



## How to get the best design teams: Interview questions and ideal responses

This document gives suggested interview questions and then describes what to look for in each response. Feel free to choose which questions most resonate with your needs, we are not suggesting that you ask all of them! Following the questions is an alternative interview strategy, designed to provide more value and better insight into the team dynamics to determine if they are a good fit, and how well they work together.

The purpose of these questions is to make evident the candidate's ability to participate in a more integrated design process where performance, value and efficiency are design drivers and collaboration effectiveness is optimized. Obviously, there are other factors to consider when hiring a design team, and these questions only address sustainability BUT to answer these questions satisfactorily, is an indicator of other good practices within the firm and their proven ability to deliver the best value.

In addition to interview questions, there are currently 2 objective credentials to assess a firm's ability to deliver performance, which can be included as a "preferred credential" in RFQ/RFPs:

1. Signatories of the **AIA 2030 Commitment** (IF they have been actively reporting – not just signed on 5 years ago and done nothing). This is a self-reporting program where firms must account for the performance of their entire portfolio (not just some individual stellar projects). They set and track pEUI (predicted energy use intensity) to actual performance and report annually. Most firms use this as a way of evaluating their own performance and learning how to continuously improve. This is not guaranteed, but it is safe to assume that a firm that is active in the program has made efforts to change how they do their work so that performance is continuously improving. There is no 3<sup>rd</sup> party verification. You can ask to see their performance.
2. SPI's "**SMARTsustainability**" **Certification**™ (SMART = specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound). This is the only certification in the industry to objectively assess and verify that an organization (not a person or a building) has the ability to deliver consistent, high quality sustainability services. SPI evaluates evidence of effectiveness in leadership, culture, processes, systems, project delivery and related issues. There are no "points" in this system (it is more similar to ISO than to LEED) so if a firm is Certified, that means they met rigorous criteria across the board. If a firm receives a "pending" designation, that means that they met most of the criteria but are putting new policies or practices in place and will need a future evaluation to ensure that these new actions are effective.

If either of these is included as a "preferred credential" in an RFQ or RFP, you will be ahead of the game. 2030 Signatories have made an internal commitment and are doing their best to raise the bar. SMARTsustainability Certified firms have proven their commitment as evaluated by an independent 3<sup>rd</sup> party.

These suggested questions are in no particular order. Additionally, you may find some questions useful and others don't fit your needs, this is meant to provide a range of options.

## **What is your firm’s commitment to sustainability and how does it manifest in daily activities?**

*In this answer, you are looking for concrete actions – not just platitudes. “We are committed to sustainability”, or “We deliver high performance” is nice, but completely useless. You want to hear how their commitment is translated into specific, measurable goals (AIA 2030 Commitment is one way to express this) and actions. Then, how those goals are translated into company-wide activities. For example, “We hold our project architects (or project managers, or project teams) accountable for performance on every project (for example, they are responsible for setting and tracking pEUI) and we evaluate their performance in performance reviews.” Or “Our middle management tracks project teams based on keeping on schedule, managing budget and achieving performance goals”, or “We have refined our design process so that everyone knows what questions/analysis to do at what time to ensure you (the client) can make the most informed decisions”. A stellar answer would be for a firm to actually show their AIA 2030 reporting data over time and then – even better – some examples that illustrate how they have learned and continuously improved performance. Most firms repeat the same mistakes and don’t make an effort to learn and improve. Firms who have processes in place to learn from their projects systematically and consistently are going to deliver the best value.*

*Another critical thing to look for (which pertains to this question and the next) is how they close the gap between pEUI and actual EUI. If they are in the AIA 2030 program, this data is easier to track than if they are not, but in either case, a firm dedicated to excellence will 1. Set pEUI goals with you, track and model as appropriate and then measure the actual EUI post-occupancy and look at what (if anything) caused a gap so they can do better next time.*

## **How do you set and understand performance criteria - and how do these criteria inform your process and end product?**

*This answer can have a few parts. First, they should be able to articulate how they work with the client to understand their ROI thresholds, occupancy expectations and other drivers for performance. Additionally, they should talk about how they manage their relationship with consultants (especially MEP/energy modeling). They should give concrete examples of how they process and analyze information so that it can inform decisions so that the client has all pertinent information. No relying on consultant’s ‘typical’, “this is the way we always do it” or “rules of thumb”. They should talk about experience setting performance criteria like energy (pEUI), indoor environmental health for occupants (including material/product criteria) and how those criteria lead to helping them optimize building systems integration (the interdependence of thermal envelop, windows, lighting, etc and how those change when one of the elements change). They should talk about what has derailed them from initial criteria and how they managed that and resolved it favorably. When they set pEUI – they should talk about how they arrive at their target performance number (using the free AIA 2030 program dbase called the “DDx” or using their own historical information). They should also talk about their efforts to “close the gap” between the predicted EUI and the actual (when they have access to that info – and the efforts they make to get that info!). They should have a desire to understand how their projects perform after occupancy and therefore made efforts to get the information.*

## **How do you prioritize goals and approach a methodology of analysis?**

*This question is about how they manage cost and value. How do they deal with ‘value engineering’? They should talk about how they work with clients to set expectations around value, life cycle costs (meaning operational implications of first-cost decisions) and analysis that compares systems rather than line-item elements. Their system-to-system analysis should include elements that affect each other (like building envelop/insulation, percentage and type of glazing, lighting, mechanical and controls systems) and*

provide you with 3 options (or more if there is a reason for that) that look at both first cost and lifetime cost, including maintenance.

**What design strategies have you used in the past that have resulted in the best durability, performance, indoor environmental quality, operational success or cost savings (value)? What have been the least successful (lessons learned)?**

*You are looking for specific strategies here – both the nuts and bolts of specific systems optimizations (wall section examples, specific technologies, etc) – as well as how they engage with you, the client (did they get a good understanding of operational needs from facility management personnel or did they use the right analysis/simulation at the right time to inform design? Did they evaluate systems comparisons with life cycle costing or simply do line-item cost estimating without comparing optimized systems?). In terms of lessons learned, ideally, they can point to a project where they learned a lesson and THEN how they applied that learning to the next project. Do they track the performance of their projects after occupancy so they can learn (whether or not they are being paid for a post-occupancy phase)? A specific set of lessons might also be around CA – how executing the design (during construction) has been optimized – how do they ensure realization of design intent? Also ask:*

**If you have done a 'green' (or net zero or Living Building Challenge) project in the past, what were your biggest lessons? What were your biggest successes and biggest challenges?**

*Some good answers have to do with collaboration effectiveness and how they work with consultants differently than on a “code compliant” building, others with timing - that there is much more of the same budget and schedule skewed towards the front end if the schedule and eased at the back...that specifications need to be started in schematic design and not late in design development, etc. They would also talk about a deeper understanding of the client’s operational needs and costs – informing the design. Additional question: What sustainable design strategies would your team explore for this project and which of those have you had experience with in similar applications (or why do you feel they are right for this application)?*

**What are the most important questions that you ask that inform the path to the design solutions?**

*One of the first learning steps (for architects) in implementing sustainable design is to start the process by exploring what are the 'right' questions to be asking - that then get followed with analysis and solutions. If you aren't asking the right questions, you don't use the analysis to the benefit of the client. All design professionals have a tendency to want to offer answers, but much of the time; they haven't stopped to make sure the answers address the most effective questions. The nature of the questions they are asking can reveal a lot. Questions for the client about value, risk threshold, operational issues (staffing, capacity, sophistication), occupancy expectations, what will be measured to determine success – and more.*

**What sustainable design (or you might want to say 'high performance' or 'healthy design') strategies would you definitely implement that would either be cost neutral or cost saving?**

*Definitely be wary of anyone who insists out of the box that to 'do it green' there will definitely be added costs...this implies that they do not understand how to maximize energy efficiency, specify healthy materials, and other basics that will make the project 'green' without widgets and other technologies. They should talk about proper siting and other passive design strategies and optimizing building systems integration – again, building envelop, daylighting, efficient mechanical systems – and using early analysis to inform those decisions. If they show you all glass buildings – beware! They can also talk about strategies that may have an initial increase in first cost that is paid back very quickly – things like investing in building envelop and better glazing to eliminate perimeter heating systems or optimizing daylight to reduce electric lighting.*

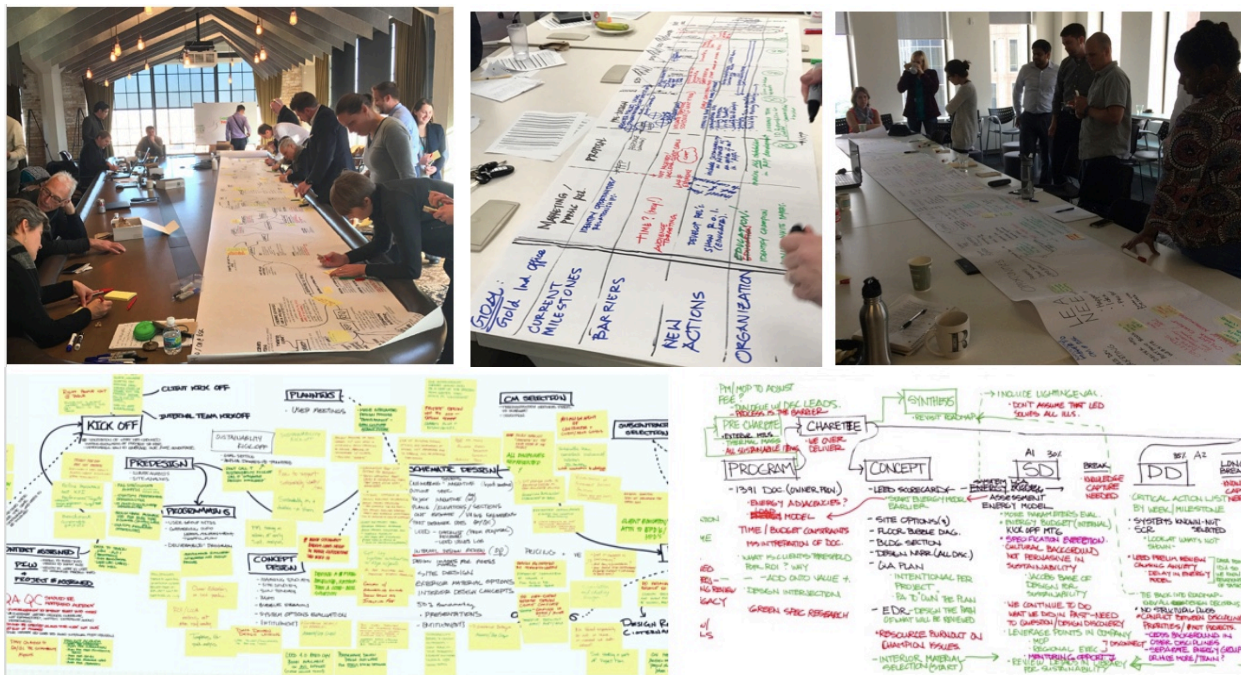
### How do you protect the health of future building occupants through design?

Part of this is about material selection – many firms have their own internal “red list” of major carcinogens and other toxins to avoid, for others this is an ongoing development and they research for every project. Their specification should be updated to address the ‘low hanging fruit’ of this issue. The other aspect is about indoor environmental quality (temperature, quality of light – optimizing natural light, acoustics, etc) – experience implementing the WELL standard might be a good indicator.

**Design process: how would you define “integrative design” and how do you optimize collaboration in your project delivery methodology (or can ask ‘what is your project delivery methodology and how do you achieve excellence consistently?’)**

If you ask most architects “what is your design methodology” they will look at you blankly or say something like “it’s a creative process, we don’t have one methodology”. This is ignorance. First, they have a methodology – it just may not be very good. If they say “project managers have different styles, etc so we don’t have ONE methodology” also a bad sign. Good firms have ‘redesigned’ their project delivery process so that they ensure setting performance targets (with the owner) at the outset (often using an OPR, owners project requirements), that the iterations of analysis happen at the right time, that they use data-driven information to set and track performance and that their collaboration with you the owner AND their consultants is designed to optimize critical path decisions. They should be able to show you a diagram of this, or talk thru the major inflection points in their process where they make this happens. Integrated design IS NOT a kick off charrette. It is not a charrette or series of charrettes (although that can be part of it). If a firm says integrated design is a charrette, don’t even continue to talk to them because they are at least 10 years out of date. (See pictures below, showing how some great firms have redesigned their project delivery.)

There is also an ANSI standard for integrated design that they can refer to having used to change their process.



**Please give examples of how you have incorporated operational issues into the design process, to inform decisions?**

*They should be able to give concrete examples of understanding the capacity and capability of facility managers and not designing systems that were beyond the ability of staff to manage and maintain them. They should also talk about life cycle cost analysis. Ideally, they can also give examples of how they have gone back to a project after turnover to learn about how the occupancy and operation of the building might have been different from expected and what they learned from that for the future.*

**For this project, what do you think are the defining aspects of design that will drive “success”?**

*First of all, it’s always good to get on the same page about what “success” means for this project (from both sides of the table). Additionally, the architect should not be the only one to answer this question! It should be a question that each major consultant has a perspective on. (see alternative interviewing method below for even more robust way of getting at this). They should talk about expected occupancy and getting the best possible understanding of how the building will be used by occupants and operated by facility managers. They should talk about building systems optimization and resulting (better) indoor environmental quality so occupants have visual, acoustic and thermal comfort (designing for people, not for publication).*

*They should talk about where the MEP team can have the greatest impact. You can ask them for examples of how they have worked w their MEP consultants to implement this approach in a prior design. They can talk about what obstacles they’ve encountered and how they’ve overcome them.*

**What do you do to minimize change orders?**

*Change orders can happen for many reasons – some, not the “fault” of the architect. However, there are a few ways that an architect can manage their side of the process. First, you are looking for a firm that has explicitly taken this challenge on systematically. Their mindset should be to prevent change orders which takes a few steps. First, working with the owner very early on to develop a crystal clear understanding of the project needs and context is critical. Next, effectively managing the team of consultants and coordinating all aspects of the design to avoid design snafus – easier said than done. There should also be timely communication (within the team and with the owner) and then, they should talk about their QC process, how it is managed and consistently executed.*

## ALTERNATIVE INTERVIEW PROCESS “COLLABORATIVE INTERVIEWING”

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A further strategy is an alternative to the traditional interview approach. The current ‘dog and pony’ show (for short-listed candidates) has some down-sides. Firms spend an inordinate amount of time developing slick images and / or models and can rehearse great answers, but you get no insight into what it really would be like to work with them, or what their working relationship is really like.

The purpose of this interview process is to uncover what the capability of each of the key disciplines is, how they think, how they work together and how compatible they are with your culture and approach. It’s like mini-dating. The outcomes can be surprising. The architect may be great, but the MEP engineer may not be collaborative or open to having analysis inform design. Or the MEP engineer may be stellar but the architect stifles them and doesn’t let them provide input early in the design process. You would never know that in a traditional interview.

Instead of the traditional interview/marketing process, the short-listed candidates each commit to a 3-hour session where they come in and do a very abbreviated charrette. This is done in two parts. First, the different disciplines from the team get separated (architect in one room, engineer in another, landscape in another). Each one is told that they are “Ruler of the Universe” and Prime Designer for the project. Their task is to take a quick pass at designing the project purely from their perspective (or somehow articulating what drives the design and what the “big moves” are). This serves two purposes: first, it puts each discipline on an equal footing where their disciplines’ focus is equally as important as all the others (avoiding Ego-tecture or the subjugation of landscape or engineering design which is typical and leads to unnecessary costs!). Secondly it shows you the true capacity of each key member within the team – how do they think, solve problems, communicate – do they approach things ‘by rules of thumb’ or really thinking and responding to your needs.

Then, in the second phase, the group comes back together with the owner (all of the owner team should be present) and the emphasis is on synthesis – how does each discipline reconcile their different approaches to a singular design approach? This is where rubber hits the road and the owner can witness how the team resolves the separate design elements and conflicts from each perspective into a synthesized whole and how they engage you, the owner in the process. Can they participate in a truly creative process? Do they listen to each other? How do they resolve internal conflict? Is ego dominating and design suffering as a result?

The overall goal of this kind of process is to free the individual disciplines and encourage creative thought and ownership of the project. None of them is expected to be experts on all aspects of design, but to bring out the best of their perspective. The critical aspects and strategies are synergized together at the end and it shows how they interact with each other to get it done. It is also a lot of fun and the owner learns a lot in the process. This also reduces the amount of time and resources invested in a marketing show that really provides limited value in terms of conveying capability and working relationships.