

Selecting the Right Architect for Your Orthodontic Project Orthodontic Design Experience is Key

By Scott Somers, NCARB, President ARCH-101
www.arch-101.com ssomers@arch-101.com

Architecture firms come in a variety of specialties, sizes and types. The average firm size is roughly 8-12 employees with many firms being smaller (with as few as one or two architects). There are some very large firms with staffs of 100 or more (usually found in larger metropolitan areas). Some firms specialize in one or more project or facility types; while others have a broad experience range. Some firms offer other in-house services such as: civil, structural, mechanical or electrical engineering or others such as planning, urban design, landscape architecture or interior design. Most firms contract outside their office for these services through appropriate consultants. Each architecture firm brings a different combination of skills, expertise, interests and values to its projects. Be careful to watch for other types of design firms disguised as architectural firms but really offer simple office design services or interior design. Only licensed architects can legally call themselves "architects."

Orthodontic design is a specialty in the industry. Many architectural firms can technically complete orthodontic design services but your practice will most likely not benefit from their lack of experience. As orthodontics is a specialty within the dental profession, the designs of orthodontic offices are a specialty within the design profession. Make sure you select one who is experienced in your practice type, representing your best interests. Also make sure you know who in the architect's office that is in charge of the success of the project. You want to be sure that the person(s) working on your project are experienced in orthodontic design as sometimes projects do get handed off to

others within the office who may not be highly experienced.

Finding the Right Architect: 10 Common Questions

First-time clients, and even experienced clients facing new situations, have many questions about architect selection. See the following **10 common questions in selecting an architect:**

- 1. Timing: When should I hire an architect?**
Most architects would argue, "as soon as possible into the project process, if not before." Architects can help define projects (programming) in terms that provide meaningful guidance for design. They can also do site studies, help secure planning and zoning approvals, code reviews, feasibility studies, and perform many other pre-design tasks such as lease review and contractor selection.
- 2. Should I look at more than one firm?**
Usually, yes. The exception, of course, is when you already have a good relationship with an experienced architect and there is little or no reason to change.

It is wise to interview at least three firms; enough to see the range of possibilities but not so many that an already tough decision will be further complicated. Select architecture firms you feel can successfully design your project because of their expertise, their experience or their ability to bring a fresh perspective to your project. Treat each firm fairly, offering for example, equal time and equal access to your site and existing facilities. Insist on meeting the key people who will work on

your project, such as the Principal-In-Charge, and the Project Manager.

In some leasing situations, a building owner may try to demand or “strongly suggest” you use their design professionals. In most instances, this is not a good idea as they represent the building owner’s best interests. You normally have full control over the selection process as long as you stipulate this in your lease. In any event, research the landlord’s professional thoroughly before allowing them to design your space; after all, it is **your** business.

3. Where can I find a list of architects to contact?

Contact other owners who have developed similar facilities and ask who they might recommend. Ask a colleague who recently completed a project. Ask who designed buildings and projects that you've admired or that seem especially appropriate. The internet can also be a great resource; search for “orthodontic architects.”

A dental equipment supplier who provides a floor plan IS NOT an architect. Architects do not sell dental equipment; dental equipment suppliers offer gimmicks to get clients to buy tens or hundreds of thousands in equipment. Orthodontic architecture is not a gimmick.

4. What information should I request?

At minimum, ask prospective firms to show you projects that are similar to yours (that is, of similar size and type) or that have addressed similar issues (e.g., similar siting, similar functional complexity, similar design aspirations). Ask them to indicate how they will approach your project and who will be working on it (including consultants). Ask for the names of other owners you can

contact. Ask them to summarize their errors and omissions insurance coverage.

5. Is communication important in the selection process?

Definitely! A (personal or phone) meeting or interview addresses one issue that can't be covered in brochures and printed materials; the "chemistry" between the owner and the project team. It also allows the owner to investigate how each architect will approach the project. You should have the chance to talk with the architect's project manager, interior designer, and anyone else with whom you may deal directly with during the course of the project. The success of your project can hinge upon your relationships with these individuals.

When one seeks the creative, technical and management skills of an architect, competitive bidding for professional services is not in the best interests of the client for a number of reasons.

Comparing "apples to apples" with architectural services is very difficult if not impossible between firms unless there is a comprehensive and clear understanding of the services expected of the architect. Are they to include structural, electrical, and civil engineering with their fee? Will the architect be expected to oversee construction? Will the project be design-build or negotiated? Who is selecting interior finishes and colors? Who is selecting furniture? There are dozens of services architects offer and/or coordinate.

Comparing expected results is also impossible to predict. A low fee architect could design a building that costs \$100,000 more to build than another architect. This ultimately results in the loss of tens of thousands of dollars. The same could be said for aesthetic quality,

the use of maintenance-free materials, floor plan efficiency, etc.

It is best to find the architect who best represents your goals and interests and negotiate a fair fee. Many lose sight of the importance of the selection of the architect. They are the single most important person in charge the success of your project, including overall construction costs, quality, integrity, etc. If a client is completing a project on a frugal budget, selecting an architect with the lowest fee makes the least sense. It is best to hire the architect who best represents your goals and interests to work with a frugal project budget and help determine how your project money is best spent on your project. Normally, an experienced architect can find savings in your project that pay for their services many times over without sacrificing quality or integrity.

6. Do I Select an Architect or Contractor First?

Most often, it makes most sense to select an architect first; then you will have help in understanding how to make the builder or contractor an effective member of the design team. When discussions regarding actual construction costs arise, it is time to possibly select a contractor.

Additional Tips

However architect selection is approached, it is worth taking the time to do it well. Some additional guidance:

- **You are engaging the services of a professional.** You will work closely with the architect through the life of the project, and your relationship may extend to future projects. Invest at least in the care it takes to select a financial or legal adviser.
- **This is a business relationship.** Find out how prospective architects do business, how they work with their

clients, how responsive they are to your management and decision styles, and how well their work stacks up against their clients' expectations. The best way to find out is to talk with other owners for whom the firm has provided professional services.

- **Ask these seven questions.** Respect the architect as a professional who will bring experience and specialized knowledge to your project. At the same time, don't be afraid to ask the same questions you've asked yourself:
 1. What does the architect expect from the project?
 2. How much information does the architect need?
 3. How does the architect set priorities and make decisions?
 4. Who in the firm will work directly with the client?
 5. How will engineering or other design services be provided?
 6. How does the firm provide quality control during design?
 7. What is the firm's construction-cost (budget) experience?
- **Be frank.** Tell the architect what you know and what you expect. Ask for an explanation of anything you don't understand. The more on the table at the beginning, the better the chances for a successful project.

Who Selects Whom?

The most thoughtful architects are as careful in selecting their clients as owners are in selecting architects. Many times, good firms use their mission or vision statement or strategic plan to help assist in which projects to pursue. An interested architect is as interested in completing a successful project as you are. They know that good architecture results from fruitful collaboration between good architects, good clients, and a good design team.

Ensure Your Project's Success

Finding the right architect for your project is the key to a successful project. Your architect will lead you through the entire design process, from code and zoning issues, through budgeting, to designing and detailing our project, to the selection of a contractor and the management of his work. Base your selection by finding an architect who:

- Acts in your behalf
- Has good communication skills
- Is someone you trust
- If flexible enough to incorporate your ideas
- Can work within your means
- Above all, wants your project to succeed to enhance your patient care services, your employee's comfort, and your practice's bottom line