FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE FUND
1216 Arch Street, Suite 2B, Philadelphia, PA 19107

Suggestions for Meetings Preparing to Build, Expand, or Renovate
a Meeting House

When a Meeting decides that major improvement of its meeting property should be explored, it should recognize that this will likely involve a searching analysis of the Meeting’s view of itself and its call for the future. This usually takes time, often many months. When the Meeting has reached unity on this vision, it will be time to create a plan for providing the necessary facilities to realize it.

The Meeting may find it helpful in this endeavor to appoint two committees, one to guide development of the design for the physical building and its construction or renovation, a second to oversee the complexities of its financing. These committees will be effective if they are comprised of members with concerned interest in the enterprise, some of whom are knowledgeable in matters of building construction or financial management and some of whom are especially skilled in guiding Friends’ consideration toward final approval of the project. The committees should report regularly to the Meeting, seeking comment or approval on key matters as seems appropriate.

Following are a number of steps which a Committee concerned with design, construction, and estimating costs might undertake. The accompanying checklists and worksheets may prove useful.

1. As planning gets under way, establish a preliminary working idea of the maximum project cost which the Meeting can reasonably expect to finance. This will ensure that your basic conceptualization is within manageable bounds.

2. Determine if your intended use of the proposed building is allowed in the zoning district where it is to be located. Examine carefully the restrictions on “mixed use” such as rental of office space or apartment(s) for income. Check zoning and building codes for requirements concerning parking, fire protection, exits, barrier-free access, storm-water management, etc. This is most important when a Meeting purchases a residence and converts it to a use defined in building codes as a place of “public assembly.” Some unexpected rules may come into play if you undertake a major renovation of an existing building, whether presently owned or newly purchased.

3. Develop a list of all the features the Meeting wishes to incorporate in improved facilities from the most essential to the “nice, but not necessary.” This will evolve into a Project Program which describes in explicit detail the use to which each envisioned space will be put and the essential physical characteristics each will require (location, area, shape, utilities, lighting, etc.). This will help the Meeting clarify its priorities and in its final form will serve as the basic instruction to the architect who may be employed.

4. Establish early estimates of the project’s cost with generous allowance for contingencies. Take pains to be realistic; first cost estimates can easily be wishfully low and not all-inclusive. Seek help as needed from a local architect, construction contractor, or building supplies vendor. A modest fee to an expert for help in the conceptual stage may be money well spent.

5. Develop a preliminary estimate of the routine costs of operating the finished building to be sure the Meeting can accommodate the increase in its annual budget. (See Estimated Operating Cost Worksheet.)

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6. New construction and major renovation are intricate endeavors which must be pursued with constant attention to detail. Appoint a member of the Meeting or hire a professional supervisor to closely monitor the project as the Meeting's representative. (This is not the function of the architect.) This person should have a common-sense comprehension of spatial relationships, structural construction, utilities systems, and the Meeting's uses of space, so to be able to make good judgments when, inevitably, questions arise both in the planning stage and during construction. Effective monitoring entails frequent interaction with the architect and frequent inspection of construction as it progresses in order to catch any errors before they become difficult or impossible to correct.

7. Seek a compatible and competent architect and/or builder. Ask a local building official, bank loan officer, or building supplies vendor for suggestions of persons known to be worth considering. Arrange presentations from and interviews with several candidates. Check references. See examples of their work. Determine how busy the candidate is so as to sense if your project will be squeezed intermittently into a heavy schedule or will get full and timely attention until it is finished.

8. Upon committing the Project Program to the design process and the eventual preparation of construction drawings, the Meeting's representative should establish an intimate, on-going, working relationship with the architect to be certain that:
   a. he or she fully understands the requirements of the Meeting, including the budget limits within which he or she is charged to work;
   b. the project can benefit fully from the architect's creative skill.

9. The more detailed your evolving estimate of costs, the more confident you and your architect can be that your finished plan will fall within acceptable limits. Seek something more than a cost per square foot of floor area. Be sure to ascertain what related items are not included in any given estimate. (See Construction Cost Worksheet and Project Budget Worksheet.)

10. Make a realistic, cautiously modest appraisal of the volunteer work that can be counted on from members, and include in the budget the costs of materials involved in the volunteer portion of the project.

11. Before entering into a construction contract, secure bids from at least three potential contractors to:
   a. confirm a realistic cost for that portion of the project;
   b. identify a contractor in whose work and attitude the Meeting can have confidence.
   If, in the first round, no contractor elicits your confidence or produces an acceptable cost quotation, seek further bidders.

12. Bids often come in higher than anticipated. If this occurs, the architect should be under contractual obligation to modify the design to accommodate the budget.

13. With the architect and builder, create an overall Project Schedule. Revise it as often as necessary to realistically account for all the time required by each component of the job. All will then know if the work falls behind, and causes and responsibility can be ascertained.

14. Require that all contracts with the architect and builder to which the Meeting is a party be fully detailed and completely cover all aspects of the contractor's and the Meeting's responsibilities. Be prepared to add provisions to the draft contracts that the architect and builder present. Dates for completion of work are essential. Thoroughly drawn contracts preclude later misunderstandings on the job. Sub-contracts let by the prime contractor do not directly involve the Meeting. (See Contracts Checklist.)