

10 Myths About Architects

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10 Myths About Architects

What is an architect?
What exactly do they do?
What services do architects offer?
How do they work?
Why would you use one?
And who is entitled to call
themselves an architect?

A good way to find the answers
is to clear up some myths.



New Zealand
Institute of Architects
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nzia.co.nz



Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

Myth #01

Architects are the same as architectural designers

No, they're not. It's easy to become confused: many designers offer 'architectural services' or use 'architecture' in the name of their company, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are architects.

By law, a person may call themselves an architect only if they have been registered by the New Zealand Registered Architects Board. This statutory body sets and supervises professional standards and protects the interests of consumers. It determines whether graduates — and overseas-trained and registered architects — have the qualifications, knowledge and work experience to practise as architects, and ensures that, once registered, architects maintain and keep current their professional competency.

To gain registration, candidates must have a five-year architecture degree from an accredited institution and at least several years of supervised work experience, and pass a rigorous oral exam. Architectural designers are not required to do this.

You can find out whether or not a person is an architect by checking the register on the New Zealand Registered Architects Board website: nzrab.nz

Myth #02

Architects just design new buildings

Architects design all of the country's new, larger-scale buildings — schools, hospitals, office towers, apartment buildings, airports, transport stations, shopping centres, museums, etc. And, of course, they also design many new houses.

However, much of architects' work involves adapting or altering existing buildings to meet the changed needs of their owners.

Extending the life of a building in this way is often an economical as well as a sustainable option, and most architects are experienced in this type of work. House alterations and additions are core business for many of New Zealand's architects.

Such projects call on the fundamental skills of architects: the ability to reimagine and reconfigure space, to make changes in sympathy with a building's materials, proportions and character, and to provide solutions that match a client's needs and budget, and meet regulatory codes and standards.

Photograph Patrick Reynolds



Project
Sod the Villa

Architect
Malcolm Walker Architects

Location
Auckland



Photograph: Patrick Reynolds

Myth #03

Architects are only interested in big projects

Many of the commissions undertaken by most New Zealand architects are not large. An architect might be asked to design a new kitchen or an extra room for a family home, a sleep-out next to a beach house or a studio in a suburban backyard, or a fit-out for a small office or café.

The size of a project does not dictate the attention an architect pays to it. Architects bring the same skills and abilities to small projects as they do to large commissions, and work through the same project stages. They consult with their clients, propose design concepts which they then develop and detail, manage the contracts agreed with clients and undertake project observation until jobs are complete.

You engage an architect to maximise the possibilities of your brief and make the most of your budget. Again, scale does not determine design quality. It's often the case that, proportionally, smaller jobs receive even more careful consideration — the size may be modest, but the design challenges and rewards are just the same.

Myth #04

Architects cost too much

Architects' services do come at a price, and cheaper rates may be offered by less-qualified providers of design services.

However, it pays to remember that architects are the best-trained design professionals in the country, have specialist skills and considerable experience (or very experienced seniors), and must comply with the requirements of a rigorous registration regime.

It's important to note, too, that the architect's fee is a small part of the cost of a construction project, although their contribution will be crucial to the project's success. The money an architect costs is outweighed by the value they add.

Architects are very conscious of the costs involved in a building project, and are expected to be transparent about their share of those costs. The client and the architect should talk frankly about money: the client must be clear about the brief and the budget, and the architect must be clear about what is possible within the budget. The New Zealand Institute of Architects encourages clients and architects to use its standard contracts, which offer protection to both parties.

Photograph Patrick Reynolds



Project
Hamilton Family Home

Architect
Bull O'Sullivan Architecture

Location
Auckland

04



Photograph: Dennis Redermacher

Myth #05

Architects just care about how buildings look

Architects do care about appearances, as you'd expect. Many buildings are around for a long time, they all represent a significant investment and most of them are highly visible—why wouldn't you want them to look good?

Architects know the buildings they design have a public presence even if their purpose is private. The form and proportions of a building, its material composition, the way it sits on its site and addresses its street, how it relates to the buildings around it and to its wider context—architects are trained to produce successful and appealing solutions to these fundamental design challenges.

However, architects recognise that an even stronger imperative is that a building's design fits its function. An architect's primary concern is that a building works well for the people who use it—that it is a comfortable, healthy, enjoyable and inspiring place to be in, and that it will perform enduring service.

Myth #06

Architects just work in the big cities

From Northland to Southland, architects work in all of New Zealand's cities and many small towns. Especially in smaller cities and towns, architects design a wide range of buildings. They know their communities and their histories, and understand local environmental conditions and contexts. Of course they also have up-to-date knowledge of building regulations, codes and consenting regimes, and are used to working with local tradespeople and professional consultants.

Architects who serve smaller communities are held to the same standard of professional competence as architects in large cities. They are very much part of the national architectural community through their membership of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, and, like all architects, they must meet the mandatory requirements of the Registered Architects Board.

Architects in smaller centres are able to offer their clients the benefits of a thorough awareness of contemporary design principles and practices, combined with a sympathetic understanding of their particular environment. After all, if you walk past your buildings every day, you'll want to be proud of them.

Photograph: Jeremy Toth



Project
Town House

Architect
Christopher Beer - Architect

Location
Cambridge



Myth #07

Architects just do drawings

Yes, architects draw — on pads and notebooks, at the drawing board (not so much, these days) and on computers (most often, these days). Drawing remains integral to architecture; if you're a client, you expect your architect to show you what a concept looks like.

But drawing is not the only service architects offer. An architect can take a building from concept to completion, navigating the consent process, collaborating with other consultants, specifying materials, supervising construction, keeping track of the budget, and advocating for the client's interests throughout the many stages of a project.

Many decisions will have to be made along the way. It's the architect's job to ensure the design meets the client's brief and budget, and that the brief is realised in the finished building. To make this happen, the architect needs many professional and personal skills. Drawing is just one of them.

Myth #08

Architects only work for rich people

It's true that New Zealand's architects have designed beautiful houses for wealthy people. These houses might not be huge, at least by global McMansion standards, however they exhibit a high level of design talent, and are internationally acclaimed.

And architects have also designed thousands of houses and apartments, all around the country, for government agencies like Housing New Zealand and for city councils and charitable trusts. Architects don't make housing policy, but they have always supported initiatives that provide decent housing at an affordable price.

In the public realm, architects design the buildings that provide the physical and social infrastructure of our communities: schools and hospitals, airports and transport stations, libraries and stadiums.

In the residential sector, architects work for a wide range of people with a broad range of budgets. Whether these clients want a big house or a small addition, what they have in common is a desire for a design response that meets their needs, rather than those of a developer.



Photograph Peter Cui

Project
Mary Potter Apartments

Architect
Warren and Mahoney Architects

Location
Christchurch



Myth #09

Architects aren't practical

Architects might dream of ideal projects with unlimited budgets, but they spend their working lives in a real world of codes and contracts, documents and details, rules and regulations, and standards and specifications. On their clients' behalf, they interact with builders, engineers, product suppliers, urban designers, landscapers, heritage consultants, neighbours and council officials (interactions which can bring anyone back to earth).

Building projects need vision yet they also demand persistence. Any project can spring a surprise — changes in the client's personal circumstances, unexpected geotechnical discoveries, material shortages. In addition, the modern building environment is becoming more and more complex; guiding a project through to completion requires determination, knowledge and judgment.

An architect has to hold a great deal of things together, even on a modest project. The real professional challenge is not only to be practical but also to hold onto design intent and integrity while dealing with so many practical requirements. This is real-world stuff: experience teaches all architects that architecture is the art of the possible.

Myth #10

Architects don't listen

You go to an architect for professional expertise: an architect can turn your requirements into reality. For an architect, it all starts with the client's brief. A good architect will interrogate that brief with an editor's honesty; sometimes clients need to know that they can't get everything they want (for their budget, that is).

Listening is a key professional skill for an architect, a bit like it is for a GP. Architects who don't listen to their clients will quickly run out of clients. If you have approached an architect and you don't think you've been heard — for whatever reason — talk to another architect. It's important to get the relationship right, right from the start.

Clients should be honest, too, and assertive. They should make sure that not only are they being listened to but that what they are asking for is also realistic. This isn't to say that a client's brief should be prescriptive — one reason to talk to an architect is to hear about solutions you haven't imagined — but it is to acknowledge that a design dialogue needs two partners.

Photograph Sam Hartnett



Project
Matakana House

Architect
Glanuzina Architects & PAO-
Peterson Architecture Collective

Location
Matakana

About the New Zealand Institute of Architects

The New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) was founded in 1905. Organised in eight branches which cover the whole country, it represents and supports 90 percent of New Zealand's registered architects. Two thousand individual registered architects, and 700 architecture firms are members of the NZIA.

The NZIA also has almost 600 graduate members working in architecture practices and 900 student members who are studying at New Zealand's three accredited schools of architecture (at the University of Auckland, Victoria University of Wellington and Unitec, Auckland).

The NZIA produces material essential to architects' practice, operates design and technical programmes to educate its members and other industry professionals and help them to maintain their professional registration, and runs a peer-reviewed awards programme that sets the benchmark for New Zealand architecture.

Above all, the NZIA champions the cause of architecture. Architecture affects us all. The NZIA exists to help its members achieve the goal of giving New Zealanders the best-possible buildings in which to live their lives.

To find out more about New Zealand's architects and architecture visit nzia.co.nz.

If you are interested in architecture, join our Friends of Architecture programme (see nzia.co.nz).

All images in this booklet are of projects that recently have won New Zealand or Local Architecture Awards (not that – Myth #11 – architects are just interested in Awards).



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Every book has an author.
Every film has a director.
Every painting has an artist.
Every dance has a choreographer.
Every play has a playwright.
Every symphony has a composer.
Every building has an architect.
Every exhibition has a curator.
Every poem has a poet.
Every sculpture has a sculptor.



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