

What to Consider Before Hiring an Architect

The Low Income Investment Fund's (LIIF) Affordable Buildings for Children's Development (ABCD) Constructing Connections project developed this tool to assist child care operators when hiring an architect to design a facility. The objective of this document is to help the reader understand an architect's role in a development project, including the design process, and to offer sample interview questions that will help child care operators assess an architect's experience and ability to design a child care facility before entering into a contract for professional services.

Getting Started

Whether you are building your own home or designing a child care facility, choosing the right architect is vital to the project's success. The best way to begin a new design or development project is to reflect on what you, the operator, bring to it: knowledge, experience, needs, desires, aspirations, personal opinions and philosophies. You also bring the resources to realize your expectations.

Before meeting with an architect, it is important to examine your program to assess how it relates to your project and what you will establish with your architect's help. For example:

- Do you know the specific spaces and square footage areas desired for your child care program, or will you need assistance from the architect in developing the design program (the collection of criteria from which design is derived)?
- Do you already have a site or building for your project, or will this decision also be a subject of discussion with the architect?
- Have you, or perhaps others, fixed a construction schedule or budget for the project?
- What are your design aspirations? What thought have you given to the design quality you are seeking in this project?
- What are your overall expectations for the project? What are your basic motivations as a client, and what role does this project play in achieving your overall goals?
- How do you make decisions? Will a single person sign off on recommendations? Are committees necessary?
- How much information do you need to make decisions? Do you require a lot of detail?
- Do you have the resources to do this project? Where will they come from, and what strings may be attached?

You don't need firm or complete answers to these questions during the selection process, but being prepared with a general understanding of where you are will help you select the best architect for the project.

Role of an Architect

An architect is a licensed professional who is qualified to design and advise on both the technical and aesthetic aspects of buildings. Architecture firms come in a variety of sizes and types. Some firms specialize in one or more project or facility types such as housing or schools; others do not. Very few architects specialize in child care facility design. Some firms include in-house engineering (structural, mechanical, electrical, civil, etc.) or other design disciplines (planning, urban design, landscape architecture, interior design, etc.); however, many architects introduce these disciplines into their projects through consultants. Whatever the situation is, every architect will work with a team of technical experts and consultants on your project. Each architecture firm brings a different combination of skills, expertise, interests, and values to its projects. An architect is trained to listen to you, the client, and to translate your ideas into a viable construction project.

Architects serve as trusted advisors to a facility project. They often take the lead on coordinating many people and agencies involved in a project, integrating diverse requirements and disciplines in a creative process. At the same time, architects serve the client's and community's interest by addressing health, safety, and sustainability matters while meeting budget requirements. They blend interpersonal skills with ethical practice to craft spaces that fulfill the complex, and sometimes conflicting, needs of clients, users, the community, and regulatory codes.

Architects approach their work through a series of project phases that guide their design work from concept to completed project. Their work process includes holding various clients, and sometimes community meetings to gather information, present design ideas, and gain approvals. They negotiate spatial and site considerations, and apply regulatory requirements to the design. Services typically provided by architects include the following phases:

Pre-Design Phase: the stage in which the owner's program, the budget, the timeline, and the scope of a project are established. Programming is a vital part of the pre-design phase for a child care facility. It is important to clearly define the age groups, and number of children to be served, as well as the range of activities to be accommodated. The program statement can be prepared by the architect in collaboration with the operator, or by a consultant the operator chooses to hire. The most important purpose of the program statement is to establish the design criteria for the project, and to determine preferences and priorities before time is invested in design.

Schematic Design Phase: the stage in which the general scope, conceptual design, and the scale and relationship of components of a project are established, using the program philosophy as a guide. Several conceptual designs are developed and reviewed with the client until both parties are satisfied with one concept on which to move forward.

Design Development Phase: the stage in which the size and character of a project are further refined and described in drawings (e.g., plans, elevations, and sections), including architectural, structural, mechanical and electrical systems, materials, and other elements as may be appropriate.

Construction Documents Phase: the stage in which the requirements for the work are set forth in detail through drawings and specifications. Final designs and a project guide are produced and used by the contractor to complete the project.

Bidding or Negotiation Phase: the stage in which either a contractor bids on the project or negotiated proposals are solicited and obtained, and in which contracts are awarded.

Contract Administration Phase: the stage in which the construction work is performed by one or more contractors. The architect will often visit the project once a week during construction, and will consult with the client during the construction period to ensure the drawings and specifications are followed.

Site Analysis Phase: the stage in which site-related limitations and requirements for a project are established (e.g., zoning regulations, building orientation, etc.).

Remember, some projects may require other services than those listed above. For example, pre-design work may also include one or more of the following activities: facilities programming, surveys of existing facilities, marketing and economic feasibility studies, budgeting and financing packages, site-use and utilities studies, environmental analyses, planning and zoning applications, and preparation of materials for public referenda. Not all services must be provided by the architect. It is important to establish what services you would like the architect to provide, or what services you would like other consultants to provide.

Interview Questions

Prior to hiring an architect, it is imperative to conduct an interview, find out how much experience the architect has, and evaluate the quality of his/her work. He/she may or may not have prior experience in designing child care facilities, but this factor may not solely determine whether or not an architect is the best candidate for your project. Keep in mind that a good, thoughtful architect is just as interested in a successful project as you are, and should demonstrate the ability to collaborate with you by listening, and respecting the ideas and questions you bring to the table. Below is a list of questions to ask the architect, ideas for critiquing the architect's answers and follow up questions.

General Information

1. How long have you been practicing architecture?

The length of time an architect has been practicing could demonstrate depth of experience and could be a good indication of reliability over the term of a project. The number of years of experience is an important selection criterion; however type of experience is just as important. Remember, finding an architect who has

experience with quality child care design is important, but is not the only deciding factor.

2. How do you keep current in your practice?

The answer to this question will provide some insight into the architect's sense of professional development, will demonstrate his/her willingness to stay current with the most recent design and regulatory tools, and will show interest, or not, to enhance skills in new areas.

3. How do you engage your client in the design process?

This should give you a sense of the architect's work and communication style. It is important to assess if the architect's personality is a good match for you. The architect should have regular meetings with you to review and discuss the design. You should feel comfortable addressing any questions or concerns throughout the process.

4. Describe a recent project. What was the actual construction cost versus the budgeted cost for the project?

This will indicate, to some degree, how well the architect was able to design and provide specifications for the project, provide realistic cost estimates and quantify the quality of his/her work to accurately guide the detail of the project. A follow up question may be: If a project went over budget, what was the cause of cost overruns, and who was responsible?

5. Was the project completed on time? If not, why not?

It is not uncommon for projects to experience some delays, given a jurisdiction's requirements or licensing delays; however, it is important to find out why the delays occurred. You want to make sure the architect's response reflects that whenever possible he/she was actively involved in moving the project forward.

6. Do you hire consultants (e.g., structural, civil, mechanical engineers, landscape architects, etc.), or do you offer these services in-house?

• How are your consultants selected and who pays for them?

Most architects have existing professional relationships with consultants they have worked with on other projects, and will, most likely, use the same consultants on your project. If the architect does not already have a list of engineers they regularly work with they are probably not the best candidate for your project. You should never have to identify consultants for the architect unless you want to (other than a child care design consultant). The architect is typically responsible for hiring technical experts and responsible for paying them. They often build their consultant fees into the total architectural fee. You may want to ask the architect to explain his/her fees in more detail, so you have a clear understanding of what services you are paying for.

• How do you ensure your consultant's work is completed on time and per your specifications?

It is important to know who will be monitoring the consultant's work as this work (structural, mechanical, electrical) directly affects health and safety issues. You want to be sure the architect is responsible for these building components being planned correctly.

7. Have you managed a bidding process before? If so what process did you use?

If the architect has experience overseeing a bidding process, it is important to know what kind. Typically, there are two kinds of bidding procedures:

- **Competitive Bid** – *this is when multiple contractors are solicited to provide bids for the project. This usually entails a request for proposals from contractors. Typically, all bidding contractors (and their subcontractors – e.g., electrical, plumbing, painting, roofing) conduct a walk-through of the project (for new construction this means looking through a complete set of construction documents and specifications), before developing and submitting a bid. Once bids are submitted by contractors, the architect reviews them with the operator. Often the job is awarded to the lowest responsible bidder, especially if public sources of capital are used for the project. It is important to note that the lowest bidder may not always produce the best quality work. The contractor selected is expected to complete the project based on his/her bid.*
- **Negotiated Bid** – *this is when the architect and operator work together with a reliable contractor to develop the scope of work and the schedule, and negotiate a price/budget based on the architect's construction documents and specifications. The contractor is expected to complete the project based on the agreed upon negotiated bid.*

Child Care Experience

8. Have you ever worked on a child care project?

If yes, ask the architect to tell you more about the project(s) and show you examples (e.g., drawings, photographs, client testimony). Also ask if a site visit can be arranged for you to tour the center(s) he/she designed.

Below is a list of questions to ask the architect about his/her experience designing a child care center:

- **Have you designed a facility with a similar program size and scope as this project?**

This will indicate the type of child care facility the architect has worked on in the past, and how familiar they are with the needs of a child care program. If the previous project was different, the architect should be able to indicate how your project will be approached differently. This is

especially important with regards to the age groups being served in the program, because infant and toddler rooms have much different requirements than preschool rooms.

- **How would you describe a quality child care environment?**

After being involved in a child care project, the architect should have a sense of industry standards for quality environments (more than just licensing requirements). They should discuss the importance of sustainable design, and creating healthy and safe places for children to learn and play. If the architect does not have previous experience with child care design they should still be able to talk about what they think quality environments for children are, and how they define quality design with their other projects. A good, thoughtful, architect without prior experience in child care design may still be a good candidate for your project.

- **What did you find most challenging about designing a child care center?**

If the licensing and/or agency requirements were the most challenging aspects of the project, you may want to know how those challenges were overcome. This can shed some light on the architect's understanding of the licensing requirements and/or a municipality's requirements, and how the architect uses his/her experiences from one project to inform and improve the process for the next project.

- **In addition to design, what kind of services did you provide the child care operator?**

This will indicate the types of services the architect is willing to assist you with for your project (e.g., land use review, programming, construction/project management, etc.) It is good to know that an architect has the capacity to assist with various aspects of the development process.

9. Do you know which zoning districts permit child care centers as a use?

Depending upon where the facility is being built/developed, the governing jurisdiction (city or county) dictates where child care centers can be developed. The architect may not know the answer to this off the top of his/her head, but he/she should indicate that he/she has the ability to research this information, and mediate the procedure for obtaining conditional use permits, or other variances as necessary. It is standard practice for an architect to complete a zoning analysis in the pre-design phase of the project.

Licensing Requirements

10. Are you familiar with local licensing requirements for a child care facility? Do you know how to get a copy of group child care licensing requirements for your city/state?

If the architect has previously designed a child care center, he/she will know some of the requirements or know how to obtain them. Should the architect have no prior experience with a child care facility, the child care operator may need to

direct the architect to those requirements. It is common practice for architects to research requirements during the design process to ensure they are creating a facility that meets current standards.

References

Ask the architect if he/she can provide you with two to three references of past clients, with at least one child care center if possible. You should arrange a time to visit the project(s). Contact the references provided, and ask the following questions:

- *What did the architect do for you?*
- *Did the architect understand and design a facility that fits with the vision you described?*
- *Was the project completed on time and within budget?*
- *If it was a child care project, did the architect understand licensing requirements? If not, how was this issue resolved?*
- *Do you think the architect understood the jurisdiction's building code and other regulatory requirements? If not, explain why you think so.*
- *How would you evaluate the architect's communication skills with you, with city/county representatives, and with other project team members?*
- *Would you use this architect to design another project? Why or why not?*

Compensating Your Architect

How much should I expect to pay an architect?

This will depend on the types and levels of professional services provided. More extensive services or a more complex project will require more effort by the architect and add more value to the project. You should budget accordingly for architectural services. The most common methods of compensation are as follows:

- *A stipulated sum based on the architect's compensation proposal*
- *A stipulated sum per unit, based on what is to be built (for example, the number of square feet, apartments, or rooms)*
- *A percentage of the construction cost (typically 10-15% of the total construction costs)*
- *Hourly rates*
- *A combination of the above.*