

Selecting Your Architect

by Ray Bowman

In the selection of your architect, you are deciding many aspects of your. If the firm operates like Frank Lloyd Wright they will design what they think you need with no concern for cost. Paying for their award-winning design is your problem. Most churches cannot afford this approach.

A More-with-Less approach requires a firm that knows how to design a plan within your budget and will make a contractual commitment to stay within your budget. Of course, the budget has to be in line with reasonable current construction costs and the scope of the project. The question is: "If we employ your firm will you agree to design the project based on our Program of Needs and within our budget?" If the answer is yes, ask how they accomplish cost control.

There is more than one way to accomplish this. My partner was an engineer so we designed and controlled the cost of the entire project. After understanding the client's needs and budget, we conducted a preliminary study and made a cost estimate. To provide flexibility, we would recommend some options to add features that were desirable but not required. If the needs were totally out of line with the budget, we worked with the client to modify the design. We

would reach an agreement before proceeding. Our contract stated: “If the bids to construct this project are higher than the approved budget, all necessary revisions to bring the work within the budget will be made at no cost to the client.” This included negotiating the changes with the low bidder or in some cases rebidding the project. We were so cost conscious that rebidding was rarely needed. We always honored our commitment.

Ask the right questions

To pursue your investigation visit projects of similar size and complexity to yours that the firm has completed. Include buildings other than churches. Ask the owners about service, cooperation, and quality of design. Did the project stay within their budget? Were there change orders due to errors or omissions in the plans and specifications that increased the cost during construction? How were problems during construction resolved? Is the building living up to your expectations?

Spend time at the architect’s office. The appearance of their office indicates how they approach design. Ask to be introduced to the staff and their responsibilities. Do they have engineers on staff? If not, what firms will be used? Approximately half of the project cost will be the responsibility of engineers. Visit the engineers’ offices and ask how they work with the architect to control cost. Will they include you in making decisions about equipment and fixtures?

If your project includes an assembly room or a sanctuary, what consultants will be used for acoustical and audio-visual design? Be sure to experience some of their projects by attending a service and talking to the operators of the systems.

Know the ability and experience of the person who will be responsible for your work. If a principal of the firm will be in charge of your project through its several phases, that alone is almost reason enough to select them. For a small project a small firm is advisable. A big firm will usually give a small job to “the boys in the back room” who are short on experience. The project needs to fit the size, expertise, and experience of the firm. Look at the list of their projects to judge their level of experience and ability. Some smaller firms are capable of doing larger jobs. Just make sure before you employ them.

What is the architect’s professional fee? What does the fee include? Will there be an additional fee for some consultants? The decision to hire a firm should not be based on the lowest fee. Their qualifications come first, and then the fee can enter into the decision.

When you find a firm that does excellent work, has effective cost control, and will make meeting the budget contractual, you may have found your architect. The contract for professional services is usually the standard A.I.A., American Institute of Architects, form. This contract protects the interests of the professionals and the client except in the area of cost control. Have your attorney review the document and make sure the commitment to cost control is included and properly worded.

Cost control during design

Our firm did not specify cheap materials or systems to save money and meet the budget. So how did we save? Competition! The specifications allowed at least three, more if possible, different suppliers to bid on all the components. We made sure there were as many **equivalents** to what we specified as possible. Further, the contractors and the suppliers knew we would approve their submittals and that resulted in cost saving competition.

We made cost comparisons before specifying a component or system. Additional savings came from the simplicity of design and engineering without sacrifice of quality.

This required extra work for us but benefited our clients--More with Less.