Selecting an Architect

Introduction
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 objectives and methods. It may necessary to work on a very tight budget. The building may be conceived in purely utilitarian terms. Orthodox Christians especially may expect a new sanctuary to take on a significant role in raising the visibility of the parish. Therefore, there may be a need for an architect with specialized expertise in byzantine architecture or Russian-style domes. Or a local architect may be needed for a variety of reasons. None of these approaches may be as straightforward a decision as it seems.

Costs
Start with costs. A competitively low 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 clear and explicit Request for Proposals (RFP), specific services included—and the pricing of services not included—can vary greatly. A thorough review of proposals by a knowledgeable parish council member or consultant is critical. On 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 parish 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 education building, hall or sanctuary that reflects the concern of a church for its parishioners.

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 beginning. Knowing where and how to look, it’s possible for virtually any
project to find architects who can work to create a facility that will enhance the activities the parish conducts within it—whether a hall, a gym, an education building or a sanctuary. Success in the design process is the joint responsibility of the client and the architect.

Selection of an architect should not be an isolated initial act, but a late stage in the strategic effort of defining vision, values, goals, and the messages the parish wishes to convey about itself both to an external audience and to internal users. To design a facility that will work, an architect needs as much definition—strategic, conceptual, and functional—as possible. 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 “mission identity”

Until recently it has been rare for buildings to be talked about in terms of contributing to mission identity. This is especially the case for nonprofits where the techniques of marketing and the competition for membership and funds are rather recent concepts. What messages should the parish convey with its buildings? Is it distinctive, graceful, beautiful, nurturing, energetic, forward-looking, inviting, imposing, majestic or exotic? Whatever is built will send some message. This is the often-overlooked issue of the added value of parish identity.

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Working with institutions facing or creating change to align strategy, identity, operational planning and facilities with vision, mission, values and messages requires experience and expertise, which may be available on the parish council. If this is not the case, a paid advisor or consultant through this process will save both money and headaches.

The selection process

The best process for architect selection involves a number of steps. First, develop a detailed Request for Proposals that gives a thorough overview of the parish, the objectives of the project, a complete program and budget for the project, a clear definition of the scope of requested services and contractual, operational and service requirements.

Then, through respected and knowledgeable internal and external sources, develop a list of architects to consider. Form a design review committee and have them issue a request for interest and qualifications 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 necessary do not exist in architectural 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 a parish realize its vision of a new facility. However, there are a variety of reasons 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 a carefully selected group of architects is invited to submit their qualifications for a project, and from that group a small number is chosen to be interview to be interviewed, the parish will be in a position to make its choice largely on the basis of how comfortable a fit it is between the design review committee and the architects. (The situation to avoid is to include on the interview roster an architect whose work is not appropriate... the review committee may like them best for political or monetary reasons.)

After the interviews issue the RFP to two or three firms, and review the resulting proposals carefully for comparability before completing the selection process. When the point of negotiating a contract is reached, be aware that standard contracts offered by professional firms are likely to have a bias in favor of those parties. Seriously consider finding more owner-friendly sources for a contract or have an experienced consultant or construction lawyer offer modifications that protect the parish in terms of adherence to budget and schedule and overall legal rights in any dispute.

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

In summary, a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) generally describes a project 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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