

## **I Need an Architect — Now What Do I Do With Him?**

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### **Forced Or Needed?**

Say you plan to build a manufacturing or retail facility. You may not know or care about anything but the bottom line concerns you know by heart or that are reflected in your balance sheet and daily experience. You probably might not even want an architect but feel forced by code or planning requirements to hire one. However, once you become involved in the project and if you follow the design process you will begin to see a development of light, sound, air and feeling that makes your building and site serve you in a way you hadn't anticipated.

### **What is the Business of Architecture?**

While all of this may sound esoteric — and architects are always being accused of being "aesthetic, intellectual snobs", the truth of the matter is that the **business of architecture is building**. Coupled with this is the fact that architects are **licensed professionals in the business of building** — just as lawyers, doctors and engineers are licensed to practice their respective professions. As such, architects have both a **moral and legal responsibility** to this profession and the clients they serve. Usually we think the "contractors" are the builders. The fact is, that rightly understood, the architect is the head and heart of a well-run building project.

Building is a 'team sport'. It requires the co-operation of many parties to get the project done. The architect is the person who takes you or your company's ideas, needs, and dreams and turns them into physical artifacts. He has an aesthetic responsibility to you to **add value** to your ideas and discard solutions which will not really serve those desires — all while still meeting a reasonable budget.

### **Your Architect — Imagined and Real**

Architects have an undeserved reputation for raising costs. As a representative of the client it is, in reality, the responsibility of the architect to 'ride shotgun' on your building funds. (This includes ensuring that the contractor completes the work as specified.) This usually undeserved reputation for raising costs stems from two things architects do.

1. They try to actually manifest the client's desires — a process that usually costs more than most 'off-the-peg' solutions (which **really do not** satisfy these desires.)
2. The architect takes the creative risk of first choosing building systems and finishes. While later parties can have the luxury to complain, the fact is, building materials are expensive and better almost always costs more. Conversely, minimum quality almost always costs much more (in the long run) than first imagined.

The first thing an architect will do for you is work with you on your 'program' and budget. This will determine if you are even in the realm of possibility for building the project you envision. The usual outcome at this point in time is for the client to "shoot the messenger" (read: architect) because the cost is almost always more than anticipated. The truth of the project however is not that the architect raised the cost. Rather, they are just delivering the first bad news about real cost conditions.

The second thing an architect does is design. Simply stated he puts the pieces of your building together in drawings and specifications so that it can be built. Coupled with this design process is management. Some may manage the entire building project as architect/construction manager. Others may only manage the design process — controlling the various engineers, consultants, specific on-site testing, inspections, site visits and negotiations concerning the work as it goes along. AIA (Architectural

Institute of America) contracts can be tailored to be specific about which services are being provided to you.

## **Picking Your Architect**

How do you find the right architect for your project? Simply stated — **invest time**. Most CEO's and individuals hire the first architect they meet after deciding to build a project. This often means they will end up with architects they meet at functions outside of business. This may be alright, but a better solution is to make office hour phone calls to say, five architects. From this list, limit your candidates to the three you felt most comfortable with after your brief telephone interview.

The professional setting is key because it reflects how the architect really approaches business as opposed to an opinion of how one does business after having had a few drinks. Don't discount architects who don't exactly roll over to your every whim. It may mean that they have integrity. It may also mean the architect knows that you are over your head in some phases of the building process. Regardless, if you follow along closely, you will see that there is a good reason you hired him.

In your selection process, **don't be shy about asking hard questions concerning things that matter to you**. If you have a personality driven company, it would seem natural to expect to see that personality reflected in the final building results. The architect is there to help you augment yourself — and to help protect you from yourself. (e.g., You may want things that are unreasonable. The architect can suggest reasonable substitutes.) The architect is also a screen which allows building owners to make their own artistic or corporate statements to the public. In a society that often frowns upon people for "putting on airs", the architect can, in this case, be 'blamed' for the statement of the owner through his building.

## **Architect/Client Relationship**

The most difficult relationship is one where the client fancies himself an architect. Even worse is a group whose members consider themselves architects, construction supervisors, interior decorators, etc. The client represented by a group i.e., the infamous **building committee** is a very common type of client. In order to make committee driven projects run smoothly and cost effective, we have found that the best solution is to have them express themselves in writing through one committee member.

Even if this ideal can be met in theory and contract, it is difficult to maintain in practice. The architect will still have to make presentations to the whole group. Human nature being what it is, such presentations often encounter committee members who view the design process as the only time they will get an opportunity to wield authority. The ability to handle such persons (both inside and out of meetings) is an important trait you will want in an architect.

The obverse of this is the architect that lets you design the project and acts if they are waiting for you to say what you want at every stop. **Avoid them like the plague**. They are not really architects (in the true sense) and are not giving you architectural counsel. In many states you could use a draftsman or engineer to get some of your jobs done. However, you would lose the perspective of one who has studied the history and present state of the built environment.

Why should you care about having such a perspective? For one thing, the architect can save you from constructing a building that will become obsolete — either out of style (**poor resale value or corporate image**) or become obsolete in technical or safety requirements within which you must function.

## Working Together— The Ideal And The Real

Experienced architects will know when to shut up! That is, they will know about how much you can stand to hear about why they are suggesting what they do. Unless you have a real interest in architecture, you will not have the patience to hear what they are thinking at every turn. However, you should never be afraid to push them with deep questioning to satisfy yourself that they **are** thinking about more than what you want to know. If you really want to know, most architects will accommodate you with long explanations; historical references and the like.

In an Oxford lecture in 1967, R.M. Hare, professor of moral philosophy discussed his understanding of how one should deal with an architect. If the architect came up with a proposal you liked, it would okay to suggest **minor** alterations or suggest things that work better for your previously-stated needs. If you do not like the design, you should **reject the whole scheme** and send him back to the drawing board until he either comes up with something you like or you fire him. While this is of course too ideal, it does emphasize the need for both architect and client to be responsible for whole systems from the beginning. It also shows the client the basic pattern of working with an architect — even though it may vary with circumstances.

You should also give the architect direct supervision and control over the interiors, landscaping, etc. — if he wants it. This prevents the design from being diminished by other professionals who may not fully understand the designer's intent. This makes the architect give you a complete project.

### Special Concerns

One last thing of importance to be mentioned is the manner in which the architect can increase the security of a building without negatively impacting the design, occupants or your business' viability. Of course, no building design can protect everyone from irrational acts of war. In the present climate however, attention should be given to these new security concerns. Although they are hard to find, you should look for an architect that had a security background before September 11, 2001.

### Allies

The architect is probably your single-most important ally in the building process. He is the mechanic that makes your project a reality. Not only does a good architect make the preliminary work easier (including obtaining financing) but he also helps, through good design, to maintain and increase the value of your project in the years to come. What should you do with the architect you found? Let him build.

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