



HOW TO HIRE AN ARCHITECT

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introduction

Nothing is more exciting than starting a building project, and nothing will affect the success of your project more than hiring the right architect.

An architect not only determines the design and function of a building, but also the emotional toll and financial costs involved in its construction.

Finding your perfect match in an architect is not impossible and the following eight points can guide you along the way.

Use these to help analyse 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.

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1. the search: finding an architect

Like many other fields, word of mouth is the best way to look for an architect. Ask family, friends and professional colleagues for referrals. Through this process you have the added benefit of independent advice on the performance or otherwise of a particular architect.

Is there a particular building you admire? A knock on the door can yield an introduction to your project's potential architect.

Professional organizations such as the New Zealand Institute of Architects [www.nzia.co.nz] and the New Zealand Registered Architects Board [www.nzrab.co.nz] are also great sources to find architects.

General contractors, interior design studios and other trade-related personnel are often able to furnish you with some good referrals as well.

These days, searching the internet, is the most used method to search for architects, however there is a lot of information available out there so you will need to narrow down your search to local architects, or to a specific type of project.

Take a look through the web sites of potential candidates, in detail, look at their previous work, and get a feel for what is their design style and language [is it about blending in the neighborhood, is it environmentally sound designs, or is it about making a big statement ?]

When you have a list of about 4 contenders [try to keep it around this number otherwise the process can get out of hand] it's time to start up a conversation with them. Make an appointment for a consultation, and take along an outline of what your project is about.

Meeting face to face is the only way you can decide if an architect is the best fit for you and your project.

2. the process: how architects work

Architects are creative thinkers and are trained to solve complex problems so don't hold back on the information you provide, and the questions you put to them, about your project. A good architect will rise to the challenge, and within the space of a short meeting, you should feel inspired and confident about your project.

The important thing here to find out is how will the architect approach your project. Let them know the most important aspects of your project and ask how these will be incorporated into the process.

Important aspects are generally functional requirements [what the building is to be used for, number and type of rooms, which spaces get used the most etc] but it can also be about how the building is to relate to its surroundings or an image that you want to create.

If your project is a new building it is a good idea to show some examples of buildings you admire, and, even better, its good to show what you don't like, to get this out of the way first. Ask for the architects opinion about your choices to see if there is some common ground.

If you are doing a renovation, start with what aspects of your building you currently like, and ask how they can be improved. Typically, a renovation should try and reuse the best parts of the existing building. Ask the architect how will this 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.

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3. design style: what is it and do you want it?

It is common for an architect to be known by a certain design style – Spanish colonial revival, ultra-modern, French country to name a few.

Most architects are able to adapt their signature style to what you want, however, think twice about hiring an architect with a distinctive modern signature style to refurbish your heritage villa, for example.

For renovation work your building will already have a style and generally the approach is to enhance this theme. It is important to know that the way a building is constructed and its overall structure can be part of its style therefore trying to change something completely different may not be practical.

If you are building new and a certain style is what you are after, have plenty of examples of the look you want; these can be found from catalogs, magazines or the Internet.

However, don't feel that you have to commit to a style before you start the process, some of the best designs just evolve out of the collaborative process between client and architect.

In terms of environmentally friendly, sustainable “green” design, and construction this can be incorporated into any design style. Discuss the importance of these elements with your architect from the outset.

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4. point of contact: meet your project architect

Signing a contract with a director of an architectural firm does not necessarily mean that person will be your project architect.

Actually, outside of small architect practices, it is common procedure, to delegate the day to day running of a project to a team, managed by a designated project architect.

Be sure to meet this project architect 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 should share a clear understanding of the project with your architect and feel completely comfortable when you are dealing with them.

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5. 3d modeling: experience your project

Plans, elevations and sections are the traditional method of communication in the building industry.

Architects and builders understand how these 2 dimensional drawings translate into actual buildings, however, their clients generally don't. It is not uncommon for clients to approve drawings, and end up surprised, sometimes unpleasantly, when the project is constructed.

A 3d model is the best way to see how your project will look when it is built. A physical scale model is one way to do this.

Alternatively, architectural computer software today allows buildings to be drawn in 3d, which can generate views from any angle, or produce an entire model that you can walk through on your computer, tablet, or smartphone.

Being able to work in 3d is a useful tool for clients.

Don't hesitate to check with your architect that they can provide 3d modeling before the commencement of your project and ask if you can see some examples.

6. architect scope: the full-service architectural firm

Conceptual designs and working drawings are not the only services architectural firms provide. Ask about other services your candidate's firm offers.

Ask about benefits of specific services to you and their corresponding costs. Ask the architect if there are any additional services offered and how they could be useful to you for your particular project.

If a firm doesn't offer a requested service, they should be able to refer a firm that does.

Below is a glimpse into some additional services a typical architectural firm provides:

- Project Feasibility Studies
- Programming
- Master Planning
- Evaluation Of Potential Building
- Architectural Design
- Traditional And Computer Renderings
- 3 Dimensional, Fly Through, Computer Visualization
- Construction Documents
- Consent applications
- Interior design
- Furniture, Furnishings & Equipment Specifications
- Construction Administration

7. architects charges: figuring out the fees

Typically, an architect's fee is calculated as a percentage of the project's entire cost (minus the architect's fee of course).

Depending on the services provided by the architect, and the size of the project, the rate could range from 5 to 20 percent. However, 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 or a retainer.

The retainer or hourly fee will be credited towards the total architectural fee once it has been determined. Billing monthly is the industry standard. Also, ask when payment is expected and the preferred method of payment.

Keep in mind that the architect's fee applies to all the costs of your project, including items requiring separate specialist design such as landscaping and electrical works.

The most important thing about fees is complete transparency. Insist upon it.

8. design coordination: specialist consultants and contractors

It is likely that you will need to engage other specialist consultants on your project. This may include structural engineers, town planners, or even specific construction advice from installers.

An experienced architect should have a list of consultants they like to work with. Your architect should be able to brief these consultants, as to what is required of them, and help you choose the best consultant for your project. Ask the architect about this process.

It is also good to start the discussion early about building contractors and the type of building contract that is suitable for your project and meets your needs. This may impact on the scope of the architects services so it is important to ask about this.

Architects will be able to recommend contractors and give advice on the best way to lead into construction.

Through a tendering process you can obtain multiple bids on the construction of your and this is a good way to test the market and bring about certainty in the contract price. This is an industry standard and gives you better leverage at the bargaining table. Find out from the architect about tendering your project and ask about any alternatives that they might recommend.

in summary

These tips are meant as a guide to choosing the best architect for your project.

You will be working very closely with your architect, through a process that demands a significant investment in time and in cost.

Not only are an architect's answers to your questions important, but how they are answered speaks volumes.

Ask yourself:

Did they take time for details to clear up any confusion?

Did you feel comfortable with them?

Did they conduct business in a transparent manner?

Building projects are exciting but can get intimidating at times, however choosing the right team can make it an enjoyable process. That team always starts with choosing the right architect and we hope these tips will help you with that for your next project.

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