

Building Relationships

Plenty of architects are qualified, but who's right for your project?

BY KRISTEN LUND

ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN Institute of Architects, new construction and renovation projects in the United States annually add up to \$300 billion, and eight to 10 percent of that money goes to the masterminds of the projects: architects. Now that 2009, widely considered the toughest year of what's been dubbed the "Great Recession," is over, the time may be right for businesses to consider building a new facility or upgrading an existing one. From a multitude of qualified architects, how can business owners determine which one is right for the job? Carl Conner, president of Conner Architecture in Evansville, offers the following criteria for choosing an architect.

Shop around. Meeting with several architecture firms is important, says Conner, to see a range of possibilities for the project. Conner notes that a firm's size is relatively un-

important. "Whether you're a firm of four people or 40 people, it typically is the same small group of people who work on any one project," he says. One question, especially for a larger firm, is if a consistent team will handle your project from the design phase through construction.

Look back. Looking through images of past and current projects gives a potential client a sense of the architect's style. Some firms have a more artistic, creative slant, while others are more straightforward and traditional. While architects, of course, work to accommodate the clients'



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PHOTO PROVIDED BY CONNER ARCHITECTURE

vision, "there always is a language that develops project to project," Conner says.

A firm's history also will indicate if it has experience in the type of project a potential client is building, whether it's a medical facility, an office, or a church. This isn't the most important factor, says Conner: "As architects, we're trained to be problem-solvers" and apply research skills to various project types.

Get the numbers. Architects should be upfront about the project's cost. While fee structures vary between projects and firms, from a stipulated sum to hourly billing rates, potential clients should leave with a clear picture of what they'll pay — not the uneasy feeling that a hidden fee is about to emerge. Another important question, says Conner, is how successfully the firm has met clients' budgets.

Feel the love. The most important factor for choosing an architect? "When you do an architecture project, it's a long-term relationship," says Conner, so find an architect you like and trust. For example, Conner Architecture currently is working with Christian Church of Jasper in Jasper, Ind., on a building project with three phases. By completion, Conner estimates he will have spoken with the client several times per week — often meeting weekly in person — for three years. See why liking each other is so crucial? "We really do create relationships with our clients," Conner says.

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