A construction project, whether it is a home addition, an historic renovation, or a skyscraper, requires a substantial investment of time, energy, and money. For many owners, this construction effort may be their 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 you is the client's critical first step toward maximizing return on investment.

The accompanying AIACC whitepaper, “Why Hire an Architect?” describes the value that a client can expect to gain from an architect’s services. It is up to you to substantiate those expectations:

As a member of the only profession educated, trained, and tested to create the interface between the natural and built environments, you have the practiced skills to integrate functionality, building materials and systems, structure, codes and regulations, energy conservation, and aesthetics to meet a client's very specific needs. Make sure that the spoken, written, and visual presentations of your work underscore such integration.

You are a licensed professional, experienced in the myriad complexities of design and construction, offering services from project inception to construction completion and beyond. Demonstrate that your expertise can inform the entire project lifespan, from the earliest assessment of needs and desires through the sustainable operation of the completed building.

Clients expect you to 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. Explain how you go about aligning needs, budget, quality, and schedule, to save money and reduce the time required to build the project.

You are an expert in your field. Clients expect you to be up-to-date on the latest codes and regulations, as well as the most advanced building systems and materials. Be diligent in your own continuing research and education. While you can’t know everything yourself, you can show the potential client how you coordinate the expertise of a comprehensively knowledgeable team.

From beginning to end, the client hopes and expects that the guidance of an architect will mean a smoother, more stress-free building experience. Offer examples of how you have successfully identified and resolved potentially costly, time consuming construction challenges, including such things as site selection, zoning restrictions, and environmental concerns.

The AIA Architect Finder

“Why Hire an Architect” encourages clients to begin their search for an architect with the AIA Architect Finder, noting that “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.” Make sure your Architect Finder listing is up-to-date, and let clients know how your membership in the AIA represents your commitment to the highest professional standards.

The Selection Process

Many potential clients will be unfamiliar with the design and construction process, and even experienced clients may not fully realize its challenges and potential. Your correspondence and conversation with a potential client offers the first opportunity to demonstrate your expertise, by thoughtfully guiding the client to a fuller understanding. Ask the client to reflect on what they bring to the project: their knowledge, experience, needs, desires, aspirations, and personal opinions. Find out what they already know about the project, and help them identify what you can help them discover about it. Learn their expectations and their resources.
The client may have little idea about the nature and structure of architecture firms. Situate your firm relative to others in terms of size and specialization—or, if yours is a generalist firm, be prepared to explain the value of this approach. Articulate your particular combination of skills, expertise, interests, and values.

Show the client projects that are of similar size and type and that have addressed issues similar to those their project will face. Tell them how you will approach their project—how many staff members you will assign to it, how your interaction will be structured, how you will present options for their consideration. Tell the client what you will expect of them—the information they will need to provide, the decisions they'll need to make, and when they'll need to make them. Offer references from among your previous clients who can attest to how well your work stacked up against their expectations.

The owner-architect relationship is also a business relationship. Be prepared to tell the client how you conduct your business; they will likely be particularly interested in how successful you have been with project budgets and timelines. And ask the client about their business, to understand not only their management and decision styles, but also their business goals. Take advantage of the interview to assess the one issue that can't be covered in brochures and websites: the chemistry between the client and you. Above all, be a good listener.

Encourage the client to be frank, to tell you what they know and what they expect. Encourage them to ask for an explanation of anything they don’t understand. From project inception, the more the you know about the client's expectations and resources, and the better the client understands your services and expectations, the better the chances for a successful project. Only when the project issues have been clearly outlined can you translate those issues to the project's budget, schedule, and design.

The Agreement

Once you have been chosen, the AIA recommends that you and the client 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 your compensation and the 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.”

— “You and Your Architect,” AIA, 1995

For the client, selecting an architect is an intensely personal experience. You and your client 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.