

DESIGN IS GOOD BUSINESS

It doesn't just add value; it multiplies it.



Design is Good Business Firm Toolkit

Your building can do much more than keep the rain off your business; it can advance your business plan. To capture the full value of your capital program, you will do well to engage your architect in a discussion of your business goals, with your business leaders.

Before Design Begins

You've hired an architect to design a building for you. Whether it's a new building or a renovation, before the architect puts pen to paper or mouse to pad, there's a lot of information to gather and assess. The most important decisions are the early ones: what to build, how much to build, where to build. It is crucial that these early decisions be well informed. That's what the phase known as Pre-Design is for. Let's look at the essential considerations.

The Program

In its narrowest sense, the "program" is an accounting of the required spaces, their sizes and characteristics, and the relationships among them—what needs to be next to what. You may be able simply to provide a list of these requirements, but there are good reasons to involve your architect in the process of defining them. One is that there may be a variety of configurations that will satisfy your goals, and the architect is likely either to be familiar with the alternatives or to be able to research them efficiently. More importantly, it will be instructive for the architect to know not just what you need, but also why

Library

- [Savings by Design](#)
- [The Business Case for Green Building](#)
- [Green Schools Investment Guide](#)
- [The Technical Feasibility of Zero Net Energy Buildings in California](#)
- [The Dollars and Sense of Green Retrofits](#)

you need it. The more the architect knows about your organizational goals, the more the building will be able to contribute to those goals.

In addition to a quantifiable need for space, you will have other important criteria: the impression your building will make on passersby and visitors, the effect it will have on your employees, the impact it will have on the environment, and so on. These criteria comprise a broader, more robust sense of "program," the complexities of which are best worked through in collaboration with your architect.

The Site

Among the crucial early decisions is how to place the building on its site. Many factors influence this decision. Some have to do with the use of the building: how visitors or customers approach it, what rooms will benefit from north light, which views you want to capture. Others have to do with physics—the stability of the soil, for example—and even chemistry—measuring and mitigating toxic substances left by a previous use. Still others have to do with the law: required setbacks, utility easements, fire department access, the protection of natural resources or cultural artifacts. You want to know all these things up front, because you want the design to optimize your response to them—to kill as many birds as possible with each stone. And you don't want to stumble on a gas main or burial ground halfway through construction.

The Regulatory Context

We mentioned required setbacks—legal boundaries that restrict the buildable area of the site, either to limit the likelihood of fire spreading from building to building on adjacent lots, or to maintain the character of a street. Setbacks are just one of the innumerable requirements imposed by zoning and building codes. Others include building height and bulk; allowed uses; construction type relative to degree of flammability; the number, size, and location of exits; path-of-travel for persons with disabilities; parking and open space; preservation of historically protected structures; projected energy use . . . the list really does go on and on. All such restrictions will affect the design of your building; some may determine whether you can build at all. In many jurisdictions, the approval process is likely

to comprise a significant portion of your project schedule.

The Political Context

While many of the regulatory approvals—also known as "entitlements"—will be granted "as of right" if your design meets the requirements, others can be a function of a political process. This is most commonly the case when an owner seeks an exception—a "variance"—from a requirement. Sometimes two requirements will conflict—a parking requirement that would necessitate the demolition of a historically protected element, for example. Other times, the owner may simply want to do something that the requirements don't allow, but for which a rational argument can be made. In most cases, seeking a variance not only invokes the decision-making authority of a governing authority but also invites public comment, which can be decisive. In some jurisdictions, even projects that satisfy all regulations may at times be subject to public scrutiny. It is crucial to understand and anticipate all of the potential regulatory and political hurdles.

Budget and Schedule

Your project budget includes many more items than simply construction cost. Among other things, it includes the cost of the Pre-Design investigations listed above, and it includes the cost of taking the project through the entitlement process. The entitlement process can significantly affect the project schedule, as well. And the two—budget and schedule—are dynamically related. Financing costs may increase if the schedule lengthens, or funding sources may be time-dependent. Market conditions may change. Part of the strategic role that the architect plays in Pre-Design is to help the owner compare the value of a scheme that foregoes some desires to get through entitlement quickly with one that satisfies those desires but takes longer.

You are likely to weigh many such trade-offs as you decide what, where, and how to build. Because your architect understands the interaction of all of the factors shaping your project, he or she can bring tremendous value to the effort, before design begins.

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2015 AIACC Honor Award for Architecture, Turner Residence, Larkspur, CA, Jensen Architects. An environmentally sensitive, universally accessible home, nestled among heritage oaks, its walls almost disappearing when it is in use.