

Do you need an Architect?

I receive many telephone calls from homeowners interested in remodeling their current home, building a new home, or converting their garage into a new Family Room or Den. Inevitably they want me to quote a design fee over the phone and don't understand why I cannot provide telephone quotations for costs. Hopefully, after reading this, Mr. Joe Homeowner will have a better understanding of the design profession.

Hiring the Professional you need

When selecting a design professional for your project, you'll have three choices: an architect, with extensive experience and a California Architect's license; a design/build construction firm, sometimes headed by a general contractor with some design experience and a contractor's license, who is able to design a home from the foundation up; or an interior designer, who may specialize in kitchens and baths primarily focusing on the interior aesthetics of a dwelling.

Architect (*American Institute of Architects*)

When you hire an architect, you are hiring a highly trained imagination that has the ability to create a residence for you that is beautiful, functional, and unique. Architects provide a service, not a product. They actually hold copyrights on their architectural plans, though you do receive a copy for one-time use. You can't sell or give the plans to someone else, authorize their publication, or use them again. You're paying for the professional's expertise in defining your requirements, developing a design, coordinating the application for permit, and making sure that the residence is built as specified by the plans. If you ask an architect to develop plans for a major remodel or a new house, he or she will typically sketch out two or three possible design approaches to help you decide what's best for the way you want to live.

Design/Build firm (*Design-Build Institute of America*)

If you already know exactly what you want and how you want your design to look, you have the option of using a design-and-build firm that can translate your ideas directly into plans.

Hiring a building designer instead of an architect – especially if the designer is not licensed as a contractor – gives you less legal protection in the event of trouble. By law, designers can develop standard residential framing, but even those with contractor's licenses may need to hire an architect or engineer for structural calculations and details. However, a building designer's fees may be lower than an architect's. *Note: Building Designers are not licensed design professionals as recognized by the State of California.*

Interior designer (*American Society of Interior Designers*)

If you aren't planning to move walls or change your home's structure, another option is to hire an interior designer to do what they specialize in – choosing finishes, colors, furnishings, and appliances, then coordinating everything in a cohesive layout. An interior designer works from the inside out, looks at the flow of rooms, placement of windows, cabinetry design, and furniture. *These are all items an Architect will address as well, but the key is whether you will be moving walls or altering the structure.* *Note: Interior Designers are not licensed design professionals as recognized by the State of California.*

That Big First Step

The first task you'll face is to get the names of design professionals. Ask friends for referrals and ask neighbors whose homes you like for the names of professionals who have designed them. This will likely be your best resource. Also, clip magazine articles on remodels that interest you and note names of architects or designers. You can also visit the website of the American Institute of Architects at www.aiaonline.com, and call the local chapter, AIA Golden Empire, at [661] 636.1356.

Interview two or three design professionals in person and talk to several of their clients. Keep in mind that though a recently registered architect or designer may charge half the price of an experienced one, he or she may take twice as long to finish a design – and the design may be less cost-efficient. Ask to see the architect's or designer's portfolio. Most important, try to sense whether you and the architect or designer will be able to communicate with each other. Clashing personalities can slow down your building project or even sideline it entirely. Not only will you be working closely with an architect for a long time, but you'll also need him or her to be your advocate – in everything from selecting wood cabinets through hiring a contractor.

Basis of Fees

At the homeowner's request, the architect, design/build firm, or interior designer can outline the kind of services to expect during various phases of the project, and the corresponding fees. Architects may charge a percentage of the home's construction costs, a lump sum, or an hourly fee for the duration of the project. But they may also charge a combination of these fees, with different types of fees at different phases. This is the reason you will not typically be quoted fees over the telephone. Be very cautious of those individuals or firms who are willing to quote you a fee without meeting with you and reviewing your scope of work.

The variation in fees for architects can range from 5 to 25 percent. Architects frequently charge an hourly fee, from \$45.00 to \$175.00 an hour. Reimbursables such as postage, copies of plans, and travel are charged separately and marked up 10 to 20 percent. Building permits and various construction coordination is almost never included and must be addressed during the initial meetings with your Architect. No matter whom you hire, your budget should include a minimum of 10 percent for contingencies (*there is always the unexpected!*).

Design Phases

The phases of the work and the fee structure will vary according to the project and the type of design professional you hire. As an example, here's what to expect with an architect. These estimated percentages indicate the amount of time generally allocated to each phase, and a proportional amount of the architect's fee.

***Scope of Work:* (5%-10% of Total Fee)**

The first thing you'll do after selecting an architect is to meet with him or her to talk in detail about what you want to build. Be as specific as you can during this meeting: Bring magazine pictures of what you want, as well as a list of desired features and your ultimate goal for your project. Think about how you live your life. What are you trying to accomplish? Will your kitchen be an entertainment center or a place just for morning coffee? Do you want to wake up with the sun in your face or a view of your shaded garden? It's critical to know how much money you want to spend. Take copious notes during this meeting to avoid any misunderstandings later.

***Rough Sketches/Schematics:* (10%-15% of Total Fee)**

The architect will develop floor plans and elevations, and sometimes will have a preliminary consultation with the city building department or a structural engineer. At this point you and your Architect will need to decide if you want to include other professionals in your project, such as a landscape designer, interior designer, or lighting or sound specialists. Some cities or homeowners associations may require a preliminary review of the plans at this point to decide if the design is appropriate for your neighborhood.

***Design Development:* (15%-25% of Total Fee)**

After developing your design, the architect will add more detail to the drawings, including exact dimensions for the floor plan, as well as materials and colors for finishes. It's easy to get bogged down or discouraged at this phase because suddenly many decisions must be made. Do you want a sheet vinyl floor, ceramic tile, pavers, or maybe a wood or simulated wood floor in that new kitchen?

The architect may also ask a contractor to provide a cost estimate for construction. Because budgeting is so complicated on building projects, you may find that preselecting a contractor – then bringing him or her in at this early stage – results in a more cost-effective design.

Unfortunately, many homeowners get into trouble when they hit the design development phase. It's often easy to go way over budget when you're planning all the features and finishes for your dream home. It is very important to remind yourself of how much money you want to spend and convey that clearly to the Architect so he/she doesn't design items that you won't be able to afford!

***Construction documents:* (40%-45% of Total Fee)**

The term "Construction Documents" is the usual term that Architects and Contractors use to describe the actual drawings that are submitted for permits and used on the jobsite to build your new home. The architect prepares working drawings that establish in detail the requirements for the entire project, including electrical and mechanical systems. An application for the building permit is usually submitted after this phase.

***Hiring a contractor/Job site Inspections:* (10%-20% of Total Fee)**

If you haven't already selected a contractor, an architect can ask several contractors or will recommend several contractors that will submit bids on the project. However, the architect doesn't select the contractor; it's ultimately the homeowner's choice. Once the contractor is selected, the architect will act as the client's agent. He or she will observe the construction during regular – usually weekly – site visits. The architect will review the contractor's request for payment and make a final listing of items to be completed or corrected by the contractor.

The surprise factor!

Building, remodeling, and interior design projects rarely (*read: never!*) proceed without some unexpected development that affects budget or schedule. But if you have done your homework, have confidence in your team, and have steeled yourself for the inevitable surprise by including that extra 10 percent minimum in your budget for contingencies, you should be able to achieve the home or remodel project of your dreams. Good Luck!

***For further information or to schedule an appointment to discuss your project, please call
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