

SELECTING THE RIGHT ARCHITECT

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Selecting the right architect can be the most important step in a building project. Putting the design of your project in the wrong hands may condemn your church to a number of problems for many years. You could end up paying more than you should to get the building, going through unnecessary problems getting the building built, having operational and maintenance problems for the life of the building, or worse, not really taking care of the needs you were trying to meet.



The Role of the Architect

It is important to understand the role of the architect. Your architect is the person who will be the primary coordinator for your project. He or she is like a composer and conductor are to a symphony. He doesn't necessarily do all of the work, he guides the work. He creates the drawings that tell the other parties how to build your building.

Your building starts as an idea or a need to be met. The architect translates the concepts into building solutions which are designed and documented in great detail so the others (carpenters, masons, plumbers, electricians, etc.) know how to do their best work.

The architect works with you (the client), and contractors (who actually do the construction) to form a three-way team to make the project successful. The architect's job is to keep all in harmony to achieve the desired outcome.

Perhaps one of the most underrated qualities of a really good architect is communication. The architect must listen to the client to hear even unspoken needs, then communicate the desired outcome through words, diagrams and drawings to those who will do the work. He gets feedback from and responds to each member of the team, keeping the client informed about the implications of the design decisions being made or the progress of the project.

The Team

The architect works with other professionals to document the design. He orchestrates the work of the structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and civil engineers. Interior designers, acoustical engineers, and other consultants may be involved. It is the task of



the architect to bring it all together into an aesthetically pleasing, and functionally efficient building to meet your needs.

You and your committee or ministry team will be one of the most important collaborators in the design process. The information you provide about the ways you will use the building, your budget, your priorities, and even your aesthetic tastes are crucial to inform the architect and the rest of the design team how to achieve the best building design for your needs.

Interviewing Architects

How do you go about interviewing architects to be sure he or she is the right person for your church? There are six basic steps:

1. Know your needs. Get help from LifeWay's Church Architecture Department to help you define what you need to build. You should know the location, size, function, budget, and approximate start time before you sign an agreement with an architect. Using a consultant from LifeWay Church Architecture is a good way to establish these parameters without committing to a full scope of architectural fees.

2. Obtain names of prospective architectural firms to interview from trusted friends, coworkers, contractors, or denominational agencies. You may want to issue a request for qualifications (RFQ) from them. They will send some information about the firm and give you some basis for a preliminary evaluation of their fitness for your project. These should include some references for you to contact to find out about other's experience working with them.

**Contact Lifeway's Church
Architecture Department at
(615) 251-2466 for information
and services for your church.**

3. Find out about the architect and how his or her firm conducts business. This can be done through an interview, by talking to others he has worked with in the past, or through your own personal experience. Realize that the interview is the least reliable source of such information. Of course they will tell you they are experienced, talented, skilled, and everything else you want to hear, but those who have worked with them know how they live, work, and serve their clients. In other words, do your homework!

Call the references provided by the architect. Find out how they performed, and if there were problems, what caused them. Was the project on schedule, and within budget? If not, why not? Every project encounters problems, so the important issue is how do they handle problems. Ask the references to be very honest, because you need to hear the unvarnished truth about their experience and opinion about the architect.

4. Select about three firms that are the most likely candidates and invite them for an interview. During the interview, invite them to make a short presentation about their firm, then ask questions to find out the details you are interested in. Discover their previous experience, services offered, basis of fee calculation, and what is and is not included in that fee.

As you do the interviews, get to know the person or persons you will actually be working with throughout the design and construction process. Chemistry in the relationship can be a good indicator. There is too much at stake, however, to rely on good feelings as the only criteria for selecting the architect who will help create the home base for your ministry for decades to come.



Beware! There are architects and other construction industry firms that choose to work with churches because they think churches are less informed and more likely to accept poor levels of service and quality of construction. Some of these are highly skilled at selling themselves as Christian partners in ministry, but do not deliver a quality product. Find someone who is committed to Christ *and* highly skilled in the area of service you require.

Find out:

- Is the architect aware of, and does he care about your church's mission and ministry goals? More important, is he committed to your church's success? Ask how he defines success. If it ends with getting a certificate of occupancy, you are not talking to the right person. Your ministry results are the real bottom line of any project.
- Is the architect equipped to help keep you informed about the ministry implications of important decisions and choices to be made and to keep your project focused to achieve your ministry goals? Can he help you be sure you have the necessary ingredients for success?
- Can the architect assist you to monitor the total project cost in addition to the construction cost? Does he have a good track record and proven methods for cost containment to help keep your project within your financial means and keep you informed about the financial implications of the choices you make in the design process?
- Are his fees quoted as a percentage of the construction cost, or as a stipulated sum? Floating percentages can encourage the project cost to creep upward. The

architect is penalized for cost containment, rewarded for inflation. A stipulated sum is the best way to assure a fair fee for a well defined scope of service.

- Does the architect enlist skilled and experienced engineers and other consultants that serve his clients well?
- Unforeseen problems emerge in virtually every project. Since it is to your advantage that problems are resolved in an equitable and satisfactory manner for all parties, ask: Has the architect demonstrated integrity and fairness in dealing with errors or problems in either the design or the construction process?

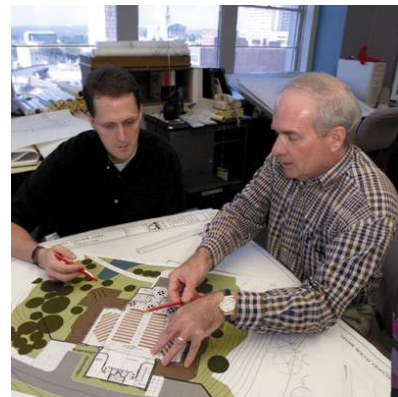
5. Next, negotiate and sign an agreement for services with the best candidate using one of the standard forms of agreement provided by the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.). Be sure to refer it to your legal counsel for review and read the contract yourself so you understand what is expected of you, as well as what to expect from the architect.

6. Be sure to notify the firms you do not select that you appreciate their participation even though they were not selected for the project. Be aware that each firm you interview will invest hundreds and perhaps thousands of dollars worth of time and resources in preparation and presentation in an interview. For this reason you should not even invite any firms you would not seriously consider employing.

The Architect is Your Ally

As you move toward the challenge of building or expanding your facilities for a growing ministry, your architect can be a great ally to help meet the needs of your congregation for years to come. The architect often serves an important role to hear your needs, expressed in church ministry terms, and translate them into architectural solutions contractors can understand.

He or she can be your guide through the process, helping you get all of the elements in place to fulfill your needs, including some you may not have been aware of early in the process.



If you understand the role of the architect, carefully do your homework, and select the right person or firm, you have an excellent chance of meeting your church's needs in a manner that is at the same time functional, cost effective and aesthetically beautiful. Your facilities will be an effective tool to help you accomplish the ministry you were called to by God.

***Gary Nicholson, A.I.A.** has been an architect and consultant on the staff of LifeWay Church Architecture in Nashville, Tennessee since 1993. He has designed and consulted on many church projects all over the United States, and led numerous church building conferences. He specializes in master planning and preliminary design for churches.*