

DESIGN IS GOOD BUSINESS

It doesn't just add value; it multiplies it.



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Your building can do much more than keep the rain off your business; it can advance your business plan. To capture the full value of your capital program, you will do well to engage your architect in a discussion of your business goals, with your business leaders.

You're Not Selecting a Design, You're Selecting a Design Team

You want a new building designed. What do you shop for? Not the building, because it doesn't exist. You shop for the design team—the architect and the specialized consultants the architect coordinates.

For projects larger than a single-family residence, the most common selection process invites firms to submit written and graphic information about their experience, capabilities, and proposed approach to the project. Sometimes this is a two-stage process, with the first stage querying the experience and capabilities of a longish list of firms (a Request for Qualifications or RFQ), followed by a second stage in which a handful of firms are asked to describe how they would approach the particular assignment (a Request for Proposals or RFP). Interviews follow, and you offer the most qualified firm the opportunity to negotiate a fee. (For the reasons that fee comparisons are not helpful in the selection process itself, look for the next installment of Design Is Good Business.)

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- [Savings by Design](#)
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- [The Technical Feasibility of Zero Net Energy Buildings in California](#)
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Clearly, such a process selects a design team, not a design. But what about a design competition? Wouldn't that be a way to pick the design itself? It would... if all of the competing firms knew at the outset everything the chosen firm will learn in the subsequent back-and-forth with the client. This interactive process of listening, questioning, and proposing alternatives and refinements is intense, and it's absolutely necessary for crafting a design that satisfies the client's needs and aspirations. No document issued to prospective competitors can possibly capture the information and insight that will emerge in that interaction.

Accordingly, a design developed for a competition will not be the design that is built—or, if it is, it will not be the design the client actually needs. This doesn't mean that design competitions are worthless. They can have tremendous value if they're understood correctly. What the design competition offers is not the prospect of selecting the building that will be built. Rather, it offers a richer way of understanding the design team that will be hired. It lets the client see how the architect thinks and what the architect values. If crafted to require the input of the broader team of consultants who will contribute to the actual project, it provides a glimpse of how the architect coordinates the team and synthesizes their input. That process of synthesis is among the architect's most important contributions: killing many birds with a few stones is the definition of cost-effectiveness in design.

Choosing your architect through a design competition will cost more than choosing through a request-and-interview process. An open competition—one encouraging all and sundry to enter—includes significant publicity and management costs. In an invited competition, competitors will require a stipend to at least partially offset the cost of participation. But for an investment as great as a building, the fuller understanding of what the architect will bring to the project can be worth the investment—as long as you don't forget that what you're selecting is the design team, not the design.

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2015 AIACC Honor Award for Architecture, Restore Neighborhoods, Los Angeles, Lehrer Architects. These urban, infill prototypes, designed to promote homeownership, provide amenities and spatial qualities not usually found in affordable housing.



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