



Kresge College Expansion
at the University of California,
Santa Cruz // Architect: Studio
Gang with TEF Design //
Photo: Jason O'Rear

Choose Architecture!

**A guide to a career in
architecture in California.**

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California Architectural
FOUNDATION



Architects Are Visionaries

Look around—you're surrounded by architecture! Every building where you live, learn, work, and play starts as an idea in an architect's mind.

Shaping the Future

Architects design everything from homes to skyscrapers, making sure they are safe, functional and beautiful. They also create sustainable places that are healthy, consider the environment, and can last a long time without wasting resources. In California, architects consider challenges like earthquakes and wildfires, designing buildings that can stand strong and protect the people inside. Are you ready to be a visionary? As an architect, you will carefully plan the spaces we move in and around. You will be a problem-solver, a creative thinker, and a great communicator, working with a team of experts and communities to bring ideas to life. With special training and an architect license, you will play an important role in building better communities. If you become an architect, you won't just design buildings, you will shape the future.



Julia Weatherspoon, AIA, NOMA
// Licensed Architect

“Architecture is so much more than drawing and constructing buildings—it’s the art of shaping the very fabric of our communities. It blends creativity, technical skill, and a deep passion for design, all aimed at making a meaningful impact on everyday life. Every project is an opportunity to breathe life into spaces that tell a story, bridge past and future, address specific needs or challenges, and inspire those who experience them.

Architecture is about solving real-world problems with innovative solutions—designing environments that are, beautiful, sustainable and safe, fostering a sense of place in the built environment. It is the tangible expression of our dreams and values, a dynamic blend of art and science that has the power to transform cities and lives.”

Design, Build, Inspire

An architect's work is exciting because it changes daily with each new project. Architects use “design thinking”, a problem-solving method that considers what people need, how things should function, and how to design buildings that inspire their communities and are suited to their locations and climates. Architects are licensed professionals with the experience and training to perform this type of work. They team up with clients (the people or groups who hire them), engineers (who ensure the project is technically sound and safe), and builders (who bring architectural plans to life). While many architects work in firms, the skills they develop can also lead to careers in urban planning, interior design, construction management, real estate development, user experience design, and more.

Contra Costa County, Pleasant Hill Library // Architect: Bohlin Cywinski Jackson // Photo: Matthew Millman



“Being an architect is exciting and fun because every day is different! Some days, I meet with people who want to build something new, like a house or a school. I listen carefully to their ideas and help bring their vision to life. On other days, I visit construction sites to make sure everything is being built as planned. I also spend time reading and writing documents, planning budgets, and ensuring buildings follow safety rules.

When I design a project, I think about everything—from how a building looks to what materials we should use. Sometimes I have to figure out how to make a space work better for people or how to design a building strong enough to handle earthquakes or fires. It’s a lot of thinking, drawing, and problem-solving, but that’s what makes it exciting.

The best part? Seeing a building go from an idea to a real place that people can use! It’s amazing to know that something I helped design makes a difference in people’s lives.”



Winston Thorne, AIA, NOMA
// Licensed Architect

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Helpful Attributes & Skills

Thinking about becoming an architect? These qualities can be beneficial, but don’t worry—you can develop and refine them through education and experience:

- A love for community (wanting to improve the spaces people live, work and play)
- Teamwork and communication skills (working with others to bring ideas to life)
- Math skills (for measurements and to manage project costs)
- Ability to explore and share ideas visually (through drawing, making and modeling)
- Computer skills (using special programs to design and plan)
- Science skills (for building performance)
- Problem-solving abilities (thinking through challenges and solutions)

Jump In! Ways to Explore Architecture

If you're interested in architecture, there are many ways to start exploring right now.

Get Started:

- Explore the buildings and spaces around you—parks, libraries, museums, and schools. Pay attention to their design, what you like or don't like, and how they are used by people.
- Visit the American Institute of Architects (AIA) K-12 Resource page for fun architecture activities and games: www.aia.org/resource-center/aia-k-12-initiatives.
- Invite a volunteer architect to your school or community with the **Architecture by the Book** program: www.calarchfoundation.org/archbythebook_lessons/
- Check if your school has an architecture club—or start one!
- Attend events hosted by your local AIA Chapter, community college or university, to see student projects or hear from architects.
- Learn about your community's architectural history by visiting historic buildings, and look for volunteer opportunities to help preserve them.

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Ginger Thompson, AIA
// Licensed Architect

"I've seen firsthand how powerful it can be to get involved with the architecture community early on. Growing up, I didn't have any architects around me, so I never imagined that being an architect was a possibility. Now, I'm actively involved in the Construction Industry Education Foundation (CIEF) CREATE Mentor Program, which introduces high school students to the many careers in building and design. I love showing students how architecture can blend their interests in people, design, problem-solving, and art into a fulfilling career while inspiring them to envision themselves in that role. Through programs like CREATE, students not only learn design skills but also gain confidence, connect with mentors, and see how their talents can make a difference in their communities now and in the future."

Harvey B. Milk Terminal 1, San Francisco // Architects: Woods Bagot / ED2 International // HKS // KYA // Gensler // Kuth Ranieri // Hamilton + Aitken Architects// Photo: Joe Fletcher and Jason O'Rear



Discover More

Here are a few organizations and programs to explore:

American Institute of Architects California (AIA CA) / Emerging Professionals

aiacalifornia.org/learn-grow-practice/emerging-professionals

American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS) California Chapters

aias.org

California College of the Arts Summer Youth Programs

cca.edu

California Preservation Foundation

californiapreservation.org

California State Summer School for the Arts (CSSSA)

csssa.ca.gov

Cal Poly Architecture Summer Career Workshop

architecture.calpoly.edu/about/summer-career

Hip Hop Architecture® Summer Camp

hiphoparchitecture.com

NOMA Project Pipeline Summer Camp

noma.net/project-pipeline

Otis College of Art and Design Summer Programs

otis.edu

Stanford Pre-Collegiate Summer Institutes (Architecture focus)

summerinstitutes.spcs.stanford.edu/

UC Berkeley Summer Architecture Program

ced.berkeley.edu/academics/summer-programs

USC Summer Architecture Program

precollege.usc.edu/summer-programs/exploration-of-architecture

Pathways to Licensure

Becoming a licensed architect can take an average of 5+ years, and there are multiple paths to becoming an architect in California, each bringing valuable perspectives that enrich the profession.

One path is to earn a professional degree in architecture from a program accredited by the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB). NAAB accreditation ensures that the program meets standards essential for professional practice and prepares students for the next steps toward licensure.

Traditional Path // Education + Experience

You can start with a four-year architecture program for a basic design foundation or a five-year bachelor of architecture (B.Arch.) program, which leads directly to licensure. A four-year degree can be followed by a master of architecture to meet licensure requirements. Many students begin at a community college before transferring to a university program.

General Education

High-school diploma

Non-Traditional Path // Experience Only

In California, you can become an architect without attending college through the “experience-only” path. After high school, you can gain hands-on experience by working under the direct supervision of a licensed architect, gradually building the knowledge and skills needed for licensure.

Foreign Path // Education + Experience

This path is possible if experience and/or education were obtained in another country with submission of National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) records and a log of required internship hours.

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Higher Education

A degree from a NAAB accredited program.

Hours // Work Experience

Completion of 3,740 hours of supervised work experience.

ARE Exams (National)

Passing all six divisions of the Architectural Registration Exam.

CSE Exam (State)

Confirming your knowledge of CA laws and regulations.

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Architecture Schools & Internships

Studying architecture is an exciting journey! As an architecture student, you'll learn how buildings are designed, discover their history, and explore new ideas that can improve the quality of people's lives and the future of the built environment. Most importantly, you'll develop creative problem-solving skills and practice the same design methods architects use every day.

Choosing the Right Architecture School

If you plan to attend college, architecture programs vary greatly. It's a good idea to start exploring early. Learn what a typical day as an architecture student is like and find out the requirements to apply. You can check school websites, take campus tours, or attend special events hosted by architecture programs and your local American Institute of Architects Students (AIAS) Chapter. Talking to students or recent graduates can also give you great insights.

Here are some helpful questions to guide your search (and many can also be applied to community college programs as well):

- Where is the program located? Does it connect students with the local community?
- What is student life like? What's it like to study at this college?
- What degrees are offered? Are there different types of architecture programs to choose from?
- Do students take design studio courses? What are they like? Can you see examples of student work?
- Are there hands-on experiences? Does the school offer internships, research projects, or study abroad?
- How does the school help with jobs? Where do students and graduates work?
- What's next after graduation? Does the school help students continue their education at other programs?
- Is the program National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) accredited?

Some architecture programs start studio courses in the first year, while others wait until the second—this can make a difference in how soon you dive into design work. Watch for programs that offer unique opportunities like design-build projects, community partnerships, or summer immersion experiences. These extras can help you discover what kind of architect you want to become.

CIEF CREATE Mentoring Program inspires, educates, and supports the next generation through hands-on experiences, scholarships, and workforce development programs.//
Photo: Ginger Thompson





California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo,
William and Linda Frost Center for Research and Innovation
// Architect: ZGF // Photo: Magda Biernat

Discover Architecture through Internships

Internships and job shadowing are excellent ways to explore architecture. You'll have the chance to meet practicing architects, observe their work, and get hands-on experience. It's a great way to build skills and make valuable connections.

The California Architectural Practice Experience Program (capX) connects students to architecture firms for paid internships and job shadowing experiences across California. It's open to high school students on up to recent graduates seeking their first professional job.

ACE Mentor Program of America

acementor.org

California Architectural Foundation (CAF) California Architectural Practice Experience Program (capX)

calarchfoundation.org

CIEF CREATE Mentoring Program

cie.foundation/creatementoringprogram

Architecture Internships via LinkedIn

linkedin.com/jobs/architecture-internship-jobs-california

Architecture Internships via ZipRecruiter (Student Focused)

ziprecruiter.com/Jobs/Internship-Architecture-Student/--in-California

"What I found most helpful about the capX program was its accessibility and the support it provides. The guidance on making the most of internship and shadowing opportunities was invaluable, especially since these experiences can feel brief and fast-paced. I also appreciated the program's commitment to continuous improvement, with opportunities for participants to give feedback. ."

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Keiko Watanabe

// Architecture Student & capX intern

Photo: ABA

Supporting Your Success

Becoming an architect requires time, learning, dedication and financial investment--similar to other professional careers, but there is financial help. You can apply for scholarships, paid internships, and other programs to help cover your costs. Or take a more budget-friendly route by starting at a community college and transferring, or choosing the experience-only path. If architecture is your passion, there's a way to make it happen!

Educational Costs

Tuition varies depending on the school: public universities may cost \$10,000-\$15,000+ per year, while private schools can exceed \$40,000. Out-of-state programs are often more expensive. Some students also pursue a master's degree, which adds to the investment but can qualify graduates for more opportunities.

Financial Assistance

Here's a starting list of resources that offer financial assistance to architecture students. For additional opportunities, be sure to explore national databases like Scholarships.com or check with your local community foundation.

2 x 8 Student Exhibition & Scholarship

ac-la.org

Architects Foundation Scholarships

architectsfoundation.org/scholarships

AIA Central Valley // John Ellis, AIA Scholarship

aiacv.org

AIA Inland California Collegiate Scholarship Program

aiaic.org

AIA Long Beach // South Bay Architecture School Scholarship

aialb-sb.org

AIA Pasadena & Foothill // Jean Roth Driskel (JRD) Scholarship

aiapf.org/Jean-Roth-Driskel-Scholarship

AIASF Scholarships at CCA, UC Berkeley & San Francisco City College

aiasf.org

California Architectural Foundation (CAF) Scholarships

calarchfoundation.org/what-we-do/scholarships

CIEF Scholarship in Architecture

cie.foundation

AIA San Diego // Laura Shinn Diversity in Architecture Scholarship

aiasandiego.org

AIA San Fernando Valley Scholarship for Woodbury University

aiasfv.org



49 South Van Ness, San Francisco // Architect: Skidmore, Owings & Merrill
// Photo: SOM

Architect Salaries

In California, depending on the type of firm and its location, entry-level architects typically earn up to \$75,000 annually. With experience and a license, architects can earn between \$120,000 and \$200,000.

Visit the AIA Salary Calculator: www.bit.ly/AIASalary to learn more.

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Ron Culver, AIA
// Licensed Architect
Photo Credit: Ben Rose Photography

“Receiving the Mel Ferris Scholarship was a game-changer for me. It provided the financial support I needed to pursue my dream of becoming an architect, and opened doors to opportunities I wouldn’t have had otherwise. Scholarships like this one can make all the difference in helping you get where you want to go—so don’t hesitate to apply for every scholarship you can find. The road to becoming a licensed architect, running a firm, and now teaching and speaking at universities wasn’t easy, but with the support of scholarships, I was able to focus on my education and my passion for design. If you have a dream in architecture, use every resource available to you to make it happen.”



University of Melbourne Student Pavilion // Architect: KoningEizenberg
Architecture, Lyons & Architects EAT // Photo: Peter Bennetts

About Us

The American Institute of Architects California (AIA CA) is a professional association that unites architects to support one another, develop new skills, and advocate for the profession. Members have access to resources that help them grow and lead at every stage of their career.

The California Architectural Foundation (CAF) empowers the next generation of architects through scholarships, internships / job shadowing, and K-12 architecture education programs that highlight architecture's impact and inspire interest in the built environment and architecture within local communities.

Together, AIA CA and CAF are shaping the future of architecture in California by supporting both current and future architects.

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