A construction project, whether it is a home addition, a historic renovation, or a skyscraper, requires a substantial investment of time, energy, and money. If you are like many owners, this construction effort may be your largest lifetime investment. Additionally, buildings continue to incur expense over time. Maintenance and recurring energy costs, repairs, remodels, even property taxes, become part of the overall expenditure. Well-designed buildings that incorporate innovative, cost-effective solutions reduce overall costs and increase market value. Hiring an architect is the critical first step to maximizing return on your investment.

As the only profession educated, trained, and tested to create the interface between the natural and built environments, architects have the practiced skills to integrate functionality, building materials and systems, structure, codes and regulations, energy conservation, and aesthetics to meet your very specific needs. Architects are licensed professionals, experienced in the numerous complexities of design and construction, offering services from project inception to construction completion and beyond. Consulting an architect at the beginning of the project planning process can save you thousands of dollars and significantly reduce the time required to build your project by aligning needs, budget, quality, and schedule. Experts in their field, architects are up-to-date on the latest codes and regulations, as well as the most advanced building systems and materials. They have a command of both the broad concepts that give coherence to your project and the important details that can make it run smoothly and stay within budget, while incorporating options to lower long-term maintenance costs.

Throughout the design process, an architect brings visions to life, integrating elements that are important to individual clients. If you have environmental concerns, your architect can designate sustainable materials and systems. If you have physical limitations, safety and innovative functionality become top priorities. Perhaps you want a “smart building”—an architect can incorporate and coordinate technology that monitors and manages all building systems. Whether your individual requirements, architects create positive experiences for both owners and users.

From beginning to end, the advice and guidance of an architect mean a smoother, more stress-free building experience. An architect is your personal consultant to identify and resolve costly, time-consuming construction challenges ranging from site selection to zoning restrictions and environmental concerns. Architects are trained to explore innovative, cost-effective, and energy-saving solutions; their detailed designs and informed product specifications often eliminate the need for expensive change orders mid-construction. And, once the project is complete, you will continue to enjoy reduced maintenance and energy costs over the life of the building.

Finding the Right Architect

The American Institute of Architects is the best place to begin your search for an architect. The AIA advocates for architecture on both federal and state levels, serving and supporting its membership in their work to create quality design in the built environment. AIA members must be licensed and in good standing, adhere to a strict code of ethics and standards, and are committed to continuing their professional education. You can rely on their professionalism and expertise to deliver a quality experience with outstanding outcomes.

The AIA’s convenient, online Architect Finder makes it easy to identify architects in your locale who specialize in the building type you are interested in. An Architect Finder search can be complemented by additional sources such as referrals, reference to architecture awards programs, and architects’ own websites.
Design is Good Business

Why Hire an Architect? (continued)

The Selection Process

To begin a project, reflect on what you bring to it: your knowledge, experience, needs, desires, aspirations, and personal preferences. What do you already know about the project, and what can an architect help you determine about it? What are your expectations? What are your resources?

The average American architectural firm is made up of nine or ten people; many are smaller, and there are some with a staff of a thousand. Some firms specialize in one or more facility or project types; others are generalists. Each firm and architect brings a different combination of skills, expertise, interests, and values to projects.

Unless you have a successful relationship with an architect already, interview several architects before making your selection, to identify the individual or team best able to realize your vision and meet your budget requirements. Ask to see projects that are of similar size and type and that have addressed issues similar to those your project will face. Ask the architect how he or she will approach your project—how many staff members will be assigned to it, how your interaction will be structured, how options will be presented for your consideration. Ask what the architect expects of you—the information you will need to provide, the decisions you’ll need to make, and when you’ll need to make them. Ask for references from previous clients: you will want to know how well the architect’s work stacked up against their expectations. The owner-architect relationship is also a business relationship; feel free to ask the architects how they conduct their business, how responsive they are to your management and decision styles, and how successful they have been with project budgets and timelines. Take advantage of the interview to assess the one issue that can’t be covered in brochures and websites: the chemistry between the architect and you. Above all, look for a good listener.

Be frank. Tell the architect what you know and what you expect. Ask for an explanation of anything you don’t understand. From project inception, the more the architect knows about your expectations and resources, and the better you understand the architect’s services and expectations, the better the chances for a successful project. Only when the project issues have been clearly outlined can the architect translate those issues to the project’s budget, schedule, and design.

The Agreement

Once you choose an architect, the AIA recommends that you and the architect enter into a formal agreement that:

- Clearly defines all of the project requirements
- Describes project tasks and assigns roles and responsibilities
- Identifies timelines and schedule requirements, including target start and completion dates
- Provides a “reality check” that allows for enough decision making and redesign time
- Establishes the architect’s compensation and method for computing that compensation based on the information contained in the agreement

This contract becomes a working document that helps identify estimated costs and associated fees, guides discussion, and helps prevent misunderstandings. The AIA’s fair and balanced library of contract documents sets the industry standard and is the cost-effective option for the design and construction industry. The AIA can help you select from among the many items available to fit your project.

In Summary

“There are few things more satisfying than a successful project. The secret to success lies in the professional, business, and personal relationship between owner and architect.”


Selecting an architect for a project is an intensely personal experience. You and your architect must be able to communicate effectively, have a high level of mutual trust, and share the same vision of the completed project. Cost and fees will always be a factor; however, a successful working relationship will ensure the desired outcome, which is always the best return on investment.

Additional Resources

The American Institute of Architects, the AIA California Council, and local AIA chapters can provide you with additional information: www.aia.org and www.aiacc.org.