

Working with an Architect

Few people realize how complicated it is to build--until they find themselves lost in the maze of design options, building codes, zoning laws, contractors, and so on. No two building projects are exactly alike, so there is no single, clear-cut path to follow. At DE BIASSE & SEMINARA ARCHITECTS, we have the education, training, experience, and vision to guide you through the design and construction process, from helping you define what you want to build to helping you get the most for your construction dollar. We see the big picture, creating total environments that satisfy functional needs and are exciting, dynamic spaces in which to work and live. Whether you are remodeling, adding on, or building from scratch, an architect can guide the way. Working with construction professionals, architects can help you end up with a well-designed project that meets your needs and works with your budget and time frame. Architects are trained to solve problems in creative ways. With their broad knowledge of design and construction, architects can show you alternatives and options you might never think of on your own.

The architect's services are a wise investment for the money: Our office uses state-of-the-art computer imaging for three dimensional modeling and production drawings, as well as traditional means of pen on paper sketches to convey design ideas. A well-conceived project can be built more efficiently and economically. We plan your project with you. As ideas evolve, changes can be made on paper--much less expensively than when construction is underway. Thorough drawings also make it easier for contractors to accurately price and build your project. Good design sells. A well-designed house has a higher resale value. A well-designed store draws customers. A well-designed work environment attracts employees and increases productivity.

Building in today's marketplace is a complex undertaking requiring many different products and skills. DE BIASSE & SEMINARA ARCHITECTS understands the complexities and works with you to design an appropriate response to your requirements, and protects your interests during the construction process.

Steps toward building your dream:

Design and construction projects involve several steps. Typically, projects go through the following six phases. However, on some projects, several steps may be combined; on others there may be additional steps.

Step 1: Deciding What to Build

The first stage, called programming, is probably the most valuable time you will spend with your architect. It is at this time you discuss the requirements for your building: how many rooms, what function the structure will have, who will use it and how. It is also the time when you begin to test the fit between what you want, what you need and what you can spend. Don't come in with solutions already decided upon. Be prepared to explore new and creative ideas. Be very frank about how you want the end result to feel and work. The architect will ask you lots of questions to get a better sense of your goals and needs to determine if your expectations match

your budget. The architect may suggest changes based upon knowledge, experience, and your budget. During the next step, your program will be realized. This first programming phase may occur after you have hired your architect or as part of your initial interview with each firm.

Step 2: Rough Sketches

Once you have defined what is to be built, the architect will then do a series of rough sketches, known as schematic designs. These sketches will show you the general arrangement of rooms and of the site. If you have difficulty understanding the sketches (many people do), ask the architect to explain. These sketches are not “finished” construction documents. They are meant to show possible approaches for you to consider. Each approach will be given a rough preliminary estimate of construction cost. Remember, there are still many more details to be established about your project, that these cost estimates are very general, and that they are provided to aid in the decision making process. It is hard to predict market conditions, the availability of materials, and other unforeseen situations that could drive up costs. Therefore, this figure must include a healthy contingency to cover cost changes that arise as the design matures.

Step 3: Refining the Design

This step, called design development, is when the architect prepares more detailed drawings to illustrate other aspects of the proposed design. The floor plans show all the rooms in the correct size and shape. Depending on the project, some architects will also make models of the design to help you better visualize it.

When looking at these drawings, try to imagine yourself using the spaces. Ask yourself: Do the traffic patterns flow well? Does each space serve the intended purpose? Do I have a good sense of what it will look like? Do I like how it looks? Do I agree with the selection of wall and ceiling finishes, door types, windows, etc.?

Based on these drawings, the architects will prepare a more detailed estimate, though final costs will actually depend on market conditions. Review every element with your architect to make sure you are getting the most out of your construction dollar.

Step 4: Preparing Construction Documents

At this point, the architect prepares construction documents, the detailed drawings and specifications with the contractor will use to establish actual construction cost and to obtain permits and build the project. These drawings and specifications become part of the contract. When construction documents are finished, you are ready to hire the general contractor or builder.

Step 5: Hiring the Contractor

There are a number of ways to select a contractor. Your architect can make recommendations, or, if you already have someone you want to work with, you might send the construction documents to him or her and negotiate fees and costs. Or you may wish to choose among several contractors you've asked to submit bids on the job. The architect will help you prepare the bidding documents, which consist of drawings and specifications as well

as invitations to bid and instructions to bidders. The bidding documents are then sent to several contractors, who, within a given period of time, reply with bids which include the cost for building your project.

While the architect can recommend contractors and assist in the selection process, the final choice is up to you. Some people prefer to act as their own general contractor or to do all or part of the construction themselves. These methods can save you money initially but can also add challenges and costs later on. Discuss the pros and cons of these methods with your architect to help you decide what will work best.

Step 6: Construction

This final step is often the most anxiety-producing part of the whole process. Up until now, your project has been confined to intense discussion, planning, two-dimensional renderings, and perhaps a model. When construction begins, your project moves from an abstraction to a physical reality.

The architect's involvement normally does not stop with the preparation of construction documents. Architects also provide construction administration services. These services include assisting you in hiring the contractor, making site visits, reviewing and approving the contractor's applications for payment, and keeping you informed of the projects' progress.

The path to a completed project is paved with lots of challenges and uncertainty. There are literally hundreds of decisions to be made, decisions which have a strong impact on how the project looks and functions over time. The architect not only can ease the way by helping you avoid wrong turns, but also can direct you to solutions you never considered. The result is a unique building project created to meet your needs, express your individuality, and provide enjoyment for everyone who uses it.

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