

You and Your Architect

GETTING STARTED

Whether you have extensive experience with design and construction or are coming to both for the first time, it can be helpful to ask yourself a few questions before interviewing prospective architects.

You do not need firm or complete answers at this point. Rather, these questions will help to ensure that your initial communications will be clear and productive and enable you to select the design professional best suited to your needs.

- How will your project be used? Do you have specific ideas on how to translate these activities into spaces and square footage?
- Do you have a site? Or will this also be a subject of discussion with the architect?
- Have you decided upon a schedule and budget?
- What are your overall aspirations for the project—aesthetic and emotional as well as practical?
- Who will be making the critical decisions—you alone, your family, or a committee of some sort?
- Where will the resources come from to create and operate your project?
- Are you willing to pay a little extra up front on systems that will save energy or bring other operations savings and payback over time?
- Will you consider integrating sustainable design strategies in order to reduce negative impacts on the environment, improve the health of occupants, create a more comfortable atmosphere, and improve building performance?
- Do you have previous experience with design and construction? If so, in what ways were you successful, and was the experience in any way disappointing?

A good architect will listen closely to your answers, help you solidify your goals and desires, and translate them into an effective building. Look for a good listener, and you'll find a good architect. A list of questions to ask when interviewing prospective architects can be downloaded from howdesignworks.aia.org.

Selecting Your Architect

Every architecture firm brings its own combination of skills, expertise, interests, and values to its projects. The challenge is to find the one that aligns most closely with your project's needs.

Some of the most frequently asked questions regarding architect selection:

When should I bring the architect into the picture?

As early as possible. Architects can help you define your project in every respect and may also do site studies, assist in securing planning and zoning approvals, and provide a variety of other predesign services.

Should I meet with more than one firm?

Usually, yes. One obvious exception is when you already have a good relationship with an architect.

How do I find suitable firms to contact ?

Talk to individuals who have developed similar facilities and ask who they interviewed. If there are projects that you have admired—whether similar to your own or not—find out who designed them. And your local AIA component will be able to help you identify firms appropriate to your situation and budget and may also maintain referral lists (www.aia.org). Finally, AIA Architect Finder, a national database of AIA member firms, is available at architectfinder.aia.org.

What can I realistically expect to learn from an interview? How can I structure the interview to make it as informative as possible?

You can learn how the architect's team will approach your project by talking to key members. Review buildings the firm has designed that are similar in type and size to yours or that have addressed similar issues. Find out how the firm will gather information, establish priorities, and make decisions, and what the architect sees as the important issues for consideration.

You might also want to inquire about the ability of the architect to stand financially behind the services to be provided. For example, you might ask if the firm carries professional liability insurance, much like that maintained by doctors and lawyers. Indeed, you should choose your architect at least as carefully as you would any other professional provider.

Why are formal interviews desirable?

An interview addresses one issue that cannot be covered in brochures: the chemistry between you and the architecture firm.

Should I expect a firm to deliver all the services necessary to complete the project?

Not necessarily. You may have considerable project-planning, design, and construction expertise and may be capable of undertaking some tasks yourself. Alternatively, you may find it necessary to add other consultants to the team. Discussion with your architect will establish who will coordinate owner-supplied work or other services.

What is “green” architecture, and do I need to discuss it?

“Green” or sustainable design refers to the increasingly popular and important practice of creating architecture that is friendly to both the environment and the end user and the inhabitants. The concepts of sustainable design include:

- Maximization of site potential
- Reduction of non-renewable energy consumption
- Conservation of water
- Reduction of waste
- Use of environmentally friendly products
- Improvement of indoor environmental quality

Using sustainable design strategies may be as simple as using recycled, non-toxic materials or may involve a more comprehensive program incorporating such elements as green roofs, photovoltaic cells that capture sunlight, and air and water treatment systems. Although many firms are generally familiar with green design, you will want to question prospective architects closely about their level of experience in this regard and examine past projects that incorporated sustainable strategies. (For more information, visit www.aia.org/walkthewalk and the U.S. Green Building Council at www.usgbc.org.)

How many firms should I interview, and how should they be selected?

Typically, three to five firms—enough to see the range of possibilities but not so many that an already tough decision will be further complicated. Treat each firm fairly, offering equal time and access to your site and existing facilities.

Factors such as experience, technical competence, and available staff resources will be important to your decision. Thus, if you are approaching more than one firm, make sure that you can provide all the information required to ensure that the proposals you get offer the same scope of services so that you can evaluate them on a consistent basis.

How should I follow up?

By soliciting references. Ask past clients to assess the performance of both the firm and the resulting architecture. Notify the selected firm or short-listed firms as soon as possible to ensure their availability.

On what should I base my decision?

Personal confidence in the architect is paramount. Seek also an appropriate balance among design ability, technical competence, professional service, and cost.

Selection Is a Mutual Process

The most thoughtful architects are as careful in selecting their clients as owners are in selecting architects. Be prepared to answer questions about your project's purpose, budget, time frame, site, and the team of players you anticipate being involved with the project. And don't be afraid to be frank. Tell the architect what you know and what you expect. Ask for an explanation of anything you do not understand. The more you put on the table at the outset, the better the chances are for a successful project. As client and architect jointly evaluate alternative approaches to the project's direction, priorities are clarified, and new possibilities emerge. There is no substitute for the intensive dialogue and inquiry that characterize the design process.

Real-World work

Explore how clients and architects worked together on real projects. See how AIA architects help their clients visualize projects, then guide them through the build. Examples of new green builds, urban & suburban renovations, and more are available to view at howdesignworks.aia.org.

Services Available from Architects

As the owner, you will find it helpful to review this chart with your architect to acquaint yourself with the professional services your project may require. Ask your architect for an explanation of any unfamiliar terms or processes.

Negotiating the Agreement

The formal agreement between you and your architect is an opportunity to ensure that you both envision the same project, requirements, and expectations. Before committing these to paper, use the steps presented below to identify any items that may have been missed.

Establish project requirements with these crucial questions:

- What is to be designed and built?
- Where will (or might) it be built?
- What is the level of quality?
- What is the role of the project in your life, your community, and/or your business?
- What are the scheduling requirements or restraints?
- What is the target date for completion?
- What are the budget and sources of financing?
- Who are the anticipated key team members?

Describe project tasks and assign responsibility for each one.

You and your architect should clarify the administrative, design, and construction tasks essential to successfully completing the project, as well as the services required and who will be responsible for each of them.

Identify your schedule requirements.

Place all tasks on a timeline, estimating duration for each, and identify those that, if delayed, will postpone completion of your project. Compare the timeline with your target completion date and adjust one or both as appropriate.

Take a critical look at the results.

Good project schedules allow enough time for decision making. Is your schedule reasonable, particularly given the project's requirements and budget? Have you allowed enough time to review the architect's submissions, receive any necessary approvals, and make your decisions?

The Owner-Architect Agreement.

If you have done your homework, the written contract should follow without difficulty. One thing to remember: As with medical or legal services, architecture is not a product that can be perfectly quantified, and just like your doctor or lawyer, your architect typically does not warrant or guarantee results. As a provider of professional services, an architect is required to perform to a professional standard. Courts recognize this, and so too must responsible clients.

Compensating Your Architect

The fee an architect receives depends on the types and levels of services provided, and the formal agreement you develop jointly with your architect will be an excellent basis for a compensation proposal. There are a number of commonly used payment structures—compensation may be based on one or more of them—and arriving at the one that is fairest to both client and architect requires thoughtful consideration.

- Time-Based Methods.

Multiple of Direct Personnel Expense multiplies salaries plus benefits by a factor representing overhead and profit.

Professional Fee Plus Expenses includes salaries, benefits, and overhead as the expense, and the fee may be a multiplier, percentage, or lump sum.

Hourly Billing Rates include salaries, benefits, overhead, and profit in rates for designated personnel.

- Stipulated Sum. Compensation is stated as a dollar amount.

- **Percentage of Cost of the Work.** Compensation is calculated by applying an agreed-upon percentage to the estimated or actual cost of the work.
- **Square Footage.** Compensation equals the square footage of the structure multiplied by a pricing factor.
- **Unit Cost.** Compensation is based on the number of units such as rooms and apartments.
- **Royalty.** Compensation is a share in the owner's income or profit derived from the project.

Suppose my project has many repetitive units. Does it make sense to use these as a basis for compensation?

Will the number of units bear a reasonable relationship to the responsibilities of the architect? If the answer is yes, unit cost may be an appropriate method of compensation.

When does it make sense to consider hourly compensation?

It makes good sense when there are many unknowns. Many projects begin with hourly billing and continue until the scope of the project is better defined.

What does a stipulated sum include?

Generally, it includes the architect's direct personnel expenses, other direct expenses chargeable to the project, indirect expense or overhead, and profit. The stipulated sum does not include reimbursable expenses.

What are reimbursable expenses?

These are out-of-pocket expenses incurred by the architect on behalf of the owner, such as long-distance travel and communications, reproduction of contract documents, and authorized overtime premiums.

What about payment schedules?

Ask your architect to provide a proposed schedule of payments. Such a schedule will help you plan for the financial requirements of the project.

What other expenses can the owner expect?

These may include site surveys and legal descriptions, geotechnical services, required technical tests during construction, an on-site project representative, and the necessary legal, auditing, and insurance counseling services needed to fulfill the client's responsibilities.

What if too little is known about the project to determine the full extent of professional services in advance?

If this is the case, then engage the architect to provide project definition and other pre-design services first, with remaining phases and services to be determined later.

Design-Build

In the past, clients typically developed separate agreements with both architect and contractor. More recently, an option that involves a combination of the two, known as design-build, has become increasingly popular. There are four basic design-build scenarios:

- Design-build-contractor: The architect and contractor work together to develop a set of bid documents from which a client may

choose and then build them according to the contractor's prescripts.

- Design-build-architect: The architect designs and capitalizes a project, then engages the necessary labor to bring it to completion.
- Bridging: The client engages an architect to conceptualize a design, then hires a design-build firm to develop the concept

and build the project under the supervision of the original architect.

- Construction management: The client makes separate contracts with both an architect and a contractor, then gives construction

management responsibility to a third party.

Keeping the Project on Track

Successful projects are invariably the result of effective management by both client and architect. There are a number of steps you can take to ensure that your project moves smoothly through both the design and construction phases.

Schedule for Architect's Services.

Carefully review the architect's schedule for services. Ask that the schedule be updated on a regular basis.

Team Member. Take part in the project-planning process. Be sure that your own deadlines, as well as your own decision-making needs, are reflected in the schedule.

Client Representative. Identify a single person to represent you and to speak for you at planning sessions and project meetings.

Internal Coordination . If several people or departments must be involved in your project's development, make it clear that the client representative is authorized to speak for you.

Meetings. Plan regular meetings of the project team and participate in them. These should have clear agendas, and persons with assigned tasks should have them completed prior to meeting.

Documentation. Require that contacts between architect and client be documented and the results shared with appropriate members of the project team. This system keeps everyone informed of what is being discussed and decided outside of formal meetings and presentations.

Decision Process. Be sure that both you and your architect understand the process by which you will make decisions: Who requires what information, whose approval is required, and how much time should be allocated for review of submissions?

Agreement Modifications. Keep the owner-architect agreement up to date. Modify it when project scope or services are changed.

Questions. When you have questions, ask them. Pay particular attention to design submissions since the work reflected in each submission will be further developed in the next. All questions should be resolved before construction begins.

Problems. Address problems when they arise and before small ones become large ones. Regular project meetings provide a natural opportunity.

Contract Administration. Once you've approved the work, you want it built as designed, and your architect is well positioned to administer the contract between you and the contractor. This requires considerable experience, time, and effort, but contract administration services represent the spending of a penny to save a dollar and are highly recommended.

Such services include

- Evaluating work for compliance with drawings and specifications
- Approving shop drawings, materials, and product samples
- Reviewing the results of material tests and inspections
- Approving the contractor's requests for payment
- Handling requests for design changes during construction
- Administering the completion, start-up, and close-out process of your project