

# Skill Set for a Church Architect

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## SUMMARY

When designing for a church, the architect must cultivate a sense of vocation, calling and service. The architect's task is iterative: research, design, present and evoke the client's informed response. Ten elements are offered for a successful design approach.

## WORKING WITH THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

Architecture is the three-dimensional representation of the shared vision of architect and client. A church building emerges from their common understanding. In contemporary church/synagogue architecture the real client is the entire community, faithfully represented by a few key individuals.

Architects who design for families, schools, corporations, or government bodies must engage in group dynamics. An architect who enters a relationship with a composite church client not only designs for the religious group but interacts with it, guides it, and teaches it how to obtain the best possible design. If the design comes from safe, open and responsive interaction, the architect fosters in the religious community an enriched ministry within new or renovated space.

Both architect and church client are searching for the same thing: the creation of a welcoming house of worship that will shelter, inspire, and engage generations to come. With this goal in mind, we offer the following suggestions for architects and spiritual leaders considering a major renovation or new church construction project:

1. **Compose Committees Carefully** Before any design work takes place, the spiritual leader and key congregation members must determine the structure, purpose, and membership of various committees on the basis of clear, functional criteria. As the committee members will not be doing the design work, selection should be on the basis of personal characteristics. Look for the capacity for clear thinking, learning easily, working well with and respecting the views of others, and stamina over the long haul. Design experience or a reputation for "good taste" should not be the primary qualification of good committee members.
2. **Establish a Firm Foundation with Research Communication** Before any design work takes place, the committee and architect together should take the time to articulate the community's deepest needs, values and hopes so that there is a sense of freedom and exploration—and gathering focus—about the foundational work of these groups. With the architect's guidance, the committees should spend their earliest sessions together learning to trust each other and discovering how to make sequential decisions in a disciplined way.
3. **Do Not Become a Potted Plant** The architect must actively engage with the committees, not sit back passively, observe, record, or (God forbid) draft. Instead, he or she asks questions, evokes responses, listens and reacts honestly and clearly. The process is collaborative; in it, leadership is earned and exercised in the thick of things. By being fully present in these meetings, the architect demonstrates competence and gives hard evidence of his or her capacity to work on behalf of the client.
4. **Understand Who Does What** It is the architect's responsibility to clarify the difference between the client's responsibilities and his or her own. The architect should signal to the spiritual leader and committee members that they are making important, long-term *stylistic* choices on behalf of their community: it is their job to determine what the building should express about themselves and their mission. It is the architect's task, on the other hand, to make *aesthetic* choices about how that style will be manifested. The architect helps the client comprehend alternatives and guides them to make wise choices which have aesthetic implications.
5. **Learn to Deal with Limited Dollars** The architect and the client should be on the same page with regard to the community's finances. That being said, the architect should encourage

the community to spend their “hard” dollars first, to create a solid infrastructure for the project; he or she should plan and then revisit the master plan for incremental projects, as finances permit. He or she must be aware that, in most cases, fund-raising activities will accompany the entire building process.

6. **Recognize that the Master Plan is Crucial** A master plan organizes decision making and functions as a constant reference point. The master plan for a house of worship requires, at the minimum, these things: that the visitor not feel lost or overwhelmed in the new space; that all codes and safety issues, no matter how technical, will be respected; and, that the plan be inherently extendable and open to refinement in the future.
7. **Design with Heart and Soul...and Joy** The architect should embrace the affective dimension of church or synagogue design. Religious faith is not all solemnities, nor should the building be. Joy, humor, and whimsy belong to the sacred, and they should contribute to the architectural vocabulary of the house of worship. The design will reflect one’s own time, but it should also acknowledge and gesture toward the community’s past and future.
8. **Stay Close to Reality** For the benefit of the church client, the architect must take the time to think and document the design in all three modes: plan, section, and elevation. Drawings must be to scale or they are not real and therefore implicitly deceptive. Congregations should be especially wary of the grand fund-raising perspective rendering if it pretends to document what has yet to be determined. The congregation should understand that, as a rule, the selection or approval of colors, fabrics, stains, etc., is always better in their actual or simulated context.
9. **Remember It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over** Once the building process has begun, the architect must ensure that the architect, contractors, and client are present for all substantial conversations. The architect must protect the clear lines of communication to ensure that the building process is carried out effectively and on schedule.
10. **Abide by Church Architecture** Finally, the architect should understand and accept the fact that he or she bears the burden of proof as to whether an architect adds value to a project; and, that the architect is truly capable of putting

the needs of the project before the personal desire for income, ego gratification, or fame. When dealing with church clients, the architect must cultivate a sense of vocation, calling and service. With this self-understanding, an architect can find the design of a church or synagogue to be an especially meaningful and gratifying assignment.

#### **About the Contributors**

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#### **RESOURCES**

##### **More Best Practices**

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 17.06.01 The Urban Planning Process
- 18.11.09 Steps Toward LEED Certification
- 18.11.07 Differences in Environmentally Preferable Products

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##### **Key Terms**

- Design
- Buildings
- Buildings by function
- Church