

Architect, Interior Designer, or Interior Decorator

What are the Differences and Who Should I Hire?

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Architects, interior designers, and interior decorators. The definitions can be confusing and the experience and qualifications of individuals can cloud the definitions even more as there can be overlapping commonalities, as well as great differences. Who do you need for your project and what are the differences?

Within the design profession, there is much discussion about what the differences really are, what training is required for each, and what qualifications and/or licensing are necessary to be called an “architect,” “interior designer,” or “interior decorator”.

The online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines each as follows:

Architect:

- 1: a person who designs buildings and advises in their construction.
- 2: a person who designs and guides a plan or undertaking.

Interior Designer:

(one who practices...): the art or practice of planning and supervising the design and execution of architectural interiors and their furnishings.

Interior Decorator:

: one that decorates; *especially*: one that designs or executes interiors and their furnishings.

Still confusing? Let's try defining the differences better through describing their training.

Training

Architect

Architects are the most comprehensively trained people in the designs in the habitable built environment. Most architects are educated in accredited 4-year bachelor degrees with a 2-year master's degree or a 5-year Bachelor of Architecture degree, though each state sets their own licensing requirements. They are formally trained in the following areas:

- Site design
- Building design
- Architectural history
- Building systems
- Interior design
- Building codes
- Technical building systems and detailing
- Structural systems
- Environmental design
- Space planning
- Use of colors and materials
- Contracts and business
- Construction management
- And many others...

Interior Designers

Most interior designers have a formal 4-year degree in Interior Design or Interior Architecture. They are trained in the designs of the interior spaces of habitable structures. They are formally trained in the following areas:

- Interior design
- Materials and colors
- Interior design history

- Furniture
- Lighting
- Human factors interior design factors
- Space planning
- Interior systems
- Graphic communications
- And others

Interior Decorators

Some interior decorators have at least 2-year associated degree in interior design or decorating, but no formal education is normally required in most states. Interior decorators are mostly involved with the selection and design of finishes such as colors, materials, window treatments, etc. They are not trained in structures, systems, building codes, or life-safety issues.

Licensing

Architects

To be called an “architect,” one must be licensed in the state they practice as required by each and every state. Each state sets their own licensing criteria. Nearly every state requires an architect to graduate with an accredited architectural degree of some sort. In addition to a degree, a 3-year internship is required subsequent to graduation. After the internship, all architects must pass a 4-day licensing exam which includes structural systems, site design, building systems, construction documents, and a number of others. After passing the exam, some states require an oral exam or interview in addition to the computerized exam.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Most states require that all new habitable buildings (new, remodeled, or altered) of a certain size **MUST** be stamped by a licensed architect in order to receive a building permit. In addition, many building jurisdictions also require stamps from

professional engineers such as structural, electrical, plumbing, HVAC, civil, landscape architects, and others in order to receive a building permit.

Interior Designers

Licensing for interior designers is set by each state. Currently, only a handful of states require interior designers to be licensed in order to complete interior design for new buildings and/or remodels, though most still do not. Licensing requirements are evolving though. In some of these states, an architect’s stamp may not be required in order to get a building permit if a licensed interior designer’s stamp is provided on the drawings. Check with your code reviewing agency to review your local requirements.

Interior designers also have a number of certifications that show an interior designer has passed a minimum standard of experience exam, such as NCIDQ (National Council for Interior Designer Qualifications).

Interior Decorators

Normally, there are no licensing requirements for interior designers. Again, requirements vary by state and code reviewing jurisdictions.

OK...I Get the Differences. Who Should I Hire?

Right here I would like to say you must hire an architect, but this is not always true. Ask the following questions of your project:

1. **Will I need the stamp of an architect in order to get a building permit?**

Most often, the answer is “yes” (for new buildings, remodels, and tenant improvements), though this is not

*always the case. You need to check into this with your local building department or jurisdiction before hiring an architect or interior designer. If you do need a stamp, an architect can normally provide all services needed in-house for your project. **If you hire an interior designer, you will also have to hire an architect unless the interior designer gets one for you.** Which choice is best for you?*

It also depends on how you approach your project (including construction) and the experience of the design team. We have worked on projects as an architect and interior designer and we have worked as just the interior designer with another architect and vice versa. It is ALWAYS easier to work with one firm, and it is usually less expensive to do so, but you need to be comfortable with the entire design team's approach to architecture and interior design. If you love the aesthetic of one architect's buildings but you love the interior designs from another firm, you might consider using two firms.

2. Is there an advantage of hiring an Architect over an Interior Designer?

Again, the answer varies. All things being equal... my personal opinion is, yes. Architects are experts in all aspects of buildings; codes, accessibility, technical systems, environmental design, planning, programming, construction costs, etc...as well as in design (exteriors and interiors). With this knowledge, experienced architects consider how each decision made on a project affects

another. The more your professional knows about the building industry, codes, construction methods & costs, your business, and overall orthodontic design... the more likely you are to achieve a successful project.

Some architects are also interior designers or they have interior designers on staff. It is nice to not have to coordinate 2 professionals from different offices for your project.

3. Who has professional liability insurance?

Many architects carry professional liability insurance that covers errors and omissions. If your architect is insured, this gives you the peace of mind that if they make a costly mistake, there is a path for remedy.

Interior designers can also carry professional liability insurance, but I am not aware of its popularity at interior design firms. This insurance would also cover costly mistakes of the interior designer, but to what extent – you would have to verify with your interior designer.

4. Do I need someone to manage the construction of my project? Who does this?

I always recommend to clients that they have the architect or someone represent them during construction to look out for your best interests; some states require it. Sometimes, clients do not find value in the architect managing construction, when in reality, some of the highest value an architect can offer is during the construction

phase of a project. You have just paid a lot of money to have your office or building designed by professionals. You could lose a lot of that value if you don't have the time or knowledge to manage your contractor and construction.

Unless you are comfortable reviewing the contractor's work, ensuring they are building what is on the drawings, approving project changes, interpreting the architect's drawings, etc., you should seriously consider having your architect manage these things, even if on a limited basis. If you manage construction, understand that this can seriously disrupt your work day and time commitments for months. Most times, decisions made regarding construction need to be made on a timely basis and other times they need immediate answers in order to not disrupt the sequence of work.

Architects are experienced in the permit, bidding, contracts, and construction management aspects of a project. They can offer construction management observation that you may want or need for your project...even at a distance.

Interior designers are not typically trained to manage construction, though some may be experienced at it. If you need these services, be sure to ask your interior designer if they can provide them.

5. **If I use an interior designer who cannot professionally stamp my drawings, what do I do?**

You will need to ask your interior designer how they intend to handle such a situation. They may either have an architect who can work with them or they may leave that up to you. If this is the case, you will have two professionals to coordinate the work of. If you do this, make sure accountability is clearly understood by all.

6. **What about lighting engineering/design, HVAC engineering/design, plumbing design, etc. if I need it for a building permit? If I do not have an architect, who will coordinate this work?**

Lighting and HVAC (heating and cooling) are two of the most complex and important components of an office or building. It is always best to have control over who completes the design and drawings for this work. It also creates accountability if design issues were to arise, such as rooms that are too hot or cold. Sometimes the contractor can provide this work or the interior designer may have resources to complete this work. While it may be less expensive to do this, it is rarely a better value.

NOTE: It is always in your best interests to have your design professional coordinate this work and not the contractor. The contractor may sell these services as "free" but they are just added to the construction costs and you have little input on the designs of lighting, plumbing, and HVAC design. These are some of the most important design and value aspects in a remodel or new building. Try to

maintain control over such design, whenever possible.

7. **I'm leasing. What if my landlord wants to provide me with a designer, architect, and/or contractor?**

This is a red flag and puts you at a distinct disadvantage with every respect to your project. At all costs, avoid using professionals who represent some else's best interests. These things are always negotiable in a lease. Negotiate to use your own professionals.

8. **I'm building new and I am using a developer/contractor to lead my project. What if they want to provide the architect, and/or contractor?**

See Number 7.

9. **I'm building new.**

You need an architect.

10. **I'm leasing and designing an office within a building (or remodeling)?**

See Number 1.

2. Be comfortable with the selection of your architect and/or interior designer. Make sure they are experienced in your office design type and can provide the professional services you need. Keep in mind that most clients DO NOT know what services they need in order to get a permit. You will need to ask questions.
3. Use professionals who represent you.
4. It is ALWAYS better to use the services of a single-source professional for a project. It is challenging to manage multiple professionals on a project and this often leads to confusion, a lack of accountability, a longer project schedule, and is often more costly.

The Four Most Important Things to Remember...

1. Be informed. The best defense against having things go wrong is to have a knowledgeable team of design professionals who best represent your interests without conflict.