



Your Guide to Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit

Unlock the potential of your property.

This essential resource walks you through the process of designing and constructing an ADU, from understanding local laws to selecting the right architect. Discover how an ADU can enhance your property's value and provide flexible living options while ensuring compliance and aesthetic harmony with your main residence.

American Institute of Architects, Iowa Chapter



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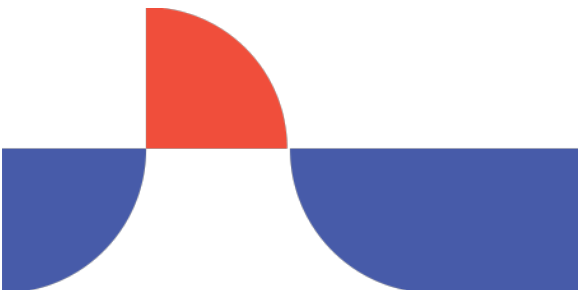
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Your Guide to Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) in Iowa

Engaging an Architect

Iowa law allows homeowners interested in adding an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) to their property the ability to do so. This guidebook will help you understand how to navigate the process of engaging an architect to design, the laws, and build your ADU.

What is an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)?

In Iowa an "accessory dwelling unit" is defined as an "additional residential dwelling unit located on the same lot as a single family residence that is either attached to or detached from the single family residence." This includes units that are part of an existing accessory structure, such as a detached garage.*

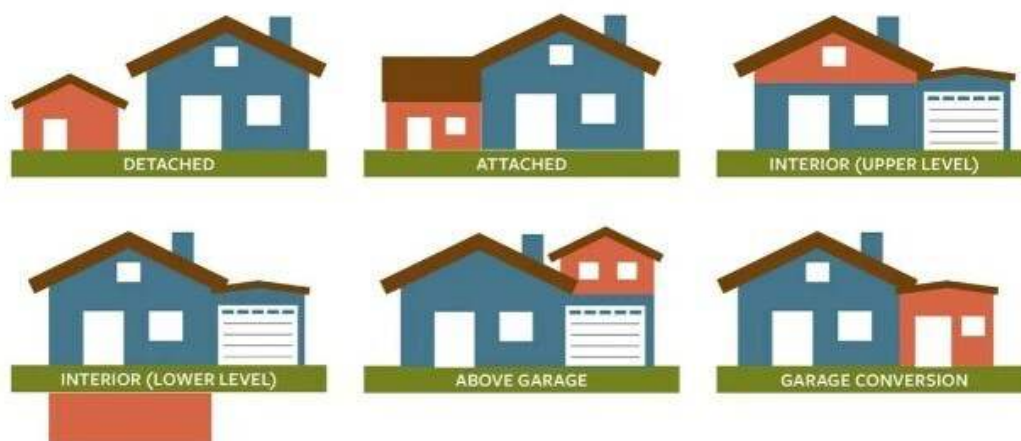


ILLUSTRATION BY MIMI PARK, DESIGN PARK, INC., FROM THE ABCS OF ADUS (AARP 2019)





Why Consider an ADU?

ADUs offer numerous benefits:

- **Multigenerational Living:**

Provide independent living space for family members while maintaining locale proximity.



- **Increased Property Value:**

An ADU can enhance the overall value and versatility of your property.

- **Flexible Space:**

Use it as a home office, guest suite, or for various other purposes.

- **Additional Income:**

Rental income can significantly offset mortgage payments or provide a new revenue stream.



Why Engage an Architect for Your ADU Project?

1. **Code Compliance:** Architects are experts in building codes (including Chapter 103A), zoning regulations, and local ordinances. They will ensure your ADU design meets all structural, safety, and accessibility requirements.
2. **Optimized for Space and Functionality:** Architects are skilled at maximizing small spaces and designing layouts that are efficient, comfortable, and meet your specific needs (e.g., rental, family use).
3. **Aesthetically Pleasing and Integrated:** While the law doesn't require matching your main house, an architect can design an ADU that complements your existing home and property, enhancing curb appeal and value.
4. **Cost-Effective:** Good design can save you money in the long run by optimizing materials, construction methods, and energy efficiency. An architect can also help you solicit competitive bids from contractors and subcontractors.
5. **Navigating the Permit Process:** An architect can prepare professional plans and documentation that expedite the permit application process and address any specific local requirements.
6. **Problem Solving:** Unexpected challenges can arise during construction. An architect can provide solutions and advocate on your behalf with contractors and local authorities.
7. **Long-Term Value:** A well-designed and constructed ADU by a licensed architect will likely have a higher resale value and better functionality for years to come.

While Iowa law simplifies many aspects, designing and building an ADU is still a significant construction project. An architect plays a vital role in designing your ADU.

How to Engage an Architect: A Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Define Your Vision and Needs

Before contacting architects, have a clear idea of what you want your ADU to be. Consider:

- **Purpose:**
Is it for family, rental, home office, or other?
- **Size:**
How many bedrooms/bathrooms do you need? Remember the 1,000 sq ft or 50% of main residence (whichever is larger) limit.
- **Placement:**
Attached or Detached?
- **Budget:**
Be realistic about what you can afford for design and construction.
- **Timeline:**
When do you hope to complete the project?
- **Desired Style/Aesthetics:**
Do you have any preferences for materials, roof style, etc.? Even though matching is not required, you might want it to fit your neighborhood.
- **Utility Connections:**
Will you seek separate metering, or will the ADU share utilities with the main house?



Step 2: Research and Create a Shortlist of Architects

- **Iowa Architectural Licensing:** Ensure any architect you consider is licensed in Iowa. You can typically verify this through the Iowa Architectural Examining Board website.
- **Specialization:** Look for architects with experience in residential design, particularly ADUs or small homes.
- **Referrals:** Ask friends, family, or local real estate agents for recommendations.
- **Online Searches:** Use online directories (e.g., American Institute of Architects - AIA Iowa Chapter) to find local architects.
- **Review Portfolios:** Look at architects' websites or portfolios to see if their style aligns with your vision. Pay attention to how they handle small spaces and integration with existing structures.

Contact your shortlisted architects for an initial consultation. Many offer a free introductory meeting.

Step 3: Initial Consultations (Interviews)

- **Discuss your project in detail.** Share your vision, needs, and budget.
- **Ask about their process:** How do they work with clients? What are their typical phases of design?
- **Inquire about their fees:** Architects typically charge a percentage of construction cost, an hourly rate, or a fixed fee. Understand their fee structure and what's included.
- **Ask for references:** Speak to previous clients about their experience with the architect.
- **Review their portfolio:** Ask to see examples of similar projects.
- **Discuss the Iowa ADU legislation:** See if they are familiar with House File 947 and its implications. This will demonstrate their understanding of the current regulatory environment.



Key Questions to Ask an Architect:

- "What is your experience with designing ADUs or similar small residential projects?"
- "How do you approach designing within budget constraints?"
- "What is your understanding of Iowa House File 947 and its impact on ADU design and permitting?"
- "Can you provide a detailed breakdown of your design process, from initial concept to construction documents?"
- "How do you handle permit applications and interactions with local building departments?"
- "What is your fee structure, and what services are included in each phase?"
- "How do you typically work with contractors during the construction phase?"
- "Can you provide references from previous clients?"



Step 4: Evaluate Proposals and Select Your Architect

After your consultations, you should receive written proposals.

Carefully compare:

- **Scope of Services:**

What specific deliverables are included (e.g., schematic design, design development, construction documents, bidding assistance, construction administration)?

- **Fees:**

Compare the proposed fees and ensure they are clear and comprehensive.

- **Timeline:**

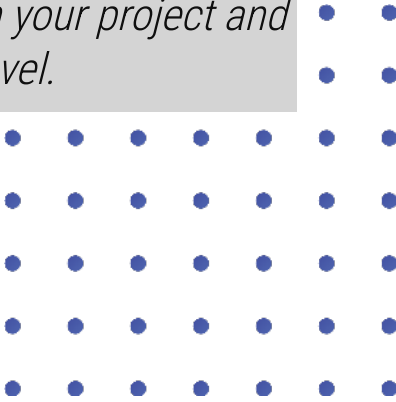
Understand the proposed schedule for the design phases.

- **Contract Terms:**

Read the contract carefully, paying attention to payment schedules, intellectual property, and dispute resolution.



Choose the architect whose vision, experience, communication style, and fee structure best align with your project and comfort level.



Step 5: The Design Process with Your Architect

Once you've selected an architect, the design process typically involves these phases:

- **Programming & Schematic Design:**
 - The architect will conduct site visits, take measurements, and thoroughly discuss your needs, preferences, and budget.
 - They will then develop initial sketches and floor plans, exploring different layout options for your ADU.
 - This is an iterative process where your feedback is crucial.
- **Design Development:**
 - Once a schematic design is approved, the architect refines the plans, selecting specific materials, finishes, and systems (e.g., HVAC, plumbing, electrical).
 - They will incorporate more detail into the drawings, providing a clearer picture of the ADU's appearance and functionality.



Resource:

Visit [AARP.org](https://aarp.org) for additional information about ADUs





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- **Construction Documents:**

- This phase involves preparing detailed drawings and specifications that contractors will use to bid on the project and construct the ADU. These documents are also necessary for obtaining building permits.
- Your architect will ensure these documents comply with Chapter 103A and any applicable local building codes.

- **Permitting:**

- Your architect can assist or handle the submission of permit applications to your county or city building department.
- Given House File 947, the approval process should be straightforward as long as your plans meet the state's requirements. Your architect will know precisely what documentation is needed for a swift approval.

- **Bidding & Contractor Selection (Optional, but Recommended):**

- The architect can help you solicit bids from qualified contractors and review their proposals.
- They can assist in negotiating contracts with the chosen contractor.

- **Construction Administration (Optional, but Recommended):**

- During construction, the architect can visit the site to ensure the work is proceeding according to the plans and specifications.
- They can answer questions from the contractor, address any unforeseen issues, and review payment applications.



What is Allowed per Iowa Law:

- **One ADU per single-family residence lot.**
- **Compliance with all applicable building regulations (Chapter 103A).** This means your ADU must meet Iowa's state building codes for safety, structural integrity, and habitability. Your architect will be crucial in ensuring this.
- **Size Limit:** Your ADU cannot exceed 1,000 square feet or 50% of the size of your existing single-family residence, *whichever is larger*. This provides flexibility for different property sizes.
- **Limited Prohibitions:** ADUs can only be prohibited or limited by:
 - State historic building code restrictions adopted by your county or city.
 - Deed restrictions on your property.
 - Rules of a common interest community (e.g., HOA), *but* regulations cannot be more restrictive for an ADU in a common interest community than for a single-family residence.
- **Manufactured/Mobile Homes as ADUs:** If you plan to use a manufactured or mobile home, it must be placed on a permanent foundation and assessed for real estate taxes.

Permit Approval Process:

- Your county or city *must* approve an ADU permit application that meets the state law requirements *without discretionary review or hearing*.
- The review timeline for an ADU permit cannot be longer than the normal review schedule for a single-family residence.
- If your permit is denied, the reason must be provided in writing, along with any necessary remedies for approval.


Important Note: Iowa law sets minimum allowances. Your county or city can adopt ordinances that are more permissive than these state requirements. Always check with your local planning department for any local ordinances that might further ease the process.

What Cannot be Restricted:

- **Placement or Appearance:** design and building requirements cannot be more restrictive than those for a single-family residence, including:
 - Maximum building heights
 - Minimum setback requirements
 - Minimum lot sizes
 - Minimum building frontages
 - Maximum lot coverages
 - Density requirements
 - Aesthetic or architectural standards.
 - The ADU's design isn't required to match the exterior design, roof pitch, or finishing materials of your main residence, this offers significant design freedom. However, it is recommended in most instances for aesthetic appeal.
- **Rental Property Regulations:** Restrictions on renting out your ADU cannot be more restrictive than existing state rental property laws.
- **Parking:** Additional parking beyond what's required for your single-family residence is not required, charging a fee for additional parking is not permitted.
- **Occupancy Restrictions:** Restrictions such as what is listed below cannot be required:
 - Requiring the property owner to be a resident.
 - Requiring a familial, marital, or employment relationship between occupants of the main residence and the ADU.
 - Restricting occupancy based on income or age.
- **Utility Lines:** Generally, new or separate utility lines between the ADU and public services cannot be required *unless* full utility access with a separate metering system for billing purposes cannot be provided.
- **Impact Fees/Development Standards:** Impact fees or development standards for an ADU cannot be different from those for the single-family residence on the same lot.
- **Street/Sidewalk Improvements:** Improvements or repairs to public streets or sidewalks beyond what's imposed on the single-family residence cannot be required.

Important Considerations for Your ADU

By strategically engaging a qualified architect, you can successfully navigate the process of designing and building an Accessory Dwelling Unit, enhancing your property and creating valuable living space.



- **Local Ordinances (More Permissive):** While the state law sets minimums, *always* check with your local county or city planning department. They might have ordinances that are *more permissive* than the state law, offering you even greater flexibility. Your architect can help you determine what applies to your specific property.
- **Deed Restrictions and HOAs:** Before investing in design, verify if your property has any deed restrictions or if you are part of a common interest community (Homeowners Association - HOA) that might limit or prohibit ADU construction. While the law limits how restrictive HOAs can be, it's essential to understand any existing covenants.
- **Financing:** Explore financing options for your ADU. This could include home equity loans, construction loans, or other personal financing.
- **Utilities:** Discuss utility connections with your architect. The law allows for sharing utility lines with the main residence unless separate metering for billing purposes cannot be achieved. Your architect can design the most efficient and cost-effective utility solution.
- **Project Management:** Deciding on the level of involvement you want in the project is crucial. Your architect can handle many aspects, but you'll still be the ultimate decision-maker and need to be involved in key choices.



For more resources on how to hire an architect check out [AIA Iowa's Hiring an Architect Playbook](#). To find a list of architects in your part of the state visit the [AIA Iowa Design Professionals Directory](#) or the [AIA Iowa Architecture Firm Directory](#). For additional questions, contact us at info@aiaiowa.org or 515-244-7502.

* As defined by Iowa law through the 2025 Legislative Session passage of House File 947.