



# architect interviews



Fall 2008 we interviewed Charles Schaffer, head of Charles Schaffer Associates in Newton, NJ, to learn some of his views about how to do construction projects successfully and what some of the key marketplace trends are.

Charles offered the broad perspective that even 4 years ago the market was different. “Green is the trend now” and energy efficiency is an important focus of owners. He says he sees it as his job to “look out for his clients.” One of the ways he does this is by taking into account the maintainability of the building when he makes material recommendations.

- For example, stucco EIFS may look great but isn't really well suited for our area.
- Another one is that flat roofs require special and consistent maintenance, which should be taken into account during the planning/design process.

Cost is a factor for all owners, and owners who plan to hold or occupy the building think about the life cycle issues which include operation, energy and maintenance.

Charles says he starts by asking lots of questions of his clients. He finds that owners usually bring a lot of ideas to a project and he needs to know about these when he starts his design process. He's found over the years that every hour he spends understanding the needs of his clients at the beginning can save him 4 to 5 hours later on in the design process.

Charles says he begins the design journey by knowing the client's plans and wishes, and then thinking ahead. He says it is regretful when an architect gets involved after a project site selection is made and the building criteria is already far along. He thinks the architect should be involved early and lead the overall team for the client. For private projects this is feasible. And, Charles has specific, bottom line reasons for moving things forward in this way.

- For one, he thinks an architect can take “soft costs” as well as “hard costs” into the equation.
- He is also passionate that an architect should get involved in the project before the site and layout are selected. After this point, changing the building site selection, or orientation and location on the lot can be costly in time and money.
  - Charles says many of the construction issues with a project may be due to the layout, site location and orientation of the building on the property. Sometimes not enough time is spent on the design development process.
  - While an engineer may think about drainage, parking, etc., the perspective has to be much broader.
    - For example, an architect, after understanding what the client wants or needs, can situate a building so that solar panels can be added later, or room is left available for future expansion.
    - An architect may also think to situate parking under a building to preserve future land for expansions.
    - An architect will analyze the cost impact of construction at that particular location.
    - He can also take into account curb appeal which can affect long term value and how successful the client feels about his project.

*“The finest structures we build are relationships”*



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In all stages of a project, clear and open communication among all parties is the key. First, goals have to be spelled out clearly. Then, everyone has to be on board. Here are three specific observations about communications:

- The Contract Manager as an agent for the Owner usually sets the tone and runs the meetings for larger projects.
- The architect is there to interpret the drawings and specifications, and supervise construction.
- Regular weekly meetings to resolve issues and measure against the original plan are important to keeping everyone focused
  - Otherwise it's too easy for everyone to "do their own thing"

Charles usually works with general contractors he is already familiar with. One of his key considerations is the track record of a GC and how it relates to the needs of the current project.

He says that every project has a personality. For example, 3 contractors may be comparable regarding price, but then the choice comes down to the contractor easiest to work with; his track record; and his diligence in following the construction documents and having the best interest of the client at heart. Having compatible personalities makes life a lot better when a sticky issue arises. Charles has a favorite saying: "Building a building is like getting into a marriage. It's important that the client feels comfortable with the contractor and trust him."

Charles says one of his goals is to have few change orders, and all this starts with the architect and how well he understands the client's needs, wants and the details of the drawings. One of the advantages of a design-build is that the contractor is involved earlier to give perspective also, and this can benefit the project.

Related to this point, Charles says that value engineering has its place but can be death to a project if done after the design is completed. During the concept stage, Charles already does a preliminary budget. This helps flush out decisions on space usage, design and finishes while there is flexibility to handle them within the budget parameters and without impact on timelines.

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