



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 the projects in your community that you like. Get recommendations from friends, relatives, or acquaintances who have worked with architects. 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. Contact your local AIA local chapter – many have lists of member-owned architecture firms that are interested in doing various types of projects.

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 can 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 handle your 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.



Making the Final Cut

Ultimately, you will choose the architect whom you trust and feel is right for the 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 on 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 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. 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. It also can be hard work. 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 American Institute of Architects has developed a variety of standard contract forms which are used industry-wide.