

"SO YOU PLAN TO BUILD AN ADDITION"

John Weber

If you are reading this article it is probable that you have already decided to undertake some construction on your Arlington Forest home. A casual survey of the Forest will reveal that others have found this to be a cost-effective way to obtain a larger home while staying close-in to D.C. Before you start this project, you may wish to answer some basic questions regarding the design and construction of the work. You may wish to consult an Architect.

Do I Need an Architect?

Legally — no! One and two family dwellings do not require an Architect's seal in the State of Virginia. However, the work must comply with the building codes regardless of who designs and builds the work.

If you are enclosing the side porch and don't have any real plumbing or heating changes in mind, or if you are simply finishing off the basement, you probably don't need the services of an Architect. However, if you are planning to add one or two room (or more), and don't know the difference between balloon framing and platform framing, then you obviously need some form of professional help. This may or may not be an Architect. Further, if your sense of what fits with these ersatz "colonial" design houses is questionable, you may wish help in preserving the roughly \$140,000.00 investment that the now unmodified Forest house is worth. A poorly done addition may in fact decrease the value of your home.

Why use an Architect?

Beyond the simple answer of achieving a better looking addition and probably a more efficient plan, an architect can, in fact, save you money. Besides preserving your existing financial investment (by not designing an eyesore as an addition), an architect may more objectively be able to assess your needs. Through a rework of existing space uses you may not have to build as large an addition as you may have thought. Also, because it is likely that the architect's knowledge of construction and codes is better than your, he may be able to achieve your final goal through less expensive methods. Further, through preparation of a truly "biddable" set of construction documents (what laymen refer to as "blueprints and specifications," the architect enables you to obtain competitive bids from several contractors. A good set of construction documents assures that everyone is bidding "apples and apples" and that few surprises will appear as the project progresses.

Which one Should I Hire?

Among licensed professionals, your choice is basically that of "Should I hire an architectural firm or an individual, perhaps a 'moonlighter?'" Unfortunately, neither option guarantees a perfect solution.

More important to your selection is the question of whether the design source has knowledge of residential work as opposed to commercial work. Residential construction is vastly different from commercial work, both in scope of project and in the everyday nuances of the business. An Architect who may be highly regarded for his commercial projects may have very little understanding of the financial constraints of residential work or of the product selections available locally at appropriate prices. Given an unlimited budget, these differences reduce. Hopefully, it will be someone else's unlimited budget.

It is also helpful if the designer has some understanding of the balloon framing used in a Forest house. This construction is very rarely used today, but offers some advantages as well as disadvantages in renovation work. For example, by being able to remove the existing brick veneer on walls in which an addition is to be placed, the designer is afforded the opportunity of utilizing the existing foundation wall for support as well as having simple timber-to-timber connections for second floor connections.

If a registered architect is desired, it is import that the architect bear a valid Virginia license. An architect without a license is not an architect. Further, a firm located near the Forest (say within 15-20 minutes ride), is better able to visit the site whenever the inevitable glitches occur.

When Should I Hire the Architect?

The earlier in the process the better, hopefully before you have placed too many of your own preconceived plans on sheet of graph paper. The more open you are to unbiased ideas from the architect, the more you are able to receive the benefits of his experience. If you present the architect with a set of drawings that you have drawn the first time you discuss the project with him, the greater the chance you will limit his range of design options. Further, if you simply ask him to convert your sketches to construction documents, then you don't want an architect, but a draftsman. In short, give your designer the maximum flexibility you can while always observing the stated cost limit.

Most projects will take at least a couple of months to design and draw. Not all of this time, of course, is in actual work, but is in fact due to the necessary need to fit a small addition into the workload of a normal practice, or into the part-time hours available to the moonlighter. Accordingly, if you wish to build in the spring, don't call the architect in April. January or November is a better time.

How Much Will an Architect's Services Cost?

Architects may be compensated on an hourly rate, a percentage of the construction cost fee, or by a lump sum fee. For architectural firms doing alteration work, the fees range between 10 and 15% of the construction costs. This may seem high to some people, but, if the firm is doing truly custom design work, this is generally what the work legitimately costs to perform, not to mention office and insurance costs. If a full-time firm is employed, it is important to try to ascertain if the firm really has time to devote to your project. A young or newly established firm may be able to spend more and better time on your project than a larger more established firm can spend.

Firms quoting an hourly rate will usually charge principal's (i.e., owner or partner in the firm) time at closer to \$100.00 per hour with drafting services invoiced at 2-1/2 to 3 times direct hourly expense (or somewhere around \$30 to \$40.00 per hour).

An individual moonlighting can usually charge less because the costs of overhead are not present. In this case, most individuals charge enough to make the time commitment worth their while. Hourly rates ranging from \$40 to \$60.00 or more per hour are currently within reason in the D.C. area (based on a casual poll of about 10 friends). If the designer is a moonlighter, can he or she break free during the day if a problem arises at the site?

Regardless of the source of your design talent, always insist on a "not-to-exceed" fee quotation based on your budget. While you will probably grow to think of your architect as a friend, this is still a business proposition.

How Much Will a Addition Cost in Arlington Forest?

Truly custom contraction, that is designs with custom fabricated casework, moldings, hardwood floors, etc., cost money. Period. There is no shortcut for quality. Frankly, Arlington Forest homes are reaching the point where they will support this type of work when it comes to resale. As a ballpark figure, if you estimate approximately \$100.00 to \$120.00 per square foot for this type of work, you will be giving your designer a fair budget. If you plan to do the painting and some finish work, and if you can do with paint-grade molding and trim, vinyl floors as opposed to ceramic tile floors, carpet underlayment instead of hardwood, any vinyl or wood siding instead of brick veneer, then prices in the range of \$70.00 to \$90.00 per square foot are currently safe budget estimates. It also helps to keep the basic design simple. 30 and 45 degree angles may look real fancy on paper, but they usually don't allow good furniture placement and they definitely cause a contractor to add money because of the time required to fit everything and because of the inherent wastes.

Regardless of your goals, don't build if you have to go "cheap." Cheap materials will not help at resale time and they will not serve you well in the long term. It is better to build a little addition well then to build a large addition of substandard materials.

Will the Architect Help Me Find a Good Contractor?

All architects should be able to place you in contact with reputable builders. If they can't, then you have made a mistake in your selection of your architect.

When it comes time to bid, limit your bidder's list to 2 to 3 contractors. More bidders will not appreciatively decrease your bid quotations, but it will add to the contractor's costs of doing business. For a project of \$50,000 to \$75,000, three bidders are plenty. Naturally, if you know of a good contractor who has performed work for a friend, let the architect know so that he can included this contractor in the bidder's list.

What Will the Architect Prepare?

After you have reached an agreed design concept, the architect will prepare a set of contract documents (also called working drawings or sometimes even "blueprints"). Most documents for a simple addition will include as a minimum: a site plan, floor plan(s), elevations (views of the building sides), pertinent construction details, a typical section cut through a wall or the addition, electrical, plumbing and heating plans or symbols, written specifications, and enlargements of special use areas, such as a kitchen. Complex (read that costly!) structures, may also require framing plans. Remember, construction documents are legal documents, admissible in a court of law. If something isn't shown or normally required by standard practice or code, then you don't own it.

Further, always insist on using standard contracts published by the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The Abbreviated Form of Agreement Between Owner and Contractor, A107 (1978 Edition) is excellent for projects of limited scope (i.e., most additions) and the standard of the industry. Do not use any standard form the contractor has preprinted for his own use. The AIA form protects the interests of both parties to the contract fairly and places the architect in the role of arbitrator during the construction. You do not have to have an architect to use this form, but, if not, the form should be edited with advice of an attorney. The forms are available from the AIA Bookstore, 1735 New York Avenue, N.W. (behind the Octagon).

Can I Do Some of the Work Myself?

If you have finished a recreation room in the past, then possibly you can finish the inside of a frame addition. If you don't know how to wire a light fixture now, then don't attempt to perform the wiring for an addition. Generally, if you understand most of the material in the Readers Digest "Complete Do-it- Yourself Manual" (the yellow book available at Crown or Hechingers), and if you have **LOTS** of time, then you may wish to do finish trim and painting for example. Otherwise, let the contractor do his job.

How long will it take to Build?

Nothing seems to go up in less than 2-3 months anymore. Most contractors doing small additions are also doing other projects at the same time as they are building yours. To do otherwise raises their cost of business over that of the competition. Do not expect to see the contractor's personnel on your site every morning at 7:00 AM. Projects progress in stages of hurry-up and then wait. Legitimate delays occur beyond their control caused by everything from employee illness, to inclement weather at the worst possible time to material delivery delays. This last issue is important because in this size project all custom orders are small when viewed by major suppliers. This forces suppliers to either package them with someone else's larger order or to send them to the factory knowing that they will have a lower priority than someone who orders thousands of the item.

Is it Worth It?

If your marriage can stand the stress — and there will be a lot of it — most people would say yes.

