



What Does an Architect's Fee Include?

A common way to compare architects is by the headline fee. A better question for you is what that fee covers, in which stages, and what is billed separately.

Fees differ from office to office, and we give no price here. This is a guide to reading any fee proposal.

01 Ask for the services in writing

Good to know: If a service is not in the written proposal, treat it as not included until it is confirmed.

A clear proposal lists the services: design, drawings, coordination with engineers and any visits to site. If a service is not written down, assume it is not included until it is confirmed.

Ask what the fee covers at each stage, so you can compare two proposals line by line.

A short proposal is not a bad one, as long as the services are clear. What you want is no surprises later. A written list of services is the only way to know what the fee actually buys. Example: if one proposal mentions site visits and another says nothing, ask the second architect whether visits are included. Why this works: services that are written down can be compared and enforced, while verbal promises usually cannot.

02 Understand the stages

Design work usually moves in stages, from concept to detailed drawings. Ask how the fee is split across the stages and when each payment falls due.

Ask what happens if the scope changes, and how a revision is priced.

Ask for the payment schedule in writing, tied to deliverables you can see, such as a set of sketches or a set of drawings. Stages and payments should follow the work you can see, not the calendar. Example: a payment due after you receive a set of concept sketches is easier to judge than a payment due on a date. Why this works: tying money to deliverables means you pay for progress you can check.

03 Ask about extras

Some items may sit outside the basic fee, such as engineering, permit processing, 3D images or site supervision. Ask which are included and which are billed separately.

Ask who pays for printing, travel and government fees.

If you want site visits during construction, ask whether they are included and how often they happen. Extras are where fees most often grow, so ask about them before you sign. Example: if 3D images or permit processing are billed separately, you want to know that before you compare totals. Why this works: when you know the extras up front, the final bill matches the proposal you accepted.

04 Compare like with like

Two fees only compare if the services match. A lower fee with fewer services may cost more once extras are added.

Keep the written proposal with your contract so both sides refer to the same list.

Ask the same questions of every architect you speak to. Their answers tell you as much as their prices. A fee is only a number until you know what sits behind it. Example: two proposals with different prices may differ because one includes engineering coordination and the other does not. Why this works: comparing the same services side by side shows which fee is actually the better value.

05 Questions to ask before you sign

1. What exactly does the fee include, stage by stage?
2. Which items are billed separately?
3. How are revisions and scope changes handled?

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