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How to Hire an Architect

Historic preservation projects should not be entered into lightly. Perhaps the most critical decisions a property owner will make in a preservation project are whether to employ the services of an architect and which architect to choose. Any architect being considered for this kind of undertaking should be someone who knows and understands preservation goals and methods. Architects, in general, are not specifically trained in historic preservation unless they have earned a post-graduate degree. Most architects have developed their knowledge and experience after working with several projects over time.

In choosing an architect, you should “ask around,” starting with the local preservation organization. Then ask neighbors or other historic-property owners for their opinions. It’s best to get two or three recommendations. Ask the architect for references and verify the information with his previous clients. It’s also a good idea to request a tour of a couple of the architect’s projects to see what was done and why. Seeing a previous project of his that is similar to the scope (size, scale and complexity) of your plans might offer an excellent opportunity to learn how the architect responds and to give you an idea of his vision.

Most architects are chosen for their experience and a professional connection that is made with the client. Discuss your project with each prospective architect and get a clear understanding of what direction he might take. You might need a second meeting before you can make a final decision.

Architects’ fees vary, but they are usually based on two schedules. One is a fee based upon “percentage of construction cost” ranging from 5 percent to 15 percent, which is determined by the size, scale and complexity of the project. Another fee schedule is hourly based, usually between \$50 and \$150 per hour. Once the scope of the

project has been determined, the architect should be able to give you an approximate fee and cost for the project. Since fees can vary dramatically, the estimated fee should not be the sole factor for a decision on selecting an architect. A high or low fee may or may not indicate an architect’s level of knowledge or experience.

There are five phases of basic services an architect may provide to a client: schematic design; design development; construction documents; bidding and negotiation; and construction administration.

Schematic design is the preliminary design solution showing overall concept, size and scale of the project and usually shown with floor plans and elevation drawings.

After the schematic design phase has been approved, the second phase, **design development**, involves a more detailed review of the preliminary design.

The third—and most expensive—phase is **construction documents**, which provides the necessary construction drawings and specifications for the contractor to build by. These documents may include detailed floor plans, elevations, interior and exterior details, wall sections, finish schedules, specifications, and possibly also mechanical, plumbing, and electrical drawings. Specifications consists of a written description of materials and how they are installed. The specifications may be in book form or part of the drawings.

The **bidding and negotiation** phase uses the construction documents for bidding by potential contractors or builders. A good set of construction documents is necessary to get the benefit of the bidding process. The architect can act as an agent to provide a fair, impartial review of a proposed bid, and can guide the client if value engineering (cost-cutting) is required. It’s important to have an agent to review

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information provided by the contractor, especially any cost-cutting measures, to verify that they are economically fair and do not affect the function or aesthetics of the project.

The final phase of service is **construction administration**, which coordinates and reviews periodically the construction of the project. The architect reviews the project for acceptable construction techniques and verifies that the client is getting “what he paid for.” In addition, regular site visits can help limit additional costs when changes or unforeseen problems occur.

A successful historic preservation project, whether a restoration, rehabilitation or renovation, requires an effective partnership between the homeowners and the professionals they employ. An architect who is knowledgeable about historic preservation issues and techniques can be a vital resource for property owners undertaking a preservation project.

