



The Potomac Valley Chapter of The American Institute of Architects

presents

The Beginner's Guide to Selecting an Architect

Why Should You Hire an Architect?

Few people realize how complicated it is to build - that is until they find themselves lost in the maze of design options, building codes, zoning laws, contractors, and so on. No two building projects are exactly alike, so there is no single, clear-cut path to follow.

The architect is the one professional who has the education, training, experience, and vision to guide you through the entire design and construction process, from helping you define what you want to build to helping you get the most for your construction dollar.

Architects see the big picture. They don't just design four walls and a roof - they create total environments, interiors and exteriors, that satisfy functional needs and are exciting, dynamic spaces in which to work and live.

Whether you are remodeling, adding on, or building from scratch, the architect can guide the way. Working with contractors and other construction professionals, architects can help you end up with a well-designed project that meets your needs and works with your budget and time frame.

THE ARCHITECT SOLVES PROBLEMS

Most building projects start with a want or need. "I need more file space in my office." Or, "We've outgrown our house." But how does that need or want get translated into square feet and three-dimensional space?

That is what architects are trained to do, solve problems in creative ways. With their broad knowledge of design and construction, architects can show you alternatives and options you might never think of on your own.

Need more room for your growing family? An architect can show you how to enlarge your home so you don't have to move. Not sure how fast your business is going to grow? An architect can design an office that meets your needs today and can be adapted for tomorrow. Have a limited budget? The architect looks for ways to make your project cost effective.

THE ARCHITECT CAN SAVE YOU MONEY

The architect's services are a wise investment for the money, not an added cost to your project. Why?

- ! Because a well-conceived project can be built more efficiently and economically. Architects plan your project with you. As your ideas evolve, changes can be made on paper much less expensively than later on when construction is underway. Thorough drawings also make it easier for the contractor to accurately price and build your project.

- ! Because energy-efficient buildings can save you money on fuel bills down the road. An architect can design a building to maximize heating from the sun and let in natural light, thus reducing your heating, cooling, and electric bills over time.

- ! Because the architect can work with your budget and help you select the appropriate materials and workmanship at a fair price. Architects develop the drawings and specifications to help you get bids for construction that are based on your requirements.
- ! Because an architect can help you choose materials and finishes that are durable as well as beautiful, saving on frequent maintenance and replacement costs. Architects work to stay abreast of advances in roofing, brick work, floor tiling, paint finishes, etc. Their familiarity with the full range of materials enables them to suggest the appropriate materials for your project.
- ! Because good design sells. A well-designed house has a higher resale value. A well-designed store draws customers. A well-designed work environment attracts employees and increases productivity.

THE ARCHITECT CAN MAKE YOUR LIFE EASIER

Let's face it, building is a long process that is often messy and disruptive, particularly if you are living or working in the space under construction. The architect you hire looks out for your interests and tries to find ways to make that process go smoothly.

If your project requires engineering or other design services, the architect can coordinate this team of experts so you don't have to. The architect sorts out complex building codes and zoning laws. The architect can help you find qualified construction contractors based on your requirements. The architect visits the construction site to help verify that the project is being built according to plans and specifications.

How Do You Find the Right Architect?

Each architect has his or her own style, approach to design, and methods of work. So it's important to find an architect who understands your style and needs. If you have already worked with a particular architect and feel comfortable, it makes sense to call him or her again. If not, you'll have to do a little work.

A Little Homework Goes a Long Way

First, think carefully about your building needs and goals. Do you need more space? What activities will be housed in the space? How much can you spend on the project? How will you finance it? Where will it be located? Do you plan to do some of the work yourself? Don't worry if you don't have all the answers. The architect can help you clarify your goals, if necessary.

Start building a list of potential architects. Find out who designed projects in your community that you like. Get recommendations from friends, relatives, acquaintances, or the local AIA Chapter. Check to see if the architect is a member of The American Institute of Architects (AIA). Membership in the AIA means that the architect subscribes to a professional code of ethics and has access to a variety of professional and technical resources.

Call each firm on your list. Describe your project and ask if they are available to take on your project. If they are, request literature outlining the firm's qualifications and experience. If the office is unable to handle your project, ask if they can suggest another firm.

The materials you receive from interested firms might include a letter of interest, brochures, fact sheets, photos of past work, and biographical material about key personnel. Look beyond the style of the brochure to determine which firms have the right experience and capabilities for your project. At this point, you should be able to narrow your list to two or three architects you will interview.

Talking Chemistry

The interview is crucial because it gives you a chance to meet the people who will design your project and to see if the chemistry is right. Remember, you will be working with the architect for a long time. You want someone with whom you feel comfortable.

Allow at least an hour for the interview. The meeting might take place at the architect's office-helpful because you can see where the work will be done. Or the interview could be held at your home or office-helpful because the architect can learn more about your project and needs - whichever feels right. The architect may show you slides or photographs of past work and describe how the firm's experience and expertise will help you. While many architects do not charge for this interview, some do. Before the interview, ask if there is a fee.

During the interview, ask questions. How busy is the firm? Does it have the capacity to take on your work? Who will handle the job? Insist on meeting the person who will actually design the project. What is the firm's design philosophy? How does the architect intend to approach your project? How interested is the firm in your job? Talk about your budget and find out the range of fees that the architect would anticipate for your project. Before making a final selection, have the architect take you to one completed project. It is proper to ask your architect for references from past clients. These references are invaluable.

If, during the course of the discussion, there is something you don't understand, ask the architect for clarification. If you feel intimidated or if the architect doesn't explain things in a way that you can understand, then he or she may not be right for you.

Making the Final Cut

Ultimately, you will choose the architect whom you trust and feel is right for your project. Unlike buying a car or a new appliance, you can't see the final product and test it out. The architect provides professional services, not a product. The right architect will be the one who can provide the judgment, technical expertise, and creative skills, at a reasonable cost, to help you realize a project that fits your practical needs as well as your dreams.

A Word About How Architects Get Paid

How architects charge for their services can be confusing to first-time clients. There is no set fee for a particular type of project. Fees are established in a number of ways, depending on the sort of project, and the amount and nature of the services best suited to your unique needs.

Some projects are best done at hourly rates; others for a stipulated sum per unit, based on what is to be built (for example, the number of square feet, apartments, rooms, etc.). Some architects charge a fixed fee; others charge a percentage of construction costs. Whenever you feel it is appropriate, discuss with your architect how he or she would expect to establish the fee on your project. The architect may suggest a combination of the above methods. The basis for the fee, the amount, and payment schedule are issues for you and your architect to work out together.

Team Work

The best building projects are created when the client and architect work together as a team. Take an active role. Don't delegate decision-making to a spouse or business partner unless you are prepared to live with his or her decisions.

Designing a building is an exciting, creative challenge. The process can be fun, satisfying, and positive. If at any time in the design process you are uncomfortable, discuss your concerns with your architect. You don't want the

architect to control the project to the point that the building is no longer yours. But you also want to be careful not to restrict the architect so much that you are not getting your money's worth in terms of design creativity.

Get It in Writing

Once you have found the architect, you are ready to put in writing the terms of your agreement on the scope of work, services, schedule, construction budget, and architect's compensation. This written agreement can take many forms. The AIA has developed a variety of standard contract forms which are used industry-wide.

Six Steps Toward Building Your Dream

Design and construction projects involve several steps. Typically, projects go through the following six phases. However, on some projects, several of these steps may be combined or there may be additional ones.

STEP 1: Programming/Deciding What to Build

The homeowner and architect discuss the requirements for the project (how many rooms, the function of the spaces, etc.), testing the fit between the owner's needs, wants, and budget.

STEP 2: Schematic Design/Rough Sketches

The architect prepares a series of rough sketches, known as schematic design, which show the general arrangement of rooms and of the site. Some architects also prepare models to help visualize the project. The homeowner approves these sketches before proceeding to the next phase.

STEP 3: Design Development / Refining the Design

The architect prepares more detailed drawings to illustrate other aspects of the proposed design. Floor plans show all the rooms in correct size and shape. Outline specifications are prepared, listing the major materials and room finishes.

STEP 4: Preparation of Construction Documents

Once the homeowner has approved the design, the architect prepares detailed drawings and specifications, which the contractor will use to establish actual construction cost and build the project. These drawings and specifications become part of the building contract.

STEP 5: Hiring the Contractor

The homeowner selects and hires the contractor. The architect may be willing to make some recommendations. In many cases, homeowners choose from among several contractors they've asked to submit bids on the job. The architect can help you prepare bidding documents as well as invitations to bid and instructions to bidders.

STEP 6: Construction Administration

While the contractor will physically build the home or addition, the architect can assist the homeowner in making sure that the project is built according to the plans and specifications. The architect can make site visits to observe construction, review and approve the contractor's applications for payment, and generally keep the homeowner informed of the project's progress. The contractor is solely responsible for construction methods, techniques, schedules and procedures.