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Choosing an architect. Working with an architect. Why? How?

Working with an architect, some homeowners feel, can be expensive, unnecessary, and even intimidating.

But especially in times of inflation, the right architect can be a homeowner's best friend. His or her knowledge of energy use, building material, and labor costs can save you more than enough to cover the fee. And an original, well-designed house - one that is strong, functional, and responsive to its site - is a daily joy as well as a good investment.

Architects offer a variety of services; they may agree to do anything from minimal consulting to total design, contract development, and construction overseeing. Naturally, you pay accordingly.

Choosing an architect

There is no pat procedure. Ask people whose design judgment you trust for recommendations. Watch newspapers and home-service publications like *Sunset* for work you like, taking note of design credits.

Not all architects choose to be members of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), but you can contact the local AIA for a list of architects suitable for your type of project. Then telephone several firms and describe the work you have in mind. If they seem interested, ask for a brochure or arrange an interview. Even if they aren't interested or available, they may be willing to recommend another firm that will suit your needs.

If you receive brochures, evaluate the firm's design approaches and capabilities, then interview the architect, asking questions about experience with your type of building, time availability, working procedures, and fees. In larger firms, be sure to talk to the individual who would be handling the project.

At these early meetings, you will have to determine not only if you like the architect's design abilities, but also if you can get along with him or her during what may be a long and stressful process.

Seattle homeowners Marion and Michael Fukuma advise, "Choose an architect that you feel is approachable, one who doesn't make you feel he or she is an ARCHITECT and that you need to be in awe. On the other hand, be fair. You can drive an architect (as well as his fee) up the wall by constantly changing your mind."

How are charges set and fees figured? Some architects charge for preliminary interviews, some bill for this time only if they get the job, and still others will give short introductory interviews without charge. Some architects specify a lump sum if the job is relatively simple. Others use an hourly or daily rate, especially in the early stages. This ranges from \$25 to \$100 per hour. Some use a multiple of project expenses, a professional fee plus expenses, or most traditionally - when the architect is hired to stay through construction - a percentage of the building costs, often 8 to 15 percent or higher. (Some clients feel the latter offers no motivation to keep costs down; some architects feel it penalizes them for doing so.)

Whatever the basis, payments are usually spread out over the course of the work. It is a mistake, however, to base your choice primarily on the fee, which is a minor percentage of the total construction cost and is often outweighed by the architect's background, expertise, ability to communicate, and the chemistry that exists between you.

When you've narrowed your choices, ask one or two architects to take you to homes they have done in the past. Look them over carefully. Ask the owners how satisfied they are.

By this time in your search, you should know whether or not you actually do need an architect's services (your interviews may suggest that you need only a general contractor or drafting service).

Let's say you have selected an architect. His or her work will consist of four major phases: design, construction documents, bidding and negotiation, and construction administration. (Some architects break these into three or five stages, but the steps are basically the same.)

A visit to the site...then learning your needs, lifestyle, budget

To develop a plan for a new house or major remodel, the architect needs to know your site, your lifestyle, your needs, your dreams, and, of course, your budget. This may involve a good deal of research. First, the architect inspects the lot or existing building. Then by talking and working with you, sometimes assisted by a detailed questionnaire, the architect develops a "program," a framework reflecting your particular needs.

This is a time of intense communication, and the more open and observant you are, the more input your architect will have to work with. You and your family might make a list of likes and dislikes about your present house, being specific about how it meets or fails to satisfy your daily needs.

Your architect will want to know who will be using the house, what activities are likely to occur inside and out (and how often), eating habits and cooking styles, sleeping and bathing habits, privacy needs. You'll discuss work and display area, storage space, automobiles, pets, and maintenance, as well as transitions, focal points, sun angles, views, and levels of formality. You'll consider family growth or change and how the house should respond through time. If you have strong preferences for colors or materials, tell your architect.

On a more emotional level, you'll explore the feeling you'd like to create with the space (comforting, playful, intimate, grand) and any images you'd like to capture in spirit (Swedish farmhouse, Italian villa, space bubble).

Reno architect Peter Wilday encourages clients to "drag out their collection of pictures cut out of magazines like *Sunset* and not be embarrassed about them. They always breathe a sigh of relief, then point out all the things they like. By the time we sift through these assorted bits and pieces, I have a better idea of what they are comfortable with."

You will also tell the architect how much money you have to spend, what your priorities are in using it, and how firm the budget is (be honest). Check with bankers, contractors, and others involved in building finances so you can develop a realistic base figure.

Weaving the answers into a design

Now the results of this research are organized into a design. The architect may make rough diagrams showing how the functional areas interrelate. He may sketch alternatives for siting and, continuing to consult with you, work toward more detailed drawings and floor plans.

The possibilities may seem as endless as your capacity for discussing them, but in time you and your architect must decide on a plan.

Usually the best work results when both of you keep open minds. The architect must try to satisfy your needs, but you should also remember that you have hired talent and experience, and you are wasting your money if you don't listen to his or her ideas.

Says San Diego architect Rob Quigley, "We like clients to provide active and aggressive criticism, while having absolute faith in us. Usually not until they see the finished house do they realize the many levels of understanding we work on."

As the design is developing, your architect will also be preparing construction cost estimates, including leeway for rises in costs as the building proceeds. These estimates are based on square-footage construction costs for your area, adjusted for your particular project. Ask about additional expenses such as soils reports, surveys, energy-use calculations, and permit fees.

With today's high costs, most people find that what they want is 25-50 percent over their original budget. Be prepared either to spend more or to accept some alternatives -perhaps smaller rooms, less expensive materials or less custom detailing. An incremental building plan, for instance, might allow you to build in stages as finances permit but still end up with a house that feels right and looks unified.

Often a clever architect can turn what initially seem to be sacrifices into design advantages by coming up with unexpected but creative solutions.

“What if I don't like it?”

As ideas get translated to hard lines on paper, you may entertain doubts and second thoughts. Will the architect change his drawings?

In the early stages, revisions are possible and even encouraged; later they will be expensive and difficult. It is up to you to ask questions and state openly what you want or don't want. Keeping quiet and hoping for the best is a losing approach - as is rushing ahead with the plans without thoroughly studying them.

At last, blueprints to look at

Soon you'll receive detailed drawings. A site plan will show you how the house relates to the land, streets, and buildings around it. It will show grading and possible landscaping. Floor plans will indicate rooms, halls, closets, and storage areas. Specifications will list which materials and finishes are going to be used and indicate the mechanical and electrical workings of the house.

Looking at the drawings, try to walk mentally through the house. The AIA booklet *You and Your Architect* suggests several questions to ask. “Does the circulation work well? Does each space serve the purpose intended? Are you happy with its appearance? Do you agree with the floor, wall, and ceiling finishes? Door types? Windows? Built-in furniture?”

If you have trouble translating the plans into a 3-d image, make a model of the house by photocopying the plans and gluing them on cardboard. (See “Building a model” in the July 1979 *Sunset*). Your architect might also make a model for his study and your understanding.

Now you will be given a more accurate cost estimate; review this carefully.

Second and third stages: construction documents, bidding, negotiations.

Once the plans are understood and approved by all, the construction documents phase begins. From this point on, your involvement with the architect will decrease - but assuming that his or her services are retained through the next phase, periodic contact will continue.

Technical plans are now drawn by the architect or his staff and consultants. These drawings are elaborate translations of the earlier ideas and preliminary plans into the language of contractors and builders. When these are done, they are submitted to various environmental and design review boards for approval.

Now the architect, if still on scene, will help you hire a general contractor. This selection can be based on competitive bidding, or you may simply select a contractor from recommendations and interviews and then negotiate a contract.

For competitive bidding, the architect sends bidding documents (drawings, specifications, bidding forms) to firms known for good work. Within a given time frame, the prospective contractors submit sealed bids. Usually the firm bidding lowest is selected.

Perhaps more expensive, but certainly less risky, is the negotiated contract. Often architects have contractors with whom they've worked well in the past. If you agree to hire the recommended firm, your architect will help you and your attorney work out a contract, based on a set figure of construction costs plus a fee. Sometimes a guaranteed cost limit is set and bonuses are offered for cost or time savings.

It is the contractor's job to obtain proper building permits and to oversee actual construction. As work progresses, the architect will visit the construction site occasionally to make sure work is on schedule and that the workmanship is acceptable. He approves materials and equipment, certifies payment to the contractor, and may mediate minor conflicts between you and the builders.

As move-in time approaches...

The architect also handles the almost inevitable changes resulting from seeing the project take shape. Something as minor as moving a skylight or removing a cabinet can suddenly make it necessary to alter plans, readjust the budget, and ask for a "change-order." For these occasions, it's important to have the architect on call.

When the project is finally complete and the power and gas are turned on, you and the architect prepare a final “punch list” of non-functioning items or workmanship corrections for the contractor. Once they are corrected, final payment is made and the warranty period (usually lasting one year) begins.

No matter whom you choose or what you pay, you won’t ever get the perfect house. That’s the one that’s still in your head, and will always remain there. But in partnership with a talented architect and capable builders, you may come very close.

Suggested Readings:

How to Build a House With an Architect
by John Milnes Baker, J.B. Lippincott Co., 1977

Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse
by Eric Hodgins, Simon & Shuster, 1946

Text reprinted from Sunset Magazine,
1982, Lane Publishing Co.



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