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How to Have a Successful Experience With Your Architect

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Start earlier than you think so that you can enjoy each of the various stages and the creative process. You'll be surprised at how long it takes to digest the design phase, create construction documents, secure governing approvals through your homeowners association, the city and the Coastal Commission, if required, and securing construction bids.

For a Remodel

Know from the onset exactly why you want to remodel. An experienced architect can help you evaluate your options. Know your primary and critical objectives before your first meeting:

- Remodeling for resale
- Remodeling for your own pleasure and comfort

A. Create a wish list: Itemize the reasons you are considering to remodel.

We ask all potential clients who inquire

about remodeling to do this essential homework (this can eliminate Change Orders down the line):

B. Determine a total budget which includes architecture, engineering, miscellaneous expenses and construction. Be clear with the architect so they understand your parameters. While the architect can not guarantee the construction cost for the remodel you outline, they can guide you based upon your budget. If your program is too ambitious for your budget it is good to know this from the start. The architect should help you pare down the program to fit your needs –or suggest you put your plans to remodel on hold until you have more to work with.

RULE: You can always find an architect (especially in today's economy) to tell you what you want to hear but your experience will be successful if you find one that tells you the truth; prepares you for reality in both cost and timing.

Note: If your remodel is extensive (or

involves your kitchen) you should budget for living expenses off-site during the remodel.

Building a New Home

Create an outline of your objectives to take with you when interviewing the architect. Include the basic necessities - number of bedrooms, general requirements for master suite, kitchen basics (how many ovens/dishwashers – sometimes the only requirement is for dueling microwaves), and specialty rooms (office, exercise, wine cellar, etc.). If you know that you want a specific size home (square footage) jot that down, too.

How many cars must park in a garage and does the garage have special hobby requirements? What about your outside space?

Do you need an ideally situated vegetable garden, a fire ring, fountain, BBQ features, pool, spa, gazebo, or . . . as little as outside area as possible?

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Now You Are Ready to Interview Architects

The very best way to find an architect is word of mouth. Friends who have had great experiences, job signs on projects in construction that you like (don't be bashful about knocking on the door and asking the owner about their experience), photos in magazines that feature design ideas you like.

Schedule an appointment (this first meeting should be free) to get acquainted. Remember, the architect will be interviewing you too. Don't be put off from interviewing with an architect whose work you like but you're told they are 'too busy or too expensive.' Sometimes that translates to being too good not to be considered.

A. The First Interview with an architect (allow 1 hour)

EDUCATION: Two things must happen in the first interview meeting; you must express your general goals and objectives and the architect must explain the way they approach their work and the services they provide. Remember, you are interviewing each other. If you don't feel the architect is enthusiastic about your project a second meeting won't change that impression. If the architect doesn't believe your goals and objectives are realistic they should tell you. If the chemistry isn't there . . . Don't force it. You will spend a great deal of time and money working together - it is important to have trust and good communication from the start.

Things you want to discover during this meeting:

- Architect's design philosophy and approach
- Architect's design style & objectives
- Architect's experience with projects similar to yours
- Architect's experience in your community or HOA
- Architect's business structure
 - o Is their license current and in good standing with the state
 - o Have there been any professional sanctions or violations
 - o Do they carry Professional, General & Workmen's Comp insurance?
 - o Who are the key people in the firm and what roll will they play in your project?
 - o Ask for a list of 3 recent references
- What are the Architect's standard services that will be included in their contract? What services are beyond their

contract?

B. Architectural services vary greatly from architect to architect. Ask the architect to show you a completed set of plans so you understand what is included and pay special attention to those things they expect to be "worked out during construction" or by the builder. Anything not specified on the plans before they are bid will come to you as a Change Order during construction. Change Orders are always more expensive than if they had been included initially.

A full-service architect will provide project programming, design, cost estimate, construction documents, approval processing, construction bidding and negotiation, construction assistance.

Once you have selected your architect let them do what they do best. A skillful, experienced architect will assemble a group of professionals (soils, structural, civil engineers and landscape architect are but a few) who are licensed and insured and with whom the architect has solid experience.

C. Understand from the start the objectives of your architect

While there are legally expected 'Standard' services an architect will provide to you, there are no rules about important 'additional' services beyond the minimum; and 'additional' services vary greatly. The scope of service you receive may mean the difference between success and disappointment and unanticipated costs in construction.

D. Listen carefully - You want to be told the truth from the start. Too often an architect will tell you what they think you want to hear rather than the truth. The truth can hurt - ONLY if you don't get it! If your plan is to build in a time frame that is impractical or on a budget that is unrealistic and you are not told the truth you will be sadly disappointed.

Trust the Professionals

Trust is one of the most powerful tools one person can give to another. While it must be rightfully earned, once acquired don't mess it up! Your architect will do their best to protect you throughout the process and your job is to let them do what they do best.

After the Design Is Finalized and Before Construction Documents

If budget and timing are a 'non' issue to you proceed as quickly as possible into the Construction Document phase. Otherwise, this is a good time to get a reality check (Preliminary Cost Estimate)

on your budget and timing expectations

Preliminary Cost Estimates

If budget is a critical factor ask the architect to put the design plans out for a Preliminary Cost Estimate. This can add a month to the process but may be invaluable. You will at least know if your expectations are on track.

RULE: You can always find a general contractor (especially in today's economy) to tell you what you want to hear but your experience will be successful if you find one that tells you the truth; prepares you for reality in both cost and timing.

Construction Documents

Construction Documents must be thorough and highly detailed to prevent conflict in construction, maintain the integrity of the design goals and prevent a string of unexpected Change Orders by the contractor (Refer to 3.C. above). This is where your architect's experience really makes a difference. This detailing will require more hours by your architect but save you a great deal of money and aggravation in the end; and you'll wind up with the project you and your architect envisioned for the price you negotiated with your builder.

Contractor Bidding and Construction Phase

A. Bidding - your architect should assist you in finding and selecting qualified and experienced builders for your project. Check their license, insurance and references. When the bids come in ask your architect to review them for consistency and conformance to the plans and help you analyze the differences. Often the lowest bid didn't include everything and sometimes

The highest bid is still negotiable. It is a plus to the whole project to work with a builder that has experience with the architect; they understand each others expectations and will work as a team.

B. Construction - Your architect should be on site at least once a week during the critical stages to see that the intentions of the plans and specifications for construction are being followed. Let your architect be your liaison with the contractor.

One Last Word

Build and help maintain good working relationships with all your design and construction professionals and you can be assured a positive, creative and fun experience!