



## Selecting Your Architect

Whether you are building your own home or designing a commercial complex, choosing the right architect is vital to a successful project.

Architecture firms come in a variety of sizes and types. The statistically average firm is made up of 9 or 10 people; many firms are smaller. There are also very large firms with staffs of 100 or more. Some firms specialize in one or more project or facility types. Others have very specific specialties. Some firms include in-house engineering (structural, mechanical, electrical, etc.) or other design disciplines (planning, urban design, landscape architecture, interior design, etc.) Many architects introduce specialty disciplines into their projects through appropriate consultants. Each architecture firm brings its own combination of skills, expertise, interests, and values to its projects. All good architects will listen to you and translate your ideas into a viable construction project. Look for a good listener and you'll find a good architect.



### The Right Architect

If you are a first-time client, or an experienced client facing a new situation, you probably have many questions about architect selection. Some of the more frequently asked questions are addressed here.

*When, in the life cycle of a project, should I bring the architect into the picture?*

As early as possible. Architects can help you define the project in terms that provide meaningful guidance for design. They may also do site studies, help secure planning and zoning approvals, help you work out financing, and a variety of other predesign services.

*Should I look at more than one firm?*

Usually, yes. One obvious exception is when you already have a good relationship with an architect and it makes little sense to change.

*How do I find suitable firms to contact?*

Contact other owners who have developed similar facilities and ask who they interviewed and ultimately selected. Ask who designed buildings and projects that you've admired or that seem especially appropriate. Many local chapters of the American Institute of Architects maintain referral lists and are available to assist you in identifying architects who can help you. (Look in the *Yellow Pages* for the AIA listing, or go to [www.aia.org](http://www.aia.org).)

*What information should I request from firms?*

At a minimum, ask to see projects the firm has designed that are similar in type and size to yours or that have addressed similar issues (for example, siting, functional complexity, or design aspirations). Ask them to indicate how they will approach your project and who will be working on it (including consultants). Ask for the names of other owners you may contact.

### *Why are formal interviews desirable?*

An interview addresses one issue that can't be covered in brochures: the chemistry between the owner and the architecture firm. Interviews also allow the owner to learn how each firm plans to approach the project.

### *How many firms should I interview and how should they be selected?*

Most people advise that you interview three to five firms--enough to see the range of possibilities, but not so many that an already tough decision will be further complicated. Interview architecture firms that you feel can do your project because of their expertise, experience, and ability to bring a fresh look to your situation. Treat each firm fairly, offering, for example, equal time and equal access to your site and existing facilities.

### *What can I realistically expect to learn from an interview? How can I structure the interview to make it as informative as possible?*

You can learn how the architect's team will approach your project by talking to key members. Ask how the architect will gather information, establish priorities, and make decisions. Ask what the architect sees as the important issues for consideration in the project. Evaluate the firm's style, personality, priorities, and approach: are they compatible with yours?

### *How should I follow up?*

Tell each firm what you intend to do next and when you plan to make your decision. If you haven't talked with past clients, do so now. Ask them to assess both the performance of the firm and the performance of the resulting architecture. You may want to visit existing buildings to see them in use. Notify the selected firm, or short-listed firms, as soon as possible. Remember, conditions change, sometimes very rapidly: regulatory parameters, market conditions, and team availability.

### *On what should I base my decision?*

Personal confidence in the architect is paramount. Seek also an appropriate balance among design ability, technical competence, professional service, and cost. Once you've selected the best firm, enter into detailed negotiations regarding services and compensation. The AIA Contract Documents--the industry standard--offer an excellent starting point for contract negotiation.

### *What about selecting an architect by competitive bid?*

You can ask for a fee proposal from an architect at any time during the selection process that you think is appropriate. The U.S. government, by law, depends on qualifications-based selection, whereby qualification for a project is the first consideration, and fee is secondary. You are engaging the services of a professional with whom you will work closely throughout the life of the project.

Choose your architect at least as carefully as you would your dentist or doctor. Factors such as experience, technical competence, and available staff resources will be important to your decision. So, if you are

soliciting proposals from more than one firm, make sure that you can provide all the information required for definite proposals to ensure that the proposals you get offer the same scope of services, and you can evaluate them on a consistent basis.

Yours will be a business relationship. Find out how prospective architects do business, how they work with their clients, how responsive they are to your management and decision styles, and how well their work stacks up against their clients' expectations.

Ask questions. Approach the architect as a professional who will bring experience and specialized knowledge to your project. Don't be afraid to ask the same questions you've asked yourself: What does the architect expect to contribute to the project? How much information does the architect need? How does the architect set priorities and make decisions? Who in the firm will work directly with you? How will engineering or other design services be provided? How does the firm provide quality control during design? What is the firm's construction-cost experience?

Be frank. Tell the architect what you know and what you expect. Ask for an explanation of anything you don't understand. The more on the table at the outset, the better the chances are for a successful project. Remember, a good architect is a good listener. Only when you have outlined your issues can the architect address them.

Because you will be in a business relationship to acquire the professional skills and judgment of the prospective architect, you might also want to inquire about the ability of the architect to stand financially behind the services to be provided. For example, you might ask if the architect carries professional liability insurance--much like that carried by doctors, lawyers, and accountants. While not all architects carry such insurance, it can, in many circumstances, be an indicator of sound business acumen.

Be prepared to answer questions about your project's purpose, budget, time frame, site, and the team of players you anticipate being involved with the project. Once again, be frank, and inform the architect of any information you want to be kept in confidence. Protecting your confidential information is an ethical requirement for members of the AIA.

### **Selection Is a Mutual Process**

The most thoughtful architects are as careful in selecting their clients as owners are in selecting architects. They are as interested in a successful project as you are, and they know that good architecture results from fruitful collaboration between architects and clients.

Even the simplest of projects are very complex. Each situation is different, including people, needs, site, financing, and regulatory requirements. Many of the owner's needs and expectations come into focus only in the process of design. As the owner and architect mutually evaluate alternative approaches to the project's design, priorities are clarified and new possibilities emerge. There is no substitute for the complex, time-consuming, and intensive dialogue and inquiry that characterize the design process.

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