

CONSUMERS GUIDE

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How to hire an Architect



CONSUMERS GUIDE: HOW TO HIRE AN ARCHITECT

WHERE TO START

Few projects are as daunting, or as satisfying, as building a house. The options are infinite, the decisions to be made seem endless, and the financial and emotional investments are substantial. The benefits of doing it well last for years.

There's an old Yankee tradition that says you can do it yourself. There's a lumberyard in your town that will design your house for free if you buy their materials, and a contractor nearby who includes the design work in his package. Why do you need an architect? In truth, many very simple jobs don't need an architect. Most houses, on the other hand, will benefit from an architect, and the value added will be well worth the cost.

Architects can save you money and time. They can steer your project through code approvals, recommend up-to-date materials and systems, get competitive bidding from contractors, and insure high quality construction. The biggest benefit? Good design. A well-designed house enhances your life from the moment you move in and returns its cost when it is sold. The right architect will give form to your dreams, arrange your rooms to help your daily life run smoothly, and surprise you with features that you never considered.

The nine topics in this guide can help you choose the right architect.

Finding an architect

As in many other professional fields, word of mouth is the architect's most powerful marketing tool. General contractors and other trade-related personnel, as well as friends and colleagues, are good sources for referrals. More and more, however, internet websites will lead you to the right group of candidates. On the architect's website, look at previous work, read about design intent, get a feel for style and language. Is it about blending in with the neighborhood? Does it preserve the site or overpower it? Does it make a statement? Is that the statement you want to make? Is it coherent? Is it environmentally sound? How does it make you feel? How would you feel if you lived in it? Then, start a conversation. Make an appointment for a consultation. Meet with the one who will do the work.

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WHAT TO ASK

How will the architect approach your project?

The architect will want to know your priorities, what's most important to you: things like appearance, comfort, durability, budget, scheduling, an easy construction process, all of the above. Ask how he or she will deal with those issues. Talk about what you like in the houses you have lived in and what you dislike. Do you want to recreate spaces that you have seen and loved? Do you want to update a familiar plan? Are you ready for a change? If you are remodeling, do you want your changes to blend seamlessly with the existing house? Ask how that might be accomplished. Alternatively, is the situation right for an addition that is completely different from the original house? In the design business, there is no single right answer. Figure out what works best for you.

Signature Style: Who's got it and do you want it?

It is common for an architect to be known for a certain style. In our Northeastern U.S., it's apt to be contemporary shingle, craftsman/cottage, minimalist contemporary, or green contemporary. Our catalogue of styles might also include "fusion" and "indie", labels that are not yet in the realtors' guide books. Although most architects are able to adapt their signature style to different situations, you might think twice about hiring an architect with an ultracontemporary signature style to rehab your California Craftsman bungalow. How flexible will your designer be? Will you get a design that has been done previously in a different form, or will it be uniquely suited to your situation? Will your architect be comfortable executing your wishes, or will he do just what he wants to do? The most fruitful design process is a teamwork endeavor: the best projects are a skillful execution of both owners and architects desires.

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WHAT TO ASK

Who will work with you?

Signing a contract with an architect representing an architectural firm does not necessarily mean that person will be your project architect. Actually, outside of single-architect firms, it is common practice for another architect to do part, or all, of the work on your project. Be sure to meet the project architect before making any final decisions. Ask about the architect's schedule and how much time they will spend on your project. The average new house takes six months or more in the design and drawing phases and nine months or more in the construction phase. You'll be seeing a lot of your architect. The one you choose needs to be a good listener and a good communicator, sympathetic to your needs and easily accessible. To do their best work, they'll want to get to know you very well. You'll want to be happy to see them.

3-D Modeling: don't build your home without it

Architects can visualize how two-dimensional elevations and floor plans translate into actual buildings; most people can't. Even when you are pretty good at visualization, a 3-dimensional model helps. Software today allows you to review your design from multiple angles, fly above and walk through it, and try it on with different materials and colors. We have found that the images we use to present a project are so convincing that some clients are unwilling to deviate from those images later in the process. This has both benefits and liabilities.

In addition, the ability to quickly change a computer generated model helps you get it right. You can ask, "What if we tried gabled roofs instead of shed roofs?", and see it changed. With computer modeling, your architect can easily make fine adjustments throughout the process that would be laborious using hard erasers and 2H drafting pencils.

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WHAT TO ASK

What services does an architect provide?

Conceptual renderings and drawings are not the only services that an architectural firm can provide. Some firms will only take on full service contracts, as described in the examples below; some are willing to do partial services; some are able to do more than the traditional scope of services. Ask about the benefits of specific services and their corresponding costs.

These are some tasks that are beyond the traditional architect's scope of services:

- Project feasibility studies
- Programming
- Master Planning
- Evaluation of potential building sites
- Elaborate renderings for sales purposes
- Leed® coordination and certification assistance
- Detailed cost estimates
- Furniture, furnishings and equipment specifications
- Interior Design
- Construction Administration with a Clerk of the Works



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WHAT TO ASK

What is the process?

Architects traditionally break down their work into phases, based on the description of the architect's role provided by the American Institute of Architects contract documents. The following phases accurately describe what needs to be done:

Schematic Design: Developing a Concept

The architect and the owner investigate restrictions on the site, land use codes, what approvals will be required. The architect begins translating thoughts to sketches and sketches to computer models.

Design Development: Refining a Design

With input from the owner, the architect adjusts the design and adds detail. It may be necessary at this point to review plans with various agencies, including the planning board, the zoning board, the DEP, historic district or design review boards.

Construction Drawings

The design needs to be documented sufficiently for permitting, estimating or bidding, and insuring that the design chosen will be well-executed. This phase is usually the largest of the five, and includes plans, elevations, sections, details, schedules and specifications.

Negotiating the Contact for Construction

The project may be put out to bid among several contractors, assigned to a construction manager for bids from sub-contractors, or turned over to a favored contractor on a cost-plus basis. Thorough drawings and a contract that requires full transparency are important in all cases. Your architect will help recommend contractors and evaluate bids and contracts.

Construction Administration

Once the contractor begins, the architect's roll is to answer questions about the intent of the design, provide additional information if needed, offer solutions to problems. The architect reviews requisitions for payment and insures that the work follows the intent of the drawings.

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HOW TO FIGURE OUT FEES

What Does an Architect Cost?

Typically, an architect's fee is calculated as a percentage of the project's entire cost (minus the architect's fee of course). Depending on the services provided by the architect, the rate could range from 5 to 20 percent. However, when you first start the design process for your project, it is difficult, if not impossible to accurately determine the final project cost. During this initial time period, the architect may charge an hourly fee or a retainer. The retainer or hourly fee will be credited towards the total architectural fee once it has been determined. For new construction, the architect will be able to give you a general idea of construction costs on a per square foot basis for the level of quality you may want.

Fee examples:

A \$175,000 Renovation with a 12% architectural fee = \$21,000

Cost breakdown per phase:

Schematic Design – 20% of fee = \$4,200

Design Development – 15% of fee = \$3,150

Construction Drawings – 40% of fee = \$8,400

Bidding – 5% of fee = \$1,050

Construction Administration – 20% of fee = \$4,200

A \$650,000 New House with a 10% architectural fee = \$65,000

Cost breakdown per phase:

Schematic Design – 20% of fee = \$13,000

Design Development – 15% of fee = \$9,750

Construction Drawings – 40% of fee = \$26,000

Bidding – 5% of fee = \$3,250

Construction Administration – 20% of fee = \$13,000

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Keep a notebook

Finally, fill a binder with pictures of designs that you like. These can be pictures of houses that look like they would fit on your site, or they can be pictures of things that appeal to you in any way whatever. Sketch your own plans: even if you haven't allowed enough room for that egress stair from the second floor, your plan will help the architect understand what's important to you. Imagining the possibilities is the most fun part of the process. Pick the right architect, and enjoy it.