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THE ARCHITECT'S ADVANTAGE

Great Homes Don't Happen by Accident

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Guidebook: Chapter 16

Chapter 16: What it all Costs and what The Architect Provides

Let's talk about money, what design professionals refer to as "fee".

It's the question every client wants to ask in the first meeting but isn't quite sure how to raise it. You have decided you want to build something, a new home, a major addition, a renovation that finally makes the house work and somewhere in the back of your mind is the quiet, nagging question: What is this going to cost me, just to have someone help me design it?

You deserve a straight answer. That's what this chapter is for.

I bring the fee conversation up early, deliberately, without apology, and before we have gone very far down the road together. I have no interest in spending weeks developing a relationship and a project scope with someone who is simply kicking the tires, and I have no interest in a client investing their time and excitement in a process they are not yet ready to commit to. So after an initial conversation about the size of the house, the scope, and the budget, I provide a full written proposal. Everything is included; my fee, the fees of the consultants who will be part of the team, the scope of services at each phase, the deliverables, and the timeline. No ambiguity. No surprises waiting around the corner. That clarity is a form of respect for both of us.

What You Are Paying For

Before we get into how fees are structured, I want to say something that I think every client deserves to hear.

From the Exploration Meeting to the final construction walkthrough, I will typically spend three hundred to four hundred hours on your project for a custom-design, new-construction house. Many of those hours are visible to you as the Design Reveal, the 3D model, the site visits, the meetings where we work through details together. Many of them are not. The hours spent studying your site before I have drawn a single line. The hours resolving a structural condition in the drawings before it becomes a problem in the field. The hours reviewing submittals, answering builder questions, coordinating consultants, and making the hundreds of small decisions that keep the project moving in the right direction.

You are not just paying for the drawings. You are paying for six years of education, thirty-six years of professional experience, and accumulated judgment, and the instincts that catch a problem before it is built, the knowledge that guides a material decision toward something that will last, the professional accountability that comes with a licensed architect signing and sealing a set of documents and standing behind every line on every page.

That is what the fee represents. When you understand it that way, it is not an additional cost. It is one of the most productive investments in the entire project.

How Architects Charge

There is no single standard fee arrangement in residential architecture. Depending on the project, the firm, and the scope of services, you may encounter any of the following approaches or a combination of a few.

A percentage of construction cost is one of the most common structures for custom residential work. The architect's fee is calculated as a percentage of the total construction cost, and that percentage varies from firm to firm based on the scope of services included and the nature of the practice. The logic is straightforward: larger and more complex homes generally require more design work, more detailed drawings, and more construction oversight, and a percentage fee scales with that reality.

A fixed fee, sometimes called a “lump sum”, means the architect agrees to provide a defined scope of services for a set dollar amount regardless of how long it takes or what the construction ultimately costs. This gives clients budget certainty, which many people find reassuring. The trade-off is that a fixed fee requires a clearly defined scope upfront. If the project evolves significantly with a program change, an added garage, a kitchen that is relocated, the fee may need to be revisited. For well-defined projects with decisive clients, fixed fees work beautifully.

An hourly arrangement means you pay for exactly the time spent. This is completely transparent but can create anxiety without a clear sense of how many hours the project will require. Hourly billing works best for limited-scope work like a feasibility study, a zoning consultation, help evaluating a property before you buy it. For full project services, most clients prefer a structure that gives them more predictability.

A per-square-foot rate is sometimes used as a rough benchmark in early conversations, particularly in certain regions. It can be a useful starting point but tends to oversimplify the real variables of a project. A four-thousand-square-foot home with a simple rectangular footprint and standard finishes is a very different design challenge from a four-thousand-square-foot home on a steep hillside with a complex roof and custom millwork throughout, but a per-square-foot fee would treat them identically.

My own fee structure is a blend, shaped by the size of the house, the complexity of the design, the site conditions, and the client's budget. What matters most is that whatever structure we agree on is clearly defined in the contract before work begins.

What Drives the Fee

Within any fee structure, several factors shape the ultimate number. Project complexity is the most significant. A home with straightforward geometry, standard structural systems, and conventional construction is less expensive to design than one with a complex roof, a challenging site, and custom details throughout. The more unique the project, the more time it demands and the fee should reflect that honestly.

Site conditions matter more than most clients expect. A flat, accessible lot with no unusual constraints is easier and less costly to design for than a steep hillside, a tight site, or a property with difficult soils. When the land presents challenges, the design work reflects them. The level of finish and detail is directly proportional to the documentation required. A home with varying

rooflines, exotic finish materials, intricate foundations, and extensive custom cabinetry requires a far more detailed set of drawings than one built with standard components. Every custom element must be drawn, dimensioned, and described with enough clarity that a builder can execute it exactly as intended.

Your decision-making process has a real effect as well and this one surprises clients sometimes. Projects where the client has a clear vision, makes decisions efficiently, and sticks with them move faster and cost less to administer than projects where direction changes frequently or earlier work gets revisited. This is not a criticism. Designing a home is a significant undertaking and deserves the time it takes to properly document it. But it is worth knowing that your engagement has a direct effect on the fee.

What the Fee Includes

When an architect quotes a fee, it is tied to a defined scope of services. At the baseline, a standard scope takes your project from initial concept through permitted construction documents and into construction.

Schematic Design is the exploratory phase: analyzing the site, listening to your goals, and translating your program into architectural form. You will see floor plan diagrams, preliminary site plans, and early exterior studies. The goal is to arrive at a design direction you believe in before committing significant resources to developing it further.

Design Development takes the approved schematic design and resolves it into a more detailed, buildable version. Structural systems are coordinated, window and door locations refined, and preliminary material decisions explored. This is where a good idea becomes a constructable one.

Construction Documents are the complete set of drawings submitted for permit and used by the builder to price and build the project. As a licensed architect, I sign and seal these documents before they are issued. That signature is not a formality. It is my professional certification that the drawings have been prepared in accordance with applicable codes and standards, and my legal responsibility for their content. When you see that seal on a set of drawings, you are looking at the product of a licensed professional standing fully behind their work.

Construction Administration is the phase most clients overlook and most regret skipping. Once construction begins, the architect shifts to observation and communication; periodic site visits, answering contractor questions, reviewing submittals, and verifying that the project is being built in conformance with the drawings. I covered this in depth in Chapter 12. The short version is this: the construction phase is where problems are discovered and decisions are made under pressure. Having your architect present during that phase is not a luxury. It is the final act of protection the design process offers.

What Is Not Included: The Consultants

An architect's fee covers architectural design services. It does not cover the fees charged by the other licensed professionals required to complete a residential project. These consultants are essential; their work is incorporated into the construction document set but they are contracted and paid separately.

In my proposals, I include estimated fees for each consultant so that nothing comes as a surprise. The team typically includes a structural engineer, who designs the foundation system, framing, and beam and column sizing for every new home. Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing engineers coordinate the systems that make the house function on larger custom projects, while on smaller projects those systems are sometimes designed by the licensed contractors themselves. A civil or site engineer may be needed if the project involves significant grading, drainage design, or new driveway access onto a public road. A geotechnical engineer is required by many jurisdictions before a permit is issued, particularly on sites with unusual soil conditions. A landscape architect brings the same design intelligence to the exterior environment that the architect brings to the building itself. The interior designer, as I described in an earlier chapter, is a genuine partner in the selection of finishes, details, and furnishings that gives the house its character.

Each of these consultants represents real value. Each of them also represents real cost. Understanding that the architect's fee is one part of a larger professional services investment is essential to budgeting the project honestly.

How to Evaluate a Fee Proposal

When you receive an architectural fee proposal, read it carefully and ask questions before you sign anything.

Look at the scope, not just the number. A lower fee is only a better deal if it covers the same services. A proposal that appears cheaper may simply be providing less and the difference will show up later, in the quality of the documents, the level of construction oversight, or the absence of consultants who should have been there.

Ask what happens when the scope changes. It may. The best proposals define clearly what triggers an additional services request and what additional work will cost. Vague language here creates friction later.

Pay close attention to construction administration. Some lower-fee proposals limit or eliminate it entirely. This is a false economy. The construction phase is when the quality of the finished home is determined. Reducing your architect's presence during that phase to save a few dollars in fees is a trade-off that rarely ends well.

A fee that seems very low is a warning sign, not a windfall. Architectural services cost what they cost because they take time and expertise. An unusually low fee generally means one of three things: the scope has been reduced, the architect is undervaluing their work, or the experience level is not commensurate with what the project requires. None of those outcomes serves you.

A Word on Negotiating

Fee negotiation is normal, and professional architects do not take it personally. The most productive conversation you can have is also the most direct one: here is what I am able to spend on design fees, here is what I am hoping to build, can we make this work? An architect who respects you will answer that question honestly.

What can be negotiated: fee structures, payment schedules, and the scope of services included in the base agreement. What cannot really be negotiated is the time a project genuinely takes. If something requires thirty hours of work, offering to pay for fifteen does not produce thirty hours of work. It produces fifteen.

If budget is a genuine constraint, some architects will structure their services in separate phases, schematic design as one engagement, design development as a second, construction documents as a third, spreading the financial commitment over a longer period. What is important to understand is that phasing changes when you pay, not how much you pay. The work required to take a project from first sketch to a complete permitted set of drawings is what it is. Phasing simply allows you to approach it in stages.

Negotiate before you sign, not after. Have the fee conversation thoroughly, make sure every agreement is reflected in the written contract, and begin the relationship with the same clarity and honesty that you want it to carry all the way through to the day you move in.

The right fee is one that fairly compensates the architect and their consultants for the work required and gives you the level of service your project deserves. Approached openly, it is not an awkward conversation at all. It is the foundation of everything that follows.

Final Word on Fees

Of all the conversations in a custom home project, the one about fee is the one clients most want to avoid and most need to have. I understand why. Fees feel personal in a way that other project costs do not. The stone and the framing and the cabinetry are numbers attached to materials. The fee is a number attached to a person, and attaching a number to a person can feel uncomfortable in a way that attaching a number to a roof does not.

I want to relieve that discomfort, here, at the end of this chapter. An honest fee, fairly set and openly discussed, is not an awkward thing. It is the start of a professional relationship built on clarity. The scope of work is defined. The compensation is agreed to. Everyone knows what is owed, by whom, and for what. From that foundation, the rest of the relationship can unfold without the quiet tension of money left unresolved.

A clear fee, a clear scope, a clear starting line. That is what every client deserves. It is what I aim to deliver, every time, from the very first conversation.