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Advice Blog

Architectural Design Phases and Costs

July 20, 2018

Our previous blog post focused on what an architect can bring to your home improvement project. If you will be working with an architect, it's helpful to understand the phases that define the design process.

Five phases of the design process

It may sound like so much chaos, but, in fact, architects are trained in a



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design process that helps to [Commons license](#) keep things in order. There are five basic phases of the architectural design process: schematic design, design development, construction documentation, bidding, and construction administration. These phases illustrate how an architect operates, and understanding them can help in determining whether or not you need to hire one.

During the *schematic design* phase, information that will inform the development of the project is collected in order to generate several design options. The architect uses his or her academic knowledge and training to expand possibilities. Toward the end of the phase, there may be an initial cost estimate and schedule for the project.

Design development generates the relationships of the parts (plumbing, electrical, structural, etc.). Window and door openings are located and the product selection process begins. In scientific speak, it is the “materials and methods” phase of the process. The end of the phase will likely include the permitting process. Information from consultants is analyzed and integrated.

During the *construction documentation* phase, drawings are finalized in anticipation of handing them to a contractor. The project is fully dimensioned, and, if there are consultant drawings, such as structural, plumbing, electrical, etc., they are coordinated with the final architectural plans. The final construction documentation set is a map that includes materials, dimensions, connections, details, and product

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specification.

During the *bidding* phase, you and the architect work to find the best price for your project. The completed construction document set provides an apples-to-apples comparison so all contractors are bidding on the same thing. At the end of the phase, you will select a contractor and settle on a final price for the project.

During *construction administration*, the architect works with the builder to ensure that the original vision is built. An architect is the client's advocate throughout all phases of the project, but the advocacy role is particularly important during the last stages as a third party builds the final design. A contractor's focus is not always in line with the design aesthetic because their job is to get the project built. For example, the contractor may have an excess of tile from his or her previous job and might see your job as a good place to use it up; it saves money and time. And if the tile fits with your vision, great! But if not, it's good to have someone keeping track of all the pieces.

The cost of an architect

Architectural services are an added cost. A very broad rule of thumb for small residential projects is that the architect's fee is 7–10% of the cost of the project. So, if your project is going to cost \$100,000, the fee would be \$7,000–10,000. That fee is then broken down into the phases: Schematic design is about 15% of the fee, design development is roughly 10%, construction documentation is 40%, bidding is 5%, and

construction administration is around 30%. This is important to know because, in some cases, it may be advantageous to hire an architect for some of the phases, not all. For example, if you know a builder that you trust and have the time to oversee your project, hiring an architect through design development may be all you need.

Whether or not to hire an architect is a big decision to make, and the cost/benefit analysis is not always clear cut because you are dealing with an unknown, a future project that isn't defined. Design consistency, aesthetic choices, and bringing a vision to life do not land on a spreadsheet as easily as a kitchen faucet or window selections. Some residential projects are just too small to justify the cost.

If you are considering an architect, be sure to comparison shop. Look at photos of completed projects on a firm's website. Do they look like the project you imagine? What does the architect state as his or her vision? Do they focus on historical preservation, energy efficiency, modern design? If it's the right choice for you, working with an architect can make the process of creating and building your project efficient and rewarding.

— *Lisa Hiserodt*

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