



Hiring a Residential Architect-FAQ's

There is a common misconception that architects are a luxury in the home-building industry. The truth is that an architect combines budget, function, and aesthetics into a design everyone can feel good about. Whether building a new home or renovating an older one, architects play an important role in combining your desires, your needs and your budget into a home that fits your lifestyle.

What does an architect do?

Architects are trained problem solvers. Just a few of their tasks are to help define needs, present options that may have not been considered, plan for the future, design around a budget, and help obtain contractors and permits. One of the most important services an architect can provide is monitoring construction. Typically a small part of the architectural fee, this service can be the most valuable. Having a qualified professional reviewing the contractor's work, ensuring that the design is followed through, and identifying construction problems early in the process can save time and money down the road.

How do I select an architect?

Each architect has an individual style, approach to design, and method of working. Start with getting recommendations from those you know have worked with an architect. The AIA directory is also a resource for finding architects who specialize in custom homes. Make a short list and call each firm, asking the firm's qualifications and experience. Most importantly, interview each firm. Meet the people you would be working with to learn their design philosophy and methods of working. Personal chemistry will have a great deal to do with process. Talk about your budget and the range of fees the architect anticipates for your project. Feel free to ask any question, including how interested the firm is, and what they will charge. Ask for a reference list of past projects and follow-up. Past clients will give you an excellent idea of how well the architect listened and responded to their needs. Remember, an architect provides a service, not a product. Your final selection should be based on the architect's technical expertise, creative skills and ability to communicate with you.

What is an architect's fee?

Every project's fee is set differently, based on the type of project and scope of service desired from the architect. Common methods of compensation include: hourly rates, a stipulated sum, or a percentage of construction costs (which range from 5-20%). The basis for the fee, the amount and the payment schedule are issues to be worked through and are commonly set in writing with use of a legal AIA agreement.

What is the process?

First, if a site has not already been selected, your architect can help you choose and plan the location for your home. Examining possible sites with an architect, discovering the unique character and potential hazards of your site, before you buy, will better match your dreams with reality. The design process begins with programming. This is the first place your desires, needs, and budget are tested. Quantitative concerns such as the number, type and size of rooms are discussed along with more qualitative items such as the relationship of the home to the site, the home's fit to your lifestyle, the look of the home and experience of the rooms within. The architect seeks to combine these issues and presents them in the form of schematic sketches to the owner. Some architects will also do 3-dimensional renderings or make models to help the client visualize the design. Through a series of meetings, the architect will revise and refine these sketches until a solution is agreed upon. Next, more detailed information about room sizes, and decisions over major materials and room finishes are incorporated through the process known as design development. Many architects also provide interior design services, such as defining color schemes, wall and window treatments and even selecting and placing furniture. Allowing your architect to advise in these finishing touches ensures continuity with the design of the home. The third phase includes the preparation of the construction documents. These are the final detailed drawings and specifications, which the contractor will use to bid and construct the project. These documents will become part of your Architect-Owner contract and the Owner-Contractor contract. When the project documents are finished, you are ready to hire a contractor. This is known as the bidding and negotiating phase. You may already have someone you want to work with, or you may ask several contractors to submit bids on the job. An architect can recommend contractors and assist in the selection process, but the final choice will be up to you. Your selection should consider the contractor's technical expertise, price, past work and ability to communicate with you. The final phase of the process is construction. Although the design and documentation are completed, the architect also provides construction administration. These services include making regular site visits, reviewing and approving the contractor's application for payment and keeping you informed of the project's progress. Weekly meetings are held with the contractor, architect and owner to discuss progress, decisions to be made, or problems to be solved. Having an architect who is familiar with the entire project's history will ensure that any decisions made in the field during construction will keep your interests in the forefront and maintain the original decisions and intents determined in the design phase of the project. For a new house, home renovation, or addition, hiring an architect is a wise investment.