Making the Right Choice: How an Architect Can Help

IT'S A SIMPLE PROJECT, JUST FOUR WALLS AND A ROOF.

Architects help make decisions. After talking with an architect, many people are surprised at their own definite ideas about what they want in a house.

Architects help homeowners think about how a building functions. They can design a house that is flexible enough to grow with a young couple who work now but expect children later. Architects can design an inexpensive, energy-efficient, fully accessible home for retired people on a fixed income. They can show how a house built for a single family can be remodeled into a house for a group of single working people.*

*For example, an architect in Washington D.C. found a new way to plan traditional space. He took a four-story Victorian townhouse and divided it so that two friends, both working professionals, had separate and private living spaces. Instead of slicing the building down the middle, as they had expected, he came up with an innovative plan that gave each person one complete floor and two half floors.

ALL I NEED IS A BUILDER OR A CONTRACTOR.

The architect is the one building professional who has the training and experience to guide homeowners through the entire building process. An architect serves as the owner's agent. As head of a team of specialists (engineers, landscape architects, contractors, etc.), an architect's first obligation is to look out for the homeowner's interests. Architects' drawings and construction documents tell the contractor precisely what to build and set down exact requirements. They help homeowners get bids for construction based on those same requirements.* And, architects follow the contractor's work for you to make sure there are no surprises — you know what you will get.

*For example, a Detroit family of six almost lost hope on buying a 60-year-old house that was just right for their needs. The house needed quite a bit of work, and the bids the family got from two remodeling contractors were both over their budget. Then a friend introduced them to an architect who estimated her firm could do the job well within their budget, including her fee, and the family got exactly what they wanted.

AN ARCHITECT IS A LUXURY I CAN'T AFFORD.

An architect can save the homeowner money in many ways. An architect's fees are not just added on top of project costs. Architects can oversee a homeowner's budget and negotiate to get the best materials and workmanship at a good price. More importantly, an architect's design can greatly reduce energy and maintenance costs, which add up to many times the purchase price of a home over the years.* They can turn a difficult lot into a successful building site. They
can spend time planning and developing a homeowner's ideas fully to avoid costly refinements after construction is underway. They can make sure bids for construction are based on exactly what the homeowner wanted and expected to get the best price. They can find do-it-yourself parts of the project for a homeowner or show the homeowner how to act as their own contractor.

*For example, one cold day in February, a "simple solar" house proved it could conserve energy during a hard Midwestern winter. The inside temperature of the house was 70 degrees F., with no furnace or wood stove inside. The monthly heating bill, September to March, was well below average. The house had no complex solar gear, but it captured every available ray of the sun. How? It was all in the architect's orientation and design of the building to take full advantage of lighting, shade, and ventilation.

ARCHITECTS JUST DO BLUEPRINTS.

Today, the best answer to the question "what do architects do?" may be "what do you want them to do?" Renovation? Energy analysis? Site selection? Interiors? Cost analysis? Construction and/or construction management?

In designing a project, architects can add a porch, a skylight - or design a complete house. They can adapt an old building to a new use and keep its character. Architects can provide cost estimates. They can make a building safe for occupancy. They can fit a building to a difficult site. Architects can find skillful craftspeople. They can enlarge a house and eliminate the need to move.* Or they can just talk to you about what you want your house to be.

*For example, an architect in California remodeled a 1938 house to find additional space - with little cost and without disrupting the household. He did it by connecting an old garage to the rest of the house with a two-story greenhouse and a circular stairway. The garage became a new studio space flooded with light. It suited the homeowner's needs and budget perfectly. Why? Architects have the experience and training to create solutions that are simple, effective, and beautiful. They know how to give you more of what you want than you even knew you wanted. In this case, the architect worked around an inexpensive, off-the-shelf greenhouse.

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www.aiachicago.org/find-an-architect

AIA Chicago offers "Working with an Architect" and "Ask an Architect" sessions through the year which are designed to bring together residential architects and homeowners to talk about how to choose the right architect, navigate zoning and permitting regulations, and avoid costly surprises.

The American Institute of Architects Chicago (AIA Chicago) is the largest chapter of licensed architects, architectural interns, and allied professionals within AIA Illinois, and the second largest AIA chapter in the country.

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