
How to Hire an Architect

Kevin Wolfe Architect, PC

(718) 428-0631



Finding an Architect

Nothing is more exciting than creating a new house or renovating an old one, and nothing will affect the success of your project more than the right architect. The architect determines the design and function of a building as well as the emotional toll and financial costs involved in its construction. Finding your perfect match in an architect is not impossible and the following points can guide you along the way. Use them to help analyze the personality, design strategy and communication skills of your candidates. Your goal is to find the right architect for your project, for your budget and for you. I hope you enjoy this guide and I look forward to your feedback on its contents.



As in many other fields, word of mouth is one of the best ways to look for an architect. Ask family, friends and professional colleagues for referrals. Is there a particular house you admire? A knock on the door can yield an introduction to your potential architect. Professional organizations such as your city or county's local architectural institutions are also great sources to find architects. General contractors and other trade-related personnel would also be able to furnish some referrals. Be sure to visit the web sites and houzz profiles of your candidates. Look at their previous work. Get a feel for their aesthetic. Is it about blending in with the neighborhood or making a big statement? Next, start a conversation. Make an appointment for a consultation. Meeting face to face will help you decide if it is a good fit.

1. Ask Questions

How will the architect approach your project? Let them know the most important aspects of your project and ask how these elements will be incorporated into their design process. If you are doing a home remodel or an addition, start with those aspects of your home you currently like and ask how they can be improved. Typically, a remodel should try to blend seamlessly with the rest of the house. If your home is in an historic district, the architect's expertise in working with the local approving authorities (such as an architectural review board or landmarks preservation commission) will be key to its success. Ask: how will these approvals be achieved?



Even though the architect might have an attractive portfolio and good references you will still want to make sure their design process and approach is right for you and your project. If you know your budget, tell them up front—they need to know this in order to make your project a success. If you don't know, they can help you establish a budget that is realistic for your goals.

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

It is common for an architect to be known by a certain design style—traditional or ultra-modern for example. Make sure you match your selected architect's design skills to your aesthetic goals. Though most architects are able to adapt their signature style to what you want, think twice about hiring an architect with a Modernist signature style to rehab your historic Craftsman style home.



for example. Have plenty of examples of the look you want; these can be found in catalogs, magazines or the Internet. Note that environmentally friendly, sustainable "green" designs and construction can be applied to any style. Discuss the importance of these elements with your architect from the outset.

3. Make Sure You've Met Your Project Architect

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-owned operations, this is common procedure. Be sure to meet the project architect you will actually work with before making any final decisions. Being able to communicate freely and openly with your project architect is vital to the success of your project. You both should share a clear understanding of the project and feel completely comfortable with each other.

4. 3-D Modeling

Architects understand how elevations and floor plans translate into actual buildings; their clients necessarily don't. The worst thing that can happen is a client who doesn't understand completely what they've approved to be built and doesn't like it when it's completed. You don't want to be that client. Fortunately, there's a preventative solution: 3-D modeling.

A 3-D model is the best way to see how your new home or a renovation will look after it's built. Sophisticated software allows a proposed design to be reviewed from multiple angles and even provides room walkthroughs. Being able to view work in 3-D can help you get better involved in the design process. There are various levels of 3-D modeling, and varying costs as well. Some architecture offices offer it as an additional service. If the complexity of your project warrants it and you have the time and money (it is labor intensive and adds cost), don't hesitate to ask for a 3-D model before the commencement of your project. Remember, changing a design on paper is relatively easy; changing a design during construction is costly and time consuming.

5. The Full-Service Architectural Firm

Architectural design and drawings are not the only services architecture firms provide. Ask your architect if there are any additional services offered and how they could be useful for your particular project. Ask about benefits of specific services and their corresponding costs. If a firm doesn't offer a requested service, they should be able to refer you to a firm that does.



Additional services some firms provide:

1. Pre-project cost estimates
2. Landscape Architecture
3. Interior Design
4. Historic Preservation
5. Color consulting
6. Evaluation of a building you may be buying or selling
7. Master planning
8. Traditional and computer rendering
9. Site evaluation for a new house
10. Zoning review

6. Fees

Architects may charge an hourly fee, a fixed fee or a percentage of the construction cost. Typically though, an architect's fee is calculated as a percentage of the project's entire construction cost. Depending on the services provided, the rate can range from 8 to 24 percent. That rate reflects the level of service the architect is providing—the lower the fee, the less service given. So when you get a fee proposal from an architect, make sure you know what level of service is proposed so you are comparing apples to apples.

Are you getting a bare-bones proposal from one architect—just enough drawings to make it through the local Buildings Department—or a full set of design drawings and specifications that outlines the entire project? Does the Architect's fee proposal include helping you select fixtures, finishes and other materials for the house, or choose paint colors? Or are you expected to be doing this on your own? This is one of the most time-consuming aspects of the project, and these decisions can make or break the design as well as the budget.

Is the architect drawing all the important interior elevations—or is this being left to you and the contractor to figure out during construction? Some people have the time and the interest in performing these services themselves. But others have no time for this—nor do they have any design skills. Having a good architect helping with these decisions, along with providing a well-documented set of construction drawings will usually save you time and money, despite the additional upfront costs of the higher fee.

What about the budget? 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 (before a good estimate of the final project cost is possible) the architect may charge an hourly fee, a retainer or create a preliminary report to advise you before the project begins. The report can be used to establish a budget and a Scope of Work outlining your priorities. The retainer or other fees are typically credited towards the total architectural fee.

7. Hiring a Contractor

An experienced architect will have a list of contractors they like to work with. Your architect should be able to help you choose the best contractor for your project. Many clients like to get multiple bids on the construction of a project—usually three—and this is standard practice. With multiple bids based on the exact same construction documents the architect prepared, people feel reassured that they are getting a "fair" deal. However, others prefer to hire a contractor they trust during the earliest stage of the design process and not bid the project out to others. Having a contractor on board during the design process has the advantage of ensuring you will not be building more than you can afford, and will speed up the design phase.

Where do I go from here?

These tips will guide you in choosing the best architect for your project. You will be working very closely with your architect on what may be one of the biggest investments of your life. Not only are an architect's answers to your questions important, but the manner in which they answer speaks volumes too.



Did they take the time to fully discuss details to clear up any confusion? Did you feel comfortable with them? The design process is exciting but can be intimidating at times. Choosing the right team can make it an enjoyable process. That team always starts with the selection of the right architect.

The Next Step

Every project is unique and your requirements may differ based on a multitude of factors. But armed with the steps explained in this guide, you can proceed with confidence to find the architect who will ensure that your project is a success.

If you're in the process of looking for an architect, let's talk. I can help you wade through the necessary requirements and make sure you're not overlooking anything. I offer a custom Preliminary Design Analysis where I will identify the specific requirements pertaining to your project and your available options. Typically, this saves my clients thousands of dollars and weeks of lost time, not to mention the stress and headache of getting something wrong. To learn more about the Preliminary Design Analysis and why it is critically important to your project's success, visit my website or email me at kevin@kevinwolfearchitect.com. If you're ready to talk now, please give me a call: (718) 428-0631.

Best wishes for the success of your project! — *Kevin Wolfe, AIA*

