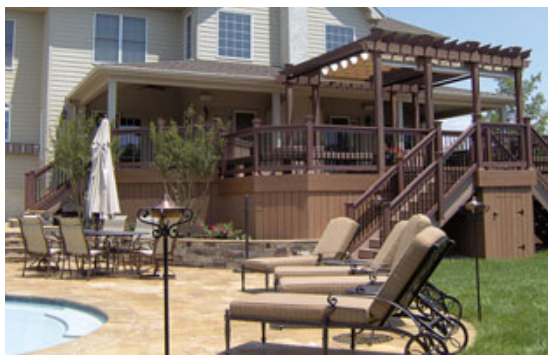


Should You Hire an Architect?

by Peter Phillips

With the simple 12-by-16 pressure-treated deck off the back door becoming a relic of the past, my architectural practice has been taking on more deck projects. The outdoor space that used to be reserved for hanging bird feeders, smoking, and grilling has been replaced by an outdoor living room that may contain a hot tub, a kitchen, a gazebo, a pergola, and even a fireplace. Decks are now extensions of the house and duplicate a lot of interior functions, yet how many deck builders have experience with laying out kitchens, dining areas, and conversation pits? And some of the more elaborate layouts present complex framing conditions that aren't addressed in the International Residential Code (IRC). Particularly on higher-end jobs, guessing can leave clients with spaces that don't work as they'd hoped and deck builders with a ding to their reputation.

Based on a project's complexities, a contractor may want to work with an architect or other design professional to develop a design that meets the client's needs. Architects have years of training (and usually years of experience too) in the creation of designs that not only function well, but also complement the home. One of my recent jobs, for example, involved both a new deck and a new kitchen. The deck is raised well above grade so its floor matches the elevation of the house floor, giving the kitchen and deck a unified feel. To further emphasize this connection, I designed the breakfast area of the kitchen with low window sills so it



It's common for contemporary decks to have features like hot tubs, roofs, pergolas, and outdoor kitchens, which were rare a decade ago.



Even this relatively simple deck has three areas — one each for cooking, dining, and relaxing. Architects not only pay attention to aesthetics, but also can provide advice on the amount of space each area needs in order to function well.

felt like part of the deck. The house is stone, and the deck is surrounded by a matching stone wall to visually tie the two together.

While contractors often design projects to be easy to build, architects may look at a space differently and draw a different set of conclusions, focusing instead on what will function best for the client. The architect's design won't necessarily be harder to

build, and it's likely to leave the client happier. Additionally, architects can produce renderings and detailed elevations to show the client how the deck transitions from the back door of the house to the yard — a great sales tool.

Besides consulting on aesthetics, an architect can point out the pitfalls of certain design options before construction. For example, if the

customer wants a hot tub on a deck that's 9 feet above grade, extra columns will be required to support it. But such columns may make the area below unusable. Also, decks that high often extend above the area outside a walk-out basement, and it is likely the homeowner won't want columns blocking the view. In that case, a design professional can calculate the span of the beam required to reduce the number of support columns.

You may not have the option of *not* using an architect. After years of hearing bad news about decks, code officials are scrutinizing the construction and detailing of today's

decks. With the adoption of the 2009 IRC, some jurisdictions now require an architect or engineer to sign and seal documents verifying the design meets the code requirements for health and life safety.

When you're building a deck for commercial use, the help of a design professional is especially useful. ADA compliance in particular can be difficult to fully understand. An architect is usually able to navigate through the local and national building codes more efficiently than a contractor. Imagine installing railing on an 800-square-foot deck, only to have it fail inspection because the stair

rail is not "graspable." An architect would have foreseen and corrected that during design.

A good architect will be flexible and consider all factors in the final design, while meeting code. Hiring an architect costs homeowners more up front, but ultimately much of that cost gets recovered because of the reduction in the number of mistakes, design flaws, and problems with the building inspector. ♦

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