Selecting an Architect

By Samuel B. Frank

There are almost as many ways to select an architect as there are reasons for building. The trick is to find the right match between your objectives and your methods.

You may need to work on a very tight budget.

You may think of the building you need in purely utilitarian terms.

You may expect a building to take on a significant role in raising the visibility —the "brand identity"—of the institution.

You may feel the need for an architect with specialized expertise in a certain type of building.

Or you may wish to retain a local architect for a variety of reasons.

None of these approaches may be as straightforward a decision as it seems.

Costs

Let's start with costs. A competitively low fee proposal from an architect may or may not represent the most economical approach. Although in theory a very good architect charges no more than a less-accomplished one, firms that invest more time and thought into the design process can seem more expensive at the start. In fact, the total project budget (and the eventual life-cycle costs that include operations, maintenance, and replacement) can often be minimized by spending more, rather than less, on the initial design.

Even with a clear and explicit Request For Proposals, specific services included—and the pricing of services not included—can vary greatly. Thorough review of proposals by a knowledgeable board member or consultant is critical.

At a larger scale, an architect's track record of designing to budget can have a much greater impact than differentials in fees. Variations in architecture, engineering, and consulting fees are generally dwarfed by the effect of design decisions on construction costs. An architect who can work effectively with cost estimators, construction managers, and general contractors to manage the costs of the construction process can save a client substantial sums. A firm that enjoys the challenge of a limited budget (and some firms thrive on such a challenge) can bring cost savings and a freshness of approach to the design process.

Some institutions are attracted to a design-build contractor's guarantee of a fixed project cost. This approach minimizes the need to attend to details as the project progresses, because the contractor is contractually obligated to deliver the project for a fixed total cost. The trade-off is that the client relinquishes all control over the quality of design and construction. When a budget squeeze occurs, the contractor will be making the critical decisions on where to cut back to stay on budget. While this might work for a warehouse or factory, it is not likely to lead to the kind of classroom building, library or clinic that reflects well on the concern of an institution for its customers.

Facilities as a strategic resource

Architect selection often is seen as a choice between a practical architect who listens to the client, versus a "high design" or "signature" architect who imposes his will upon project and client. To define the decision in these terms is to concede much of the opportunity for excellence before you begin.

If you know how and where to look, you can, for virtually any project, find architects who can work with you to create a facility that will enhance the activities you conduct within it—whether a museum or performance space, a classroom, a hospital, an athletic facility or a library. Success in the design process is the joint responsibility of the client and the architect. Selection of an architect should not be not an isolated initial act, but a late stage in the strategic effort of defining vision, values, goals, and the messages your organization wishes to convey about itself both to external and to internal audiences. To design a facility that will work for you, an architect needs as much definition—strategic, conceptual, and functional—as possible from you.

Facilities are extraordinarily expensive investments. The most common mistake made when expanding them or creating new ones is to demand too little of them.

Visibility and brand identity

Until recently it has been rare for buildings to be talked about in terms of contribution to brand identity. This is especially the case for non-profits, where the techniques of marketing and the competition for mind-share are rather recent concepts. It is, however, an old idea under other names—think of how such disparate institutions as the Catholic church, the neo-gothic American college, and McDonald's use their buildings to shape perceptions and attract customers.

What messages should your institution convey with its buildings: nurturing, energetic, forward-looking, fresh, bright, innovative?

Whatever you build will send some message. This is the often-overlooked issue of the added value of institutional identity. You must decide how much effort it is worth to design a building that conveys a compelling message of who you are.

Clients often think it essential to hire an architect with extensive experience in exactly the kind of project they are planning. Sometimes this kind of experience can, indeed, be helpful, especially in highly technical situations. In many cases, however, the qualities of design you are looking for do not exist in such specialist firms. It can often be more productive to acquire the requisite technical expertise through experts on the team of consultants and engineers who work closely with the architect to develop the design.

The local architect

For projects budgeted at over a few million dollars in construction cost it is often practical to look regionally or even nationally for the most appropriate architect—one well suited to help your organization realize its vision of a new facility. However, there are a variety of reasons you might feel you need to hire a local firm: politics, convenience, accountability, and familiarity with regulations and regulators. For some projects, a non-local architect can associate with a local one to provide both optimum design quality and local connections.

Chemistry

If you invite a carefully selected group of architects to submit their qualifications for a project, and from that group choose a small number to interview, you will be in a position to make your choice largely on the basis of how comfortable you feel with the personal fit between your design review committee and the architects. (The situation you want to avoid is to include on the interview roster an architect whose work you do not feel is appropriate... the review committee may like them best.)

Once you get to this stage, proposals, fees, contract negotiation, and contract oversight are the remaining issues. These details require experience and expertise, which may be available on your board, or if you are a large organization, on staff. If neither is the case, a paid advisor will save you both money and headaches.

The selection process

The first step in the selection process should be to ascertain whether your federal or state funding comes with specific guidelines for advertising, competitive bidding, and evaluation of bids. If you don't have to use a competitive bidding process for architects, you will be much better off. (If you do need to, you'll do best to limit bidding to those who are actually fully qualified to do the work.) Not only the quality of the work, but, in the end, the total project costs will benefit from tough review of many more things than architects' fees alone.

The best process for architect selection involves a number of steps.

First, develop a detailed Request for Proposals (RFP) that gives a thorough overview of your institution, the objectives of the project, a complete program and budget for the project, and a clear definition of the scope of requested services and contractual, operational, and business requirements.

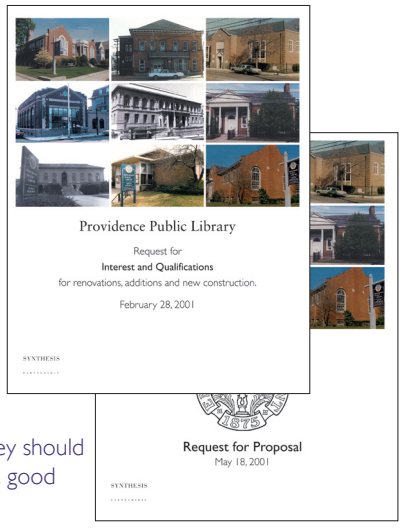
Then, through respected and knowledgeable internal and external sources (and advertising if you wish), develop a list of architects to consider. Form a design review committee that includes members of various constituencies, and have them issue a request for interest and qualifications for a manageable number of the suggested firms. From the information received, narrow the candidates down to four or five, and interview them. If you have selected wisely so far, at the interview you are looking for a firm whose approach and personality seems compatible with yours. After the interviews issue the RFP to two or three firms, and review the resulting proposals carefully for comparability before completing your selection process.

When you get to the point of negotiating a contract, be aware that standard contracts offered by professional organizations are likely to have a bias in favor of those parties. You might want to find more owner-friendly sources for a contract or have an experienced consultant or construction lawyer offer modifications that protect you in terms of adherence to budget and schedule and your overall legal rights in any dispute.

A less elaborate, but equally diligent process is appropriate for selecting a construction manager, should you choose that route. An RFP should be created, interviews conducted, references checked, and a contract carefully worked out.

A Request for Qualifications (RFQ) describes a project generally and solicits interest and background information from design or construction firms, through advertisement or invitation.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) offers and requests very specific project information, and can be made part of the eventual contract. RFQs and RFPs should be crafted carefully, but at least as important, they should be issued to firms that are a good match for the job.



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