



# TEN WAYS

*to Make the Most of  
Your Design Team*

**GOOD DESIGN** is a tremendous value-add in affordable housing development, but is also a significant soft cost - so **it's important to not just “pay” for design services, but to leverage them!**

But where do you get started? When you're focused on financing, entitlements, and resident services it can be tempting to hand off the design work entirely. But as the developer, you set the tone and priorities for the project. With small adjustments to your approach, you can raise the bar for the rest of your team and achieve even better results.

This resource, written by architect-developers, is designed to help you **maximize your design team as you plan, design, and build your project and give you more control over the entire process.** Outlined are common pitfalls and ways you can avoid them by being intentional, transparent, and collaborative in your relationship with your architect. There's a lot you can do, so let's get to work!

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors of this guide are all architects who have worked or are currently working as affordable housing developers. With firsthand knowledge of the struggles on both sides of the project team, we offer these recommendations for making the most of the developer-designer relationship.

### **Nick Forest, REAP ATL**

Nicholas is an experienced designer working with Quest Community Development in Atlanta. His work centers on assisting Quest with developing affordable housing in Atlanta's rapidly gentrifying Westside neighborhoods.

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# PLAN

*Set your team up for success.*



## 1. NOT ALL ARCHITECTS ARE EQUAL

Projects are all different and so are designers. Take the time to find the right one for your project.

- **Don't default to the same familiar firms.** New relationships can lead to new results. Be on the lookout for designers of projects you like, contact your local AIA and NOMA chapters, or release an RFP for design services (for a template, see the Enterprise [Pre-Development Design Toolkit](#)).
- **Budget adequately for design fees.** Leave room to select your project partner on more than price alone.
- **Consider the whole design team.** The landscape architect, engineers, and other consultants play a big role in your project quality and budget. If you interview prospective architects, be sure to meet with those representatives, too.



## 2. POOR DIRECTION LEADS TO A POOR DESIGN

Your architect needs a clear program to create a building that fits your needs. As the expert in the project, residents, and community you serve, you are the best equipped to create that.

- **Be clear about your priorities.** Write a project mission or goals statement that makes your programmatic priorities clear (to get started, see the Enterprise Design Matters [Project Mission Writer](#)). Down the road this reduces value engineering (or at least makes it a lot easier).
- **Make a detailed list of all the areas and amenities you anticipate needing.** It's easier to eliminate elements than to try to fit them in later.
- **Focus on the end users,** both residents and support staff. Develop your program using interviews, surveys, or other engagement strategies. Good design is a function of knowing who you are designing for.



## 3. BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT MONEY MATTERS

Your *pro forma* may not seem relevant to your architect, but withholding details of financial constraints can hurt your project.

- **Let your design team in on deadlines and requirements** for funding applications — especially if you will need drawings or renderings.
- **Share your budget early and often.** If funding sources fall through or change, let your design team know as soon as possible.
- **Write any funding source, design requirements, or priorities into the program** so your design team has them from day one.
- **Your architect can help you meet financial goals.** Discuss phasing options and other design and construction alternatives.



## 4. DO YOUR HOMEWORK AND COME PREPARED

Assume nothing. Be explicit and show examples to help your design team understand your goals and priorities.

- **Do your research on best practices.** Your design team will bring their own experience and expertise, you should too.
- **Compile and analyze a list of precedent projects** you admire. What do you value most about them? What would you do differently?
- Explore the Enterprise [Design Matters Resource Library](#) for information on topics such as senior housing, active design, or healthy materials.
- If your organization has any design guidelines or standards, share those with your entire design team early and reference them often.



# DESIGN

*Take control of the process.*



## 5. INCLUDE YOUR DESIGN TEAM IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Involve your design team to make sure the project is responsive to that feedback - but be sure to account for this in budget and schedule.

- **Integrate your designers fully into the development team. Invite your design team to attend community engagement events.** This enables them to observe and listen first-hand, answer additional questions from the public, and keeps everyone accountable to the community.
- **Create a design feedback loop** so that the community's needs can be integrated into the project throughout the design process. Present your ideas back to the community regularly to **ensure that nothing is lost in translation.**



## 6. MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DESIGN MEETINGS

In-person time with your design team is precious — make the most of it and hold your design team accountable to do the same.

- **Keep a roll of trace paper handy.** This allows everyone to engage with the drawings in a democratic and interactive way.
- Ask for “**working visuals**” like sketches, diagrams, or 3D images. This will help you to understand the building and will encourage your architect to consider what space will actually look and feel like.
- **Take detailed meeting minutes** — putting things on paper clarifies the discussion and serves as a useful record when memories become hazy.
- **Insist on a schedule** and reference it often to hold your team accountable.



## 7. ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Your architect isn't just providing you drawings — they are also there to make sure that you understand your building.

- **Question things that don't make sense** and challenge your design team to explain their decisions. **Don't assume that you don't understand just because you're not a designer.**
- Begin design reviews with questions like “**Can you walk us through the building?**” Asking them to trace a resident's path – from picking up mail and taking the stairs or elevator to stopping at the laundry room and walking their dog. This helps **orient team members who have difficulty reading drawings.**
- **Dive into the details** like fire separations and utility rooms. Ultimately, you are responsible for the building.

“ Don't be afraid to hold your design team accountable! Non-profits are usually a team of “do-ers” and often end up taking on extra work just to “get it done,” but it's important to remember you've hired professionals to do these things. ”

- Architect and Rose Fellow, Providence, RI



# BUILD

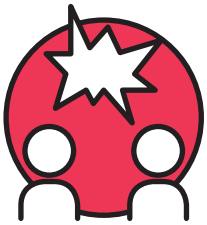
*Execute your vision.*



## 8. COMMUNICATION IS KEY - WRITE IT DOWN!

Meeting minutes and field reports take time, but relying on your collective memory can cost even more in the long run if decisions aren't documented or team members change.

- Assign a **specific team member** to be responsible for organizing and distributing meeting agendas, minutes, and field reports.
- Record **what** was decided and **why** you all agreed on that course of action.
- Leverage technology (like Dropbox or Google Drive) to share these records, current drawings, and progress photos with the entire team.
- Enforce a **strict standard file naming system** - like "20-0321" for March 21, 2020 - so files are easily searchable and archived.



## 9. CONFLICTS ARE INEVITABLE, BUT ANIMOSITY ISN'T.

Construction documents are never perfect. Don't expect them to be. Have a plan for addressing conflicts.

- **Ensure that your design team has Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) protocols in place** to minimize missing information, conflicts between drawings and specifications, and coordination errors between architectural and engineering drawings.
- When conflicts do happen, **remember that nothing is personal.** You are all on the same team dedicated to the success of your building.



## 10. DON'T STOP SHORT.

The project doesn't end with the final pay application. Don't miss out on opportunities to learn from the project's successes and shortcomings.

- **Stop to celebrate a job well done with your design team!** The trust and relationships generated are an investment in future projects, especially if this is a design team you plan to work with again.
- **Put a post-mortem meeting with your project team on the calendar** a few weeks after substantial completion to discuss things like budget, timeline, communication, and conflict resolution - and be open to ways you can work to be a better client, too.
- At the 10-month mark, **survey residents and staff, complete energy audits, and review maintenance & operations.** This schedule gives enough time for people to live in the building and have opinions, while also staying within the contractor's one-year warranty.

“ A truly collaborative dynamic on the project team can lead to design or construction solutions that defy the typical (and often visible) cutbacks from ‘value engineering’ decisions... everyone on the team must contribute to make that a reality. ”

- Developer, Nashville, TN



## 1. NOT ALL ARCHITECTS ARE EQUAL

Connect with your local chapters of AIA and/or NOMA, connect with other developers in your area, and consider the full team of consultants and experts.



## 2. POOR DIRECTION LEADS TO POOR DESIGN

Conduct surveys and interviews with staff and community members, research similar building types, inquire about community engagement, final renderings and presentation images, post-occupancy evaluations or any other additional services.



## 3. BE TRANSPARENT ABOUT MONEY MATTERS

Budget sufficient design fees in your *pro forma* and share it with your design team. Discuss the cost of design and explore phasing options or other alternative paths.



## 4. DO YOUR HOMEWORK AND COME PREPARED

Research best practices and compile a list of precedent projects you admire. Share design guidelines or standards with your design team and don't hesitate to revisit!



## 5. INCLUDE YOUR DESIGN TEAM IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Work with your design team to integrate community feedback into the design process, as well as create a design feedback loop to bring ideas back to the community.



## 6. MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DESIGN MEETINGS

Meet in person as much as possible and be ready to dig into the drawings. Ask for working visuals, sketches, and diagrams. Take detailed meeting minutes and insist on a schedule to hold your team accountable.



## 7. ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Ask for a walk-through of the building – trace a resident's path. If you see something that doesn't make sense, challenge your design team to explain their decisions. Dive into the details – ultimately, you will be responsible for the building.



## 8. COMMUNICATION IS KEY - WRITE IT DOWN!

Consistently keep and distribute meeting agendas, minutes, and field reports. Document decisions made in the field for future reference and establish useful systems for file naming and sharing.



## 9. CONFLICTS ARE INEVITABLE, BUT ANIMOSITY ISN'T

Review your design team's Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) protocol ahead of time and stay focused on solutions to keep egos at bay.



## 10. DON'T STOP SHORT

Conduct a post-mortem meeting with your whole design/construction team to celebrate successes while also debriefing on budget, timeline, communication, and conflict resolution. Survey residents and staff, conduct energy audits, and talk to your O&M staff. Ask how things can be improved for the next project.