NCARB

Competency

STANDARD FOR ARCHITECTS

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Effective July 1, 2026. Please check NCARB's website, www.ncarb.org, regularly for updates to this publication and for the most current information regarding the *Education Guidelines*, the *Architectural Experience Program® (AXP®) Guidelines*, the *Architect Registration Examination® (ARE®) Guidelines*, and the *NCARB Certification Guidelines*.

INTRODUCTION

The NCARB *Competency Standard for Architects* defines the knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors required for entry into the practice of architecture across NCARB's member jurisdictions. Together, the 16 competencies in this standard describe the capabilities necessary for an individual to effectively protect the public's health, safety, and welfare while practicing as an architect in collaboration with other design- and construction-related professionals. This standard establishes the level of proficiency needed in each of the 16 competencies to qualify an individual for initial licensure, as assessed by NCARB's programs.

COMMENTARY

Indicated by footnotes throughout the *Competency Standard*, commentary is provided to support understanding and consistent interpretation of key terms, concepts, and expectations. The commentary offers contextual explanations, illustrative guidance, and clarifications intended to help readers grasp how terminology is applied in practice. Please note: terms are defined only on their first reference.

The commentary is descriptive rather than prescriptive and serves as a reference to help readers understand the language and underlying intent of the *Competency Standard*. The examples, explanations, and references included in the commentary are representative, not comprehensive.

THE COMPETENCIES

The competencies are organized into three domains. Candidates for licensure must demonstrate their capabilities in each independent competency to earn a license in the jurisdiction(s) in which they practice. After becoming licensed, architects must ensure they maintain the capabilities described to remain competent. In addition, architects should strive to continually grow their competency in these and other areas to provide quality service and public protection.

Design & Documentation Domain

1. Assess regulatory design requirements.
2. Evaluate existing project conditions.
3. Develop a program that establishes project criteria.
4. Create design solutions that support public and environmental well-being.
5. Integrate socio-demographic considerations and universal design principles.
6. Create design solutions that address project requirements.
7. Create deliverables that convey a design solution.
8. Coordinate the integration of building systems into a project design.

Construction Administration Domain

9. Prepare and administer documentation of the construction phase.
10. Evaluate the progress of construction for conformance with contract documents and design intent.

Practice & Project Management Domain

11. Execute contracts for professional services.
12. Implement a work plan according to a project's scope, schedule, and budget.
13. Organize and coordinate an interdisciplinary project team.
14. Understand statutes and regulations that govern architectural practice within U.S. jurisdictions to provide services legally.
15. Understand ethical and professional standards that govern architectural practice.
16. Understand foundational business principles to operate a practice.

You can find more detailed descriptions of the 16 competencies, including the criteria necessary to obtain a license to practice architecture in an NCARB member jurisdiction, on the following pages.

Design & Documentation Domain

This domain encompasses the intelligent, creative, iterative, and culturally and environmentally responsive design processes. The design process involves research, analysis, and exploration of approaches, ideas, and alternative solutions that lead to a final design proposal. The final design must be cohesive, integrated, adequately described, and coordinated to achieve value objectives, cost objectives, and compliance with planning controls and construction codes.

1. Assess regulatory design requirements.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can determine the impact of regulatory requirements on a project. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

1.1. Determine relevant authorities having jurisdiction (AHJ) that govern a project based on project type and location.

1.2. Determine the regulations, codes, rules, and standards[1] that apply to a project.

1.3. Determine the steps required for a project to gain regulatory approval.

2. Evaluate existing project conditions.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can evaluate project conditions, constraints, and site context. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

2.1. Analyze existing structural integrity, functional performance, and safety of natural and built elements.[2]

2.2. Determine relevant community planning and zoning policies that will impact site and building design.

2.3. Determine relevant environmental factors.[3]

2.4. Identify and evaluate relevant existing project documentation.[4]

2.5. Analyze existing condition reports[5] related to natural and built elements.

2.6. Identify constraints or restrictions in existing buildings or natural features that might impact the design of the project.

2.7. Document findings of the existing project conditions.

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[1] **Regulations, code, rules, and standards:** Means through which authorities govern the practice of architecture, including (but not limited to) building and fire codes, zoning ordinances, accessibility standards, environmental regulations, historic preservation, design covenants, and deed restrictions that impact a project.

[2] **Natural and built elements:** Site features such as built structures, utilities, roads, topography, and vegetation.

[3] **Environmental factors:** Factors such as climate (sun, wind, rain, temperature), site-specific geography (topography, soil), natural surroundings (flora, fauna), and ecological impacts (noise, pollution, habitat loss).

[4] **Project documentation:** Materials defining project information such as drawings, specifications, permits, reports, and records.

[5] **Existing condition reports:** Documents such as land surveys, geotechnical reports, building systems analyses, structural evaluations, and environmental and hazardous material reports that are provided by other professionals.

3. Develop a program that establishes project criteria.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can gather project requirements[6] and goals and develop these criteria into a cohesive architectural program. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

3.1. Analyze project requirements and goals to inform building and site spatial functions, adjacencies, and desired qualitative features and impact.

3.2. Determine preliminary/initial quantity and size of required building and site spaces, as well as total building area necessary to achieve project requirements and goals.

3.3. Research building precedents to determine applicability to the project.

3.4. Analyze feedback from clients, users, and/or community stakeholders[7] to inform the program.

4. Create design solutions that support public and environmental well-being.[8]

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can evaluate the impact of design choices on the well-being of project users, neighboring communities, and the environment. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

4.1. Identify baseline criteria[9] for public and environmental well-being.

4.2. Determine design strategies that address baseline criteria for public and environmental well-being.

4.3. Create design options that address public and environmental well-being criteria.

4.4. Evaluate design options against established baseline criteria.

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[6] **Project requirements:** The needs, objectives, conditions, and constraints that a project must fulfill (program criteria, design and code requirements, schedule, budget).

[7] **Community stakeholders:** Individuals, groups, and organizations within or connected to the project context that are affected by, have an interest in, or may influence the planning, design, construction, and long-term impact of a project beyond the immediate client or owner.

[8] **Public and environmental well-being:** Conditions that support and protect the collective physical, mental, social, and environmental health of individuals and communities by promoting health, comfort, resilience, and quality of life, while responsibly sustaining ecological systems, conserving natural resources, and minimizing long-term harm to the natural and social environment.

[9] **Baseline criteria:** The principles and measurable requirements established for a project to guide design decisions. These criteria define the minimum performance expectations that design solutions must meet to sustain and promote occupant health and comfort, accessibility and inclusion, energy efficiency, resource conservation, environmental impact, and adaptability over time.

5. Integrate socio-demographic considerations[10] and universal design principles.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can identify and incorporate social, equitable, accessibility, and universal design considerations as they relate to an architectural solution. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

5.1. Identify opportunities to gather information from community stakeholders to inform design considerations.

5.2. Assess relevant socio-demographic factors and their potential impact on a project's design.

5.3. Assess universal design factors and their potential impact on a project's design.

5.4. Integrate socio-demographic design strategies into design options.

5.5. Integrate universal design strategies into design options.

6. Create design solutions that address project requirements.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can translate program and cost considerations into a constructable and comprehensive design solution that meets the project requirements and goals. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

6.1. Assess feasibility of integrating existing natural and built elements into the design solution.

6.2. Determine options for site strategies[11] that address project requirements.

6.3. Determine site and building materials and systems that address project requirements.

6.4. Develop design options to inform a comprehensive solution.

6.5. Evaluate design options against project requirements and goals.

6.6. Refine a comprehensive design to conform with project requirements and goals.

[10] **Socio-demographic considerations:** Factors such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, site context, marital status, household size, education level, occupation, income, and socioeconomic status.

[11] **Site strategies:** Design responses to the physical, environmental, social, and regulatory conditions of a project site such as site circulation and parking, stormwater management, building placement and orientation, and utility coordination.

7. Create deliverables that convey a design solution.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can create Instruments of Service based on the project criteria. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

7.1. Develop graphic documentation[12] that communicates the design intent to clients and the project team.[13]

7.2. Develop graphic documentation that communicates the design intent and technical details to obtain regulatory approvals and permits, inform bidding and negotiation, and support construction.

7.3. Develop specifications that communicate detailed requirements such as material standards and quality, installation, submittal requirements, warranties, and acceptable standards.

7.4. Review project documentation for accuracy and completeness.

7.5. Update documentation based on project changes.

8. Coordinate the integration of building systems[14] into a project design.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can coordinate with consultants[15] to select and integrate building systems into the design, ensuring technical compatibility, performance, and constructability. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

8.1. Identify building and site systems that need consultant input and provide relevant architectural requirements to consultants.

8.2. Collaborate with consultants to select and coordinate the design of each system within project requirements.

8.3. Determine architectural spatial requirements for system components based on consultant input.

8.4. Collaborate with consultants to facilitate the resolution of conflicts between building/site design and systems.

8.5. Review documentation across disciplines and project phases for constructability, coordination, and compatibility with the overall design.

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[12] **Graphic documentation:** Graphic materials that illustrate the design intent, such as drawings, diagrams, plans, sections, elevations, details, and models.

[13] **Project team:** The collective group of individuals, firms, and organizations engaged to plan, design, document, construct, and administer a project. The project team includes the owner, architect, consultants, contractors, and other participants whose roles, responsibilities, and relationships are defined through contractual agreements and coordinated professional services.

[14] **Building systems:** Integrated components that make a project safe, functional, and habitable such as mechanical, electrical, plumbing, structural, fire protection, building envelope, acoustics, vertical transportation, telecom, and utilities.

[15] **Consultants:** Design professionals or technical specialists retained to perform services related to the project that support, supplement, or extend the architect's own services who are not the architect of record.

Construction Administration Domain

This domain encompasses the services that support the process of project procurement and management of design delivery, review, and observation through construction. This may occur through a variety of building procurement methods and construction contracts.

9. Prepare and administer documentation of the construction phase.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can perform administrative functions throughout the project's bidding and construction phases, including advising the client and preparing and interpreting project documents. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

9.1. Maintain project records related to the bidding and construction processes.

9.2. Administer documentation generated during construction.[16]

9.3. Document and maintain addenda and change order processes.

9.4. Review and act on a contractor's application for payment.

10. Evaluate the progress of construction for conformance with contract documents and design intent.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can evaluate the progress of construction for conformance with contract documents and design intent. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

10.1. Understand contractual obligations during construction.

10.2. Understand common construction methods[17] and sequencing.

10.3. Evaluate shop drawings, submittals, and reports for conformance with the contract documents.

10.4. Evaluate construction progress for alignment with design intent and schedule.

10.5. Document construction nonconformance, notify project team and relevant regulatory stakeholders,[18] and assist in a resolution.

10.6. Perform project closeout procedures[19] in accordance with the contract requirements.

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[16] **Documentation generated during construction:** Includes responses to Requests for Information (RFIs), submittal administration, Architect's Supplemental Instructions (ASIs), Construction Change Directives (CCDs), and project closeout documents.

[17] **Common construction methods:** Widely used systems and methods of constructing a project such as wood framing, steel, concrete, masonry, and heavy and mass timber construction.

[18] **Regulatory stakeholders:** Public agencies, authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs), and other governmental or quasi-governmental entities that establish, interpret, administer, and enforce laws, regulations, codes, standards, and policies affecting the planning, design, approval, construction, and occupancy of a project.

[19] **Project closeout procedures:** The process by which construction is completed, contractual obligations are satisfied, and the project is transitioned from construction to owner occupancy, operation, and maintenance. Procedures relate to documentation such as record documents (as-builts), Operation and Maintenance (O&M) manuals, warranties and guarantees, test reports and certifications, substantial and final completion documentation, and training and turnover materials.

Practice & Project Management Domain

This domain encompasses an understanding of the profession and business of architecture, with the objective of providing value to clients, consultants, employees, and the public through timely and effective professional services in accordance with ethical and legal responsibilities.

11. Execute contracts for professional services.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can prepare professional service contracts in accordance with legal and ethical standards of care. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

11.1. Understand common architectural contract risks and their implications.

11.2. Understand the contractual relationships of owner, client, architect, consultant, and contractor.

11.3. Describe the advantages and disadvantages of project delivery methods[20] to the client.

11.4. Negotiate terms and conditions[21] of an architectural services contract.

11.5. Prepare the appropriate contracts for architectural services and architects' consultants.

12. Implement a work plan according to a project's scope, schedule, and budget.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can manage a professional services project work plan and coordinate resources to meet the project's scope, schedule, and budget. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

12.1. Coordinate with the client and design team[22] to develop and document a project's scope, schedule, and budget.

12.2. Develop a work plan that includes the list of tasks and resources required to complete the architectural services of a project on schedule.

12.3. Monitor work plan progress, identify issues, and address as needed.

12.4. Monitor project scope for alignment with the contract and identify any discrepancies.

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[20] **Project delivery methods:** The organizational frameworks that define contractual relationships, roles, responsibilities, and sequence of services among the owner, architect, contractors, and other project participants such as design-bid-build, construction management, and design-build.

[21] **Terms and conditions:** The contractual provisions that establish the rights, responsibilities, obligations, procedures, and limitations governing the professional, legal, and administrative relationships among the parties to an architectural project such as project scope, schedule, fees, budget, indemnification, insurance, technology, ownership of Instruments of Service, and dispute resolution procedures.

[22] **Design team:** The group of individuals led by the architect who are responsible for developing, coordinating, and documenting the design of a project such as the architect's internal staff and design consultants.

13. Organize and coordinate an interdisciplinary project team.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency can organize and coordinate an interdisciplinary project team for project delivery. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

13.1. Identify and engage with appropriate consultants based on project scope.

13.2. Establish communication protocols and organize project meetings among relevant members of the project team.

13.3. Direct and facilitate the work of consultants so that they provide contracted services in coordination with the project work plan.

14. Understand statutes and regulations that govern architectural practice within U.S. jurisdictions[23] to provide services legally.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency understand how to practice in accordance with architectural licensing statutes and regulations within a governing jurisdiction. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

14.1. Understand jurisdictional statutory and regulatory requirements to lawfully practice architecture.

14.2. Understand continuing education and renewal requirements to maintain architectural licensure.

14.3. Identify the consequences of unlawfully practicing architecture.

15. Understand ethical and professional standards that govern architectural practice.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency understand how to practice in accordance with ethical and professional standards of care. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

15.1. Understand the duty of the architect to their client and the public.

15.2. Understand one's own professional competence and limits for a given project.

15.3. Identify and disclose potential conflicts of interest.

15.4. Identify, document, and communicate when an ethical or professional standard has been breached.

[23] **U.S. jurisdictions:** U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories that have legal responsibility for regulating the practice of architecture within their geographic boundaries through architectural registration boards.

16. Understand foundational business principles[24] to operate a practice.

At the point of initial licensure, architects with this competency understand business principles that relate to the operations of independent architectural practice. Individuals must be able to demonstrate their ability to:

16.1. Understand business principles necessary for sustaining an architectural practice.

16.2. Understand the different types of insurance relevant to architectural practice.

16.3. Identify the key differences between business entity options.[25]

16.4. Identify common business risks[26] to architectural practice.

16.5. Identify business practices that minimize risks for clients, the firm, and projects.

[24] **Business principles:** Principles such as cash flow management, organizational structure, and legal compliance.

[25] **Business entity options:** Business structure options, including corporations, partnerships, LLC, and sole proprietorships that define the control, responsibility, and accountability for the practice of architecture allowed within a jurisdiction.

[26] **Business risks:** Inclusive of practices and situations that may threaten the ability to achieve a business's objectives and execute its strategies.