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Selecting an Architect

By Robert C. Foreman, Architect

Why is an Architect Necessary? Who should you hire? Who is best for the Job?

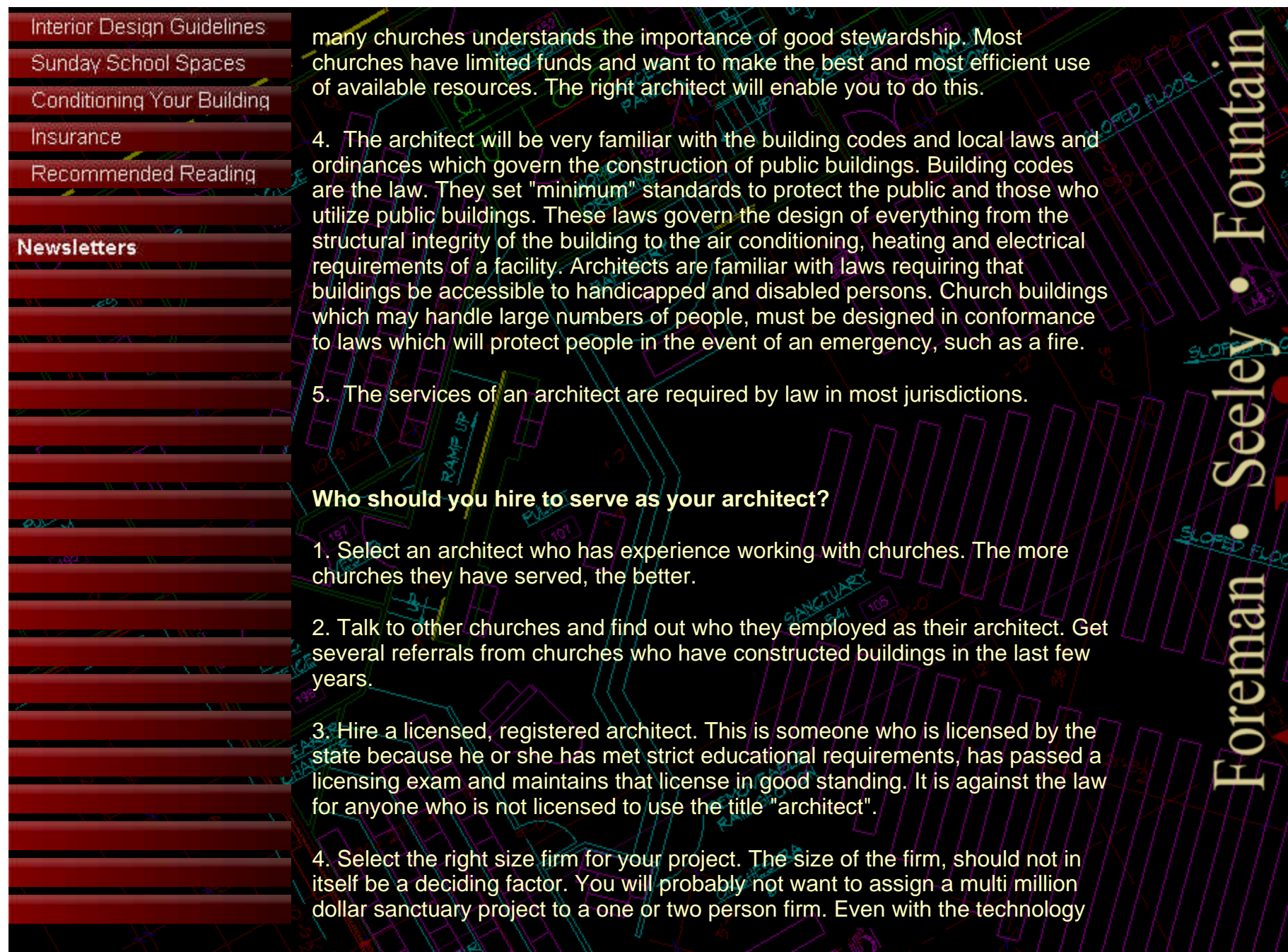
As a church begins to plan for expansion of its facilities, after the building committee is chosen, the committee should select an architect. The architect is vitally important to the success of the building project. Some experts recommend the architect only be employed after much committee work is completed. However, I feel that the architect can begin very early in the process to help the committee and the church with the decision making that must go on before a building can be designed. Of course, it must be the right architect. The architect must understand the programming and predesign process that a church must go through before actual design can begin.

Why is an architect necessary?

The services of a qualified, experienced architect (and his engineering consultants) are essential for the following reasons:

1. The architect is by training and experience qualified to lead the programming, planning and design process that is necessary in order to properly plan and design any building. The architect is trained in the kinds of skills which will result in a building which is both functional and aesthetically pleasing.
2. The architect is creative. He will bring in fresh ideas and explore alternatives that a committee may never consider. An architect who has helped many other churches with their planning, has seen and worked on many different kinds of building solutions. He will see many possibilities.
3. Using an architect is a wise use of resources. The architect who has served

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The background of the page is a dark architectural drawing, likely a floor plan, with various lines and text in different colors (yellow, green, red, blue). The drawing includes labels such as 'RAMP UP', 'SANCTUARY', 'SLOPED FLOOR', and 'RAMP DOWN'. On the right side, there is a vertical text overlay that reads 'Foreman • Seeley • Fountain' in a large, white, serif font.

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many churches understands the importance of good stewardship. Most churches have limited funds and want to make the best and most efficient use of available resources. The right architect will enable you to do this.

4. The architect will be very familiar with the building codes and local laws and ordinances which govern the construction of public buildings. Building codes are the law. They set "minimum" standards to protect the public and those who utilize public buildings. These laws govern the design of everything from the structural integrity of the building to the air conditioning, heating and electrical requirements of a facility. Architects are familiar with laws requiring that buildings be accessible to handicapped and disabled persons. Church buildings which may handle large numbers of people, must be designed in conformance to laws which will protect people in the event of an emergency, such as a fire.
5. The services of an architect are required by law in most jurisdictions.

Who should you hire to serve as your architect?

1. Select an architect who has experience working with churches. The more churches they have served, the better.
2. Talk to other churches and find out who they employed as their architect. Get several referrals from churches who have constructed buildings in the last few years.
3. Hire a licensed, registered architect. This is someone who is licensed by the state because he or she has met strict educational requirements, has passed a licensing exam and maintains that license in good standing. It is against the law for anyone who is not licensed to use the title "architect".
4. Select the right size firm for your project. The size of the firm, should not in itself be a deciding factor. You will probably not want to assign a multi million dollar sanctuary project to a one or two person firm. Even with the technology

available today, one person cannot do everything. Most firms work in teams of specialists. You will want to find out about the past experience of the team that will work on your church design. The team experience will matter more than the firm size.

5. Professional Liability Insurance protects you from the negligent errors of your architect. Find out whether the firm is insured when you make your selection. Consider this issue before starting interviews.

6. Select an architect who is active and involved in his own church. An architect who is active in his own church will be better able to understand the needs of your church.

How do you go about selecting the best architect for the job?

1. After getting as many referrals as possible, contact the architects who were most highly recommended and ask them to provide information about their firm, especially their church design experience. Ask for a list of references and a statement of qualifications.

2. Call as many references as possible. Learn as much as you can about the firms you are considering by talking to people they have served.

3. Find out what percentage of the firm's work is church design. What other kinds of work do they do? How many years has the firm been in business? How long has it been doing church design? Who do they use for engineering consultants?

4. Set up interviews with several architectural firms.

- a. Limit interviews to 5 firms, minimum of 3.
- b. Do not interview a firm who does not appear qualified based on their information submitted.
- c. Do not interview more than two firms in an evening.

- d. Allow one hour to one and one half hours for an interview
- e. Instruct each firm in advance that they have 30 minutes for presentation of their firm and 30 minutes for questions. Set a time limit.
- f. Have a list of questions prepared in advance. Consider supplying the list of questions to each firm a week in advance.
- g. Most firms will use some type of visual presentation. Ask if they will need a screen or a room which can be darkened.

5. You may ask about fee but don't expect an exact fee unless you are prepared to give detailed answers to their questions about what you plan to build. If you don't know what your budget will be or the approximate size of the project, the number of seats in the sanctuary, the square footage, etc., then don't expect the architect to be able to quote a fee.

6. Don't select an architect because he appears to have the lowest fee. You need to know what he is going to include in his services under that fee. A firm with a low fee, may charge extra for the services that other firms are including in their base fee. Sometimes a low fee only indicates that the firm needs work. Fees should not be the basis for selection.

7. Qualifications and experience should be the prime criteria used for selection of an architectural firm.

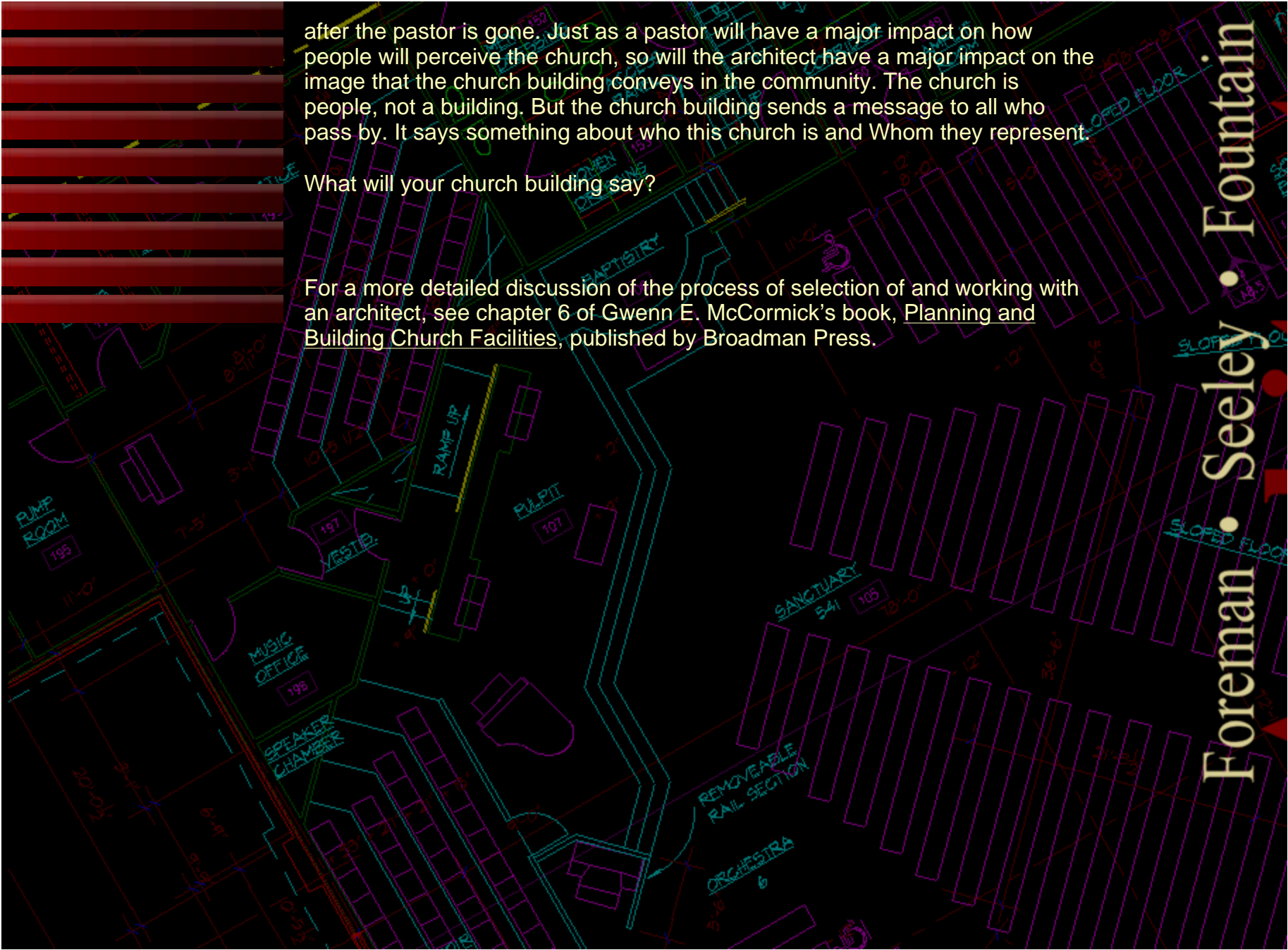
8. Compatibility should be considered as well. Are you comfortable with this firm? How well do you think they will listen to your committee? You will be working closely with your architect for an extended period of time. You need to have confidence that the selected firm is compatible with your committee.

9. Make this decision a matter of prayer, that you will be directed to the right architect.

Conclusion

The selection of an architect may be the most critical decision you will make as a church, next to selection of a pastor. The building will be there for many years

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after the pastor is gone. Just as a pastor will have a major impact on how people will perceive the church, so will the architect have a major impact on the image that the church building conveys in the community. The church is people, not a building. But the church building sends a message to all who pass by. It says something about who this church is and Whom they represent.

What will your church building say?

For a more detailed discussion of the process of selection of and working with an architect, see chapter 6 of Gwenn E. McCormick's book, Planning and Building Church Facilities, published by Broadman Press.

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