anything is built. Whatever we agree on the phone gets confirmed by email and then by an amended drawing, because a verbal fix on site is how you end up with a building that does not match its approved documents.”

5. Which software do you work in day to day, and how do you set up a drawing set?

Why they ask

This is a technical check on whether you can pick up the practice's existing systems and produce consistent, coordinator-friendly output.

How to structure your answer

Answer with specifics: name the software, describe your typical template and file structure, and explain how you handle revisions, markups and coordination with consultants. Keep it concrete rather than listing every program you have touched.

Example answer

“Most of my documentation is in Revit, with AutoCAD for existing conditions work and legacy projects, SketchUp for early concept modelling, and Bluebeam Revu for markups, comparing revisions and issuing to consultants. I set up a project template with the practice titleblock, standard views, sheets and a clear sheet numbering system before I draw anything, because retrofitting that later is painful. Revisions go into a revision schedule with clouded changes so the builder can see exactly what moved. When I issue to the engineer or the certifier I send a PDF set through Bluebeam, not a DWG, so nobody is editing a copy that then diverges from the master. I am comfortable learning a new template or a different CAD platform if that is how the practice works.”

6. How do you keep up with changes to the National Construction Code and state planning rules?

Why they ask

Compliance currency is the difference between a smooth approval and a costly redesign, and practices want to know you treat it as ongoing work.

How to structure your answer

Describe your actual habits and sources: formal channels, professional membership, and how you verify something you are unsure about. Finish with a concrete example of a change you picked up and applied.

Example answer

“I am a member of the Building Designers Association of Australia and I read their updates, and I subscribe to the NCC and the relevant Australian Standards so I can check the current clause rather than relying on memory. I also follow my state planning scheme amendments, because a change to a ResCode clause or a heritage overlay can affect a job I already have on the board. If I am genuinely unsure, I ring the building surveyor early and ask, which is far cheaper than finding out at certification. A recent example was a NCC energy efficiency change, where I worked through it with the energy assessor before I started a new set of documentation so the design met it from the concept stage rather than being retrofitted.”