



Six (6) Steps toward Building a Home

Design and construction projects involve several steps. Typically, projects go through the following six phases. However, on some projects, several of these steps may be combined; on others there may be additional steps.

Step 1 : Deciding What to Build

This first stage, called programming, is probably the most valuable time you will spend with your architect. It is at this time you discuss the requirements for your building: how many rooms, what function the structure will have, who will use it and how. It is also the time when you begin to test the fit between what you want, what you need, and what you can spend. Don't come in with solutions already decided upon. Be prepared to explore new and creative ideas. Be very frank about how you want the end result to feel and work. The architect will ask you lots of questions to get a better sense of your goals and needs and to determine if your expectations match your budget. The architect may suggest changes based upon knowledge, experience, and your budget. After thoroughly discussing your functional requirements, the architect will prepare a statement outlining the scope of your project. During the next step, your program will be realized.

Step 2 : Rough Sketches

Once you have defined what is to be built, the architect will then do a series of rough sketches, known as schematic designs. These sketches will show you the general arrangement of rooms and of the site. If you have difficulty understanding the sketches (many people do), ask the architect to explain. Depending on the project, some architects will also make models of the design to help better visualize it. These sketches are not "finished" construction documents. They are meant to show possible approaches for you to consider. The architect will refine and revise the sketches until a solution is developed that you agree meets the needs of your project. At this point, the architect will also give you a rough preliminary estimate of construction cost.

Remember, there are still many more details to be established about your project and that this cost estimate is very general. It is hard to predict market conditions, the availability of materials, and other unforeseen situations that could drive up costs. Therefore, this figure must include a healthy contingency to cover cost changes that arise as the design matures. Don't panic if these first sketches seem different from what you first envisioned. Ask your architect how these designs satisfy the requirements you discussed in the first stage. It is vital that you and your architect are clear about what you want and what the architect intends to design. It is much easier to make changes now when your project is on paper, than later on when foundations have been poured and walls erected. Before proceeding to the next phase, the architect will ask for your approval of these sketches.

Step 3: Refining the Design

This step, called design development, is when the architect prepares more detailed drawings to illustrate other aspects of the proposed design. The floor plans show all the rooms in the correct size and shape. Outline specifications are prepared listing the major materials and room finishes.

When looking at these drawings, try to imagine yourself actually using the spaces. Ask yourself: Do the traffic patterns flow well? Does each space serve the intended purpose? Do I have a good sense of what it will look like? Do I like how it looks? Do I agree with the selection of wall and ceiling finishes, door types, windows, etc.?

Based on these drawings, the architect will prepare a more detailed estimate, though final costs will actually depend on market conditions. Review every element with your architect to make sure you are getting the most out of your construction dollar.



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Step 4: Preparing Construction Documents

At this point, the architect prepares construction documents, the detailed drawings and specifications which the contractor will use to establish actual construction cost and to build the project. These drawings and specifications become part of the contract. When construction documents are finished, you are ready to hire the general contractor or builder.

Step 5: Hiring the Contractor

There are a number of ways to select a contractor. Your architect can make recommendations, or if you already have someone you want to work with, you might send the construction documents to him or her and negotiate fees and costs. Or you may wish to choose among several contractors you've asked to submit bids on the job. The architect will help you prepare the bidding documents, which consist of drawings and specifications as well as invitations to bid and instruction to bidders. The bidding documents are then sent to several contractors, who within a given period of time, reply with bids which include the cost for building your project. The lowest bidder is often selected to do the work.

While the architect can recommend contractors and assist in the selection process, the final choice is up to you. Some people prefer to act as their own general contractor or to do part or all of the construction themselves. These methods can save you money initially but can also add problems and costs later on. Discuss the pros and cons of these methods with your architect to help you decide what will work best.

Step 6: Construction

This final step is often the most anxiety-producing part of the whole process. Up until now, your project has been confined to intense discussion, planning, and two-dimensional renderings. When construction begins, your project moves from an abstraction to a physical reality.

The architect's involvement normally does not stop with the preparation of construction documents. Architects also provide construction administration services. These services may include assisting you in hiring the contractor, making site visits, reviewing and approving the contractor's applications for payment, and keeping you informed of the project's progress. While the architect observes construction, the contractor is solely responsible for construction methods, techniques, schedules, and procedures. The contractor supervises and directs the construction work on the project.

The path to a completed building project is paved with lots of challenges and uncertainty. There are literally hundreds of decisions to be made, decisions which have a strong impact on how the project looks and functions over time.

The architect can ease the way by helping you avoid wrong turns, but also can direct you to solutions you never considered. The result is a unique building project created to meet your needs, express your individuality, and provide enjoyment for everyone who uses it.