

Hiring a Design Team to Lead Your Build – Recognizing Excellence

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Your next new construction or renovation project demands a stellar team with the leadership skills and experience to guide you through a multi-phase, multi-discipline process. Choosing the right architect and interior designer will save you time and money, as well as frustration. Here is how to find the design team you can trust to get you to the finish line.



Before Your Search

Before setting out on the hunt for a professional design team, define your vision and goals for the project including your budget and schedule. Consider phasing the project over time if you are relying on reserves or an assessment for funding. Be sure to be clear on what is necessary and what is on the wish list so you know what can be trimmed or pushed out another year if your budget limited. Clear direction is essential to a successful project and arming yourself with this and key information will set you on the right path. Document what the desired “Scope of Work” is as this is the basis of the architect’s fee proposal.

Consult ownership, sales, and staff on the broader goals of your project to make sure you are on the right track. Know the particulars of your organization’s brand. Refresh yourself on guidelines from your branding and marketing team to be sure everything aligns from the beginning.

Gather existing construction documents and plans, no matter how old. You may be able to retrieve the permitted plans from the City Maps and Records department. Having this information on hand will help the architect assess the project and save time on re-creating As-Built drawings.

The Role of the Architect

If you fall short of gathering any of the information listed above, fear not, the architect can guide you in defining the “Scope of Work” for your project. Architect’s often serve as a team lead, in tandem with the client and general contractor. Their role is to design the building ensuring it meets your needs for function and aesthetic, while also meeting building codes for safety and accessibility. As they design, they must consider financial impacts, current and future needs, material sourcing, and all building systems. Commercial architectural services can begin before the design process (Pre-Design) and extend after the building is designed (Post Construction). They can assist in master planning, site selection, building the professional design team, and overseeing construction. Some architects also offer Interior Design Services and well a consultant coordination for Structural, Mechanical, Plumbing and Electrical engineering. Regardless of if you know the exact services you need, an architect can help you get to the answer. Look here for sample forms, roles and duties, service agreement <https://aiacontracts.com/>

Make a Short-List

Now that you know what you are looking for, compose a list of architects that might be right for your type of project and scope of work. Start by finding out who your company has worked with in the past. Talk to your network and other industry members about their experiences and if they have any recommendations. Find similar projects to your own and sleuth out who worked on the architectural team. You can contact your local AIA office (American Institute of Architects) for qualified architects in the area or consult the web for more leads on commercial architects.

Work the List

Narrow that list with a look at their credentials. Make sure they are fully insured and licensed to practice in the state of your project location. Check out their portfolio of work to be sure they have experience doing the type of work and services you need. A company website is a good place to start, but a phone call or email request for relevant experience can yield better results. After the screening phase, schedule some interviews.

Ask the Questions

How much do their architectural services cost?

Commercial architectural firms have different ways of charging for projects. Your goal is to get a clear understanding of their fee structure and phases of work. Along with up front project costs, ask about fees you may incur during the project if changes need to be made and how they will be handled. This is a great time to test out your budget numbers. The architect should be able to let you know if your budget expectations are realistic and let you know what you can and cannot afford.

How long will the design and construction process take?

Ask the Architect to walk you through the workflow of a typical project like yours. They should define for you different stages and benchmarks for each. Look for the type of involvement they expect from you during different parts of the project and what types of issues might affect the timeline. Schedules are always being updated. Allow ample time for Owner review, changes, bidding, permitting and then construction. Factor in the FFE procurement phase as well with long lead times.

What issues to foresee?

This is a valuable question for you. Not only does the answer help you adjust your expectations and better prepare, but it will also give you a sense of the architect's aptitude. Great commercial architects have knowledge about the current state of the industry and possible pitfalls – and they also have solutions and strategies to overcome them.

What is their management and communication style?

Ensure this answer jives with you and take clues from your experience interviewing them. How hands-on would you like them to be with you and other team members? How much updating and information do you want about the project. Along with interpersonal and status communication – inquire about how they will communicate their designs. Will they complete a model or renderings? Will they do formal presentations and hold ongoing dialogue weekly? Monthly? Find out who will be your main point of contact during the project – it might be another member of the team. If so, how will everyone stay in the loop?

Seal the Deal

Before you make your final selection, follow up on references. Past clients and team members, such as engineering and construction firms will confirm their claims and give you a better picture of what working with them will be like. Be sure to base your decision on more than the dollar amount. Excellent design takes time, costs money, and a good working Owner/Architect relationship. One last important item, have a good contract for the "Scope of Work" with clear delineation of the fees, exclusions, and additional services.

Sample contracts can be found here <https://www.aia.org/resources/6150803-list-of-all-current-aia-contract-documents>