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An experienced architect can provide important communication between owner and tenant

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As a new architect some years ago I had an experience that highlighted unsuspected added value that architects can contribute to a building project. Trained to provide attractive buildings, I had come to recognize that the state's interest in licensing architects had to do with the production of safe, healthful buildings rather than pretty ones and that client concerns extended beyond both of these considerations to include concerns about things like production efficiency, value and profit. Since each of these is important, the rich complexity of architectural practice in the "real world" had become apparent.

The value-added opportunity I encountered occurs early in a project in what often is referred to as the programming phase. Work in this phase is geared toward providing the architect with a well developed understanding of the business' facility needs and often is the initial step in schematic design. It often is too lightly regarded by both architects and clients.

A client of mine was experiencing rapid growth in his business and needed to expand his overburdened facility. In meeting with him and his managers to discuss his facility needs, we pursued the usual questions about how much space each part of his operation would require, what functions should be adjacent to others, where flexibility would be needed to accommodate future expansion and change, what regulatory and building code issues were present, and so forth. As we did, the conversation turned to a more general discussion among the owner and his staff about how they were conducting their business and about several opportunities for improvement that had been missed in the rapid expansion. What had begun as an exercise in facility programming had turned into a valuable business planning discussion.

Recognizing the change of agenda, the owner turned to me and apologized for wasting my time. He felt they should have brought a greater degree of knowledge about how his business should operate to the meeting. I assured him that it was not a waste of time. On the contrary, learning more about the operational concerns and opportunities for improvement was the best way for me to provide the design product they needed. More importantly, it was an unsuspected opportunity for them to discover ways to get even better at what they were already doing well - a discussion I was glad the building planning had facilitated.

In years since, this has happened several more times and I have had commercial real estate agents nod in agreement when I tell the story. Each experience has become a win-win for the project. The owner often sees opportunities for things like production efficiencies that may otherwise have been missed and the architect gains a level of understanding of the enterprise that allows him to provide better services. I now advise clients to expect this to happen.

Gaining this advantage is often more difficult in situations where the business is a tenant. I have encountered building owners who prefer to stand between the architect and the tenant, perhaps

fearing that a direct architect-tenant relationship could work to their disadvantage by not acknowledging needs of theirs that may be at odds with those of the tenant. I believe this is a mistake and often a missed opportunity for profit. It is often better to see the architect as a partner, or valued consultant, in development of the owner-tenant relationship.

An experienced architect can provide an important communications bridge between the owner and tenant, facilitating frank and productive discussion of the needs of both. Issues productively discussed will result in an efficiently used facility with more value for both. Space that maximizes the strengths of a building for its tenants is worth more to them since it allows them to realize increased profit from their operations and can result in longer term leases that benefit the owner. Efficiently planned buildings also maximize leasable space providing increased income for the building owner. Since the current economy seems to be generating far more renovation and adaptive reuse projects than new construction, the need for frank and careful consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of existing buildings is becoming increasingly critical and will only become more complicated as regulations surrounding issues of sustainability and energy use become more complex. Clearly, if the assessment and programming discussion can also generate an opportunity to recognize potential improvements in business operations, the benefit to all parties can be two-fold. Involving experienced architects, who have walked this path before, can enhance the opportunity.

George McGoldrick, AIA is an architect at George E. McGoldrick, AIA, LLC, Meriden, Conn.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540