



Design Professional Licensing Requirements

The following document is intended to provide guidance on which types of projects a licensed design professional, and unlicensed person may design, and the limitations placed upon each licensee.

Professional	Limitations	Applicable statutes
Structural Engineers	No limitations; may design any type of building.	6731, 6736, 5537.1 of B & P Codes
Architects	May design any type of building, except the structural portion of a hospital	15048 of H & S Code 5500.1, 6737 of B & P Code.
Civil Engineers	May design any building, except for hospitals or schools	15013 of H & S Code 5537.5, 6731, 6735 of B & P Code.
Unlicensed Persons	See below	5537, 5538, 6737.1 of B & P Code
Licensed contractors	May design plumbing, elect., mechanical systems that they install	6737.3 B & P Code

Sections 5537 and 6737 of the California Business & Professions Code:

These sections of the Business & Professions Codes provide the following exceptions for building plans that have been designed in accordance with the Building Code requirements of Chapter 23 for conventional light wood-frame construction and tables of limitation for wood frame construction as adopted by the local jurisdiction.

Unless the Building Official deems that an undue risk to the public health, safety or welfare is involved, or if any portion of any structure exempted by these sections deviates from the requirements for conventional light wood-frame construction or tables of limitation for wood frame construction found in Chapter 23 of the Building Code, the Building Official may require the preparation of plans, drawings, specifications or calculations for that portion by, or under the direct supervision of, a licensed engineer or architect. The documents for that portion shall bear the stamp and signature of the licensee who is responsible for their preparation.

An unlicensed person may prepare plans, drawings or specifications for the following:

- Single-family dwellings of wood frame construction not more than 2 stories and basement in height. With spans between bearing walls not exceeding 25 feet and the height of the structure does not exceed 25 feet.
- Nonstructural or non-seismic store fronts, interior alterations or additions, fixtures, cabinetwork, furniture, or other appliances or equipment.
- Nonstructural or non-seismic alterations or additions
- Fabric awnings and canopies
- Signs that weigh less than 400 pounds, are less than 24 square feet in area and less than 4 feet in height.
- Multiple dwellings containing not more than four dwelling units of wood frame construction, not more than two stories and a basement in height. A single lot may have a maximum of four dwelling units per lot. This shall not be construed as allowing an unlicensed person to design multiple clusters of up to 4 dwelling units.
- Garages or other structures appurtenant to single family dwellings, of wood frame construction not more than two stories and a basement in height.
- Agricultural and ranch buildings of wood frame construction

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- May not prepare plans for those alterations that will change or affect any components of the structural system or safety of the building or its occupants.

Plans prepared for the following work shall be deemed as affecting the safety of a building or its occupants and shall be prepared by, stamped, and signed by a licensed engineer or architect:

- Projects with interior or exterior structural alterations
- Interior alteration with an occupancy change
- Interior alteration with walls and partitions over 5'9" in height or ceiling work which cover a floor area greater than 3,000 square feet in B, F-1, F-2, S-1, S-2 and M occupancies.
- Storage racks over 8' in height
- Remodeling projects with changes to fire walls, barriers or partitions
- Alteration with change to exiting requirements
- All Group H (Hazardous) Occupancies
- Assembly occupancies A-1, A-2, A-3 and A-4
- Tanks and vessels
- Roof mounted mechanical equipment weighing more than 400 pounds, and/or extends more than 4 feet above the line of the roof.
- All Group E Occupancies (School and day care classified as educational group E occupancies).
- All Group I (Institutional) Occupancies
- Hotel, motel and apartment occupancies R-1 and R-2.
- Projects with mixed occupancies
- Remodeling projects in a high-rise building (having floors over 75' in height).
- Lateral force resisting systems utilizing poles embedded in the ground.
- Cripple walls exceeding 4' in height or adjacent to garage door openings.
- Nonstructural components or equipment attached to building requiring seismic design.
- All new construction of buildings and portion of buildings, including substantial improvements to buildings, located within flood hazard areas that are subject to Section 1612 of the California Building Code or ASCE 24 Flood Resistant Design and Construction.
- Any project not deemed exempt by the Building Official
- Any project deemed by the Building Official to require professional design by a California licensed engineer or architect.



What Construction Documents Are Required to Be Signed and Wet Stamped?

Sections [5536.1](#) and [5536.2 of the California Business & Professions Code](#) requires as a conditions precedent to the issuance of the building permit the signature and stamp on the construction documents by the person who prepared or was in responsible control of the construction documents. To ensure compliance with these sections, the City of Downey requires that each sheet of construction documents for which the licensee is responsible for, including the first page or cover sheet of the calculations, specifications and reports (if any), shall bear the seal or wet stamp (unless submitted electronically) (including the licensee's name, license number, (and expiration for licensed architects) and signature of the licensed design professional.

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Design Professional Licensing Questions

The following questions were obtained from 2021 California Architects Board Building Official Guide, and the Guide to Engineering & Land Surveying for City and County Officials.

When a licensed architect working on a project quits or is discharged, may another architect sign the original licensee's plans or instruments?

If both architects are licensed in California, and the supplanting architect completely reviews the plans of the original architect, making necessary, or client-directed changes, the supplanting architect has "prepared" the plans for purposes of BPC section 5582.1 and may stamp and sign them, absent fraud, deception, or dishonesty. [CCR, title 16, §151]

When plans have been filed by the original architect of record, may a building official accept changes to those plans that are submitted by the supplanting architect or engineer?

A building official is only required to verify that the appropriate stamp and signature is on the documents before a permit is issued and that design changes are made and approved by the appropriate person. [BPC § 5536.25, CCR, title 16, § 151, and California Building Standards Code (CBSC), title 24, § 106.4.4.1]

Is a building official required to notify an architect of record when another architect/engineer takes over a project, uses that architect's drawings, or makes changes?

No. *The Architects Practice Act* does not require this notification.

Sometimes an owner has separate contracts with an architect and the structural, civil, mechanical, and electrical engineers. No one discipline has overall coordination of the project, and a design change is required that will affect the work of all disciplines. May a building official require the project architect to sign for changes on his own work as well as others? Can the architect coordinate the work of the others?

No. The architect is only required to stamp, sign, and take responsibility for his or her own documents. The same shall apply to each design professional. The building official should notify the owner that such coordination is required, and it is the owner's responsibility to arrange for proper coordination. An architect can coordinate the services and documents of others if he or she accepts the responsibility. [BPC § 5536.1]

Are building officials required to give a copy of record documents to anyone who asks for them?

No. See HSC section 19851, which specifies who may obtain copies of drawings and under what conditions.

If the homeowner cannot contact the original designer, can the building department provide a copy of the plans?

The building department can duplicate the plans under the provisions contained in HSC section 19851. Refer to that code section for details.

Please reference our handouts: [Process to Request Duplication of Plans](#) and [Request for the Duplication of Plans](#) on our webpage for additional information.

If a lot contains an existing residence, may an unlicensed person prepare plans for a maximum four additional units as exempted under BPC section 5537?

No. The maximum number of units that could be designed on the lot by an unlicensed person would be three additional units in any combination. [BPC § 5537]

If an owner prepares drawings for his or her own exempt building, is he or she required to sign the drawings?

No. The statute requires only those who prepare drawings for others to sign them and, if licensed, to note their license number. However, the statute does not prohibit a building official from requiring the owner to sign the drawings. [BPC § 5536.1]

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BPC section 5537, which deals with exemptions, does not discuss site planning. Does this mean that an unlicensed person who prepares drawings for exempt structures must hire an architect to prepare the site plan drawings?

An unlicensed person may only do site planning if the activities are not subject to regulation by any licensing boards. For example, preparing grading and drainage plans are activities that require a license. Therefore, an architect or engineer would be required to prepare such plans for an exempt structure.

May the building official require other exempt structures to be designed by an architect or engineer in addition to the noted agricultural and ranch buildings if it is deemed that such structures are an undue risk to public safety, health, or welfare?

Yes. The building official may require part or all of the structure to be designed by an architect or engineer. The BPC does not supersede the building official's authority to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public

What services may an interior designer provide?

Interior designers and any other unlicensed persons may design nonstructural or non-seismic store fronts, interior alterations or additions, fixtures, cabinetwork, furniture, other appliances or equipment, and any nonstructural or non-seismic alterations or additions necessary to provide for their installation. Interior designers may not design any components that change or affect the structural system or safety of the building. [BPC §§ 5537, 5538]

Can landscape architects prepare site grading and site drainage plans?

Yes. A landscape architect can prepare landscape architectural site grading and site drainage plans. [BPC § 5616]

In a set of plans submitted to a building official for approval and issuance of a permit, which sheets of the plans or drawings must be signed or stamped?

The *Architects Practice Act* does not address this issue. The building official has the discretion to determine which sheets should be stamped and signed. However, standard practice in the profession is to stamp and sign every sheet and the cover page of specifications

Must each page of a set of specifications or structural calculations be signed by the licensed person who prepares them?

An architect is required to sign his or her plans, specifications, and other instruments of service. The Board does not require that each page of a set of specifications and/or calculations be signed by the architect. [BPC § 5536.1]

Must the architect sign the documents at initial submittal?

The *Architects Practice Act* does not stipulate when the documents are to be stamped and signed. BPC section 5536.2 requires building officials to verify that the person who prepares the documents is properly licensed to do so. This can be done by obtaining a signed statement that the person who prepared the documents is licensed to prepare such documents. The building official can accept the signed statement in lieu of the stamp and signature at the time of initial submittal. After the plan check corrections have been made and before the permit for construction is issued, the drawings must be stamped and signed by the architect. [BPC §§ 5536.1, 5536.2]

Must architects stamp their plans, specifications, and other instruments of service prior to obtaining a building permit?

Yes. [BPC §§ 5536.1, 5536.2]

Does the replacement of a fire-rated door require an architect or engineer to approve the replacement or write a specification for the replacement?

The local building official should make this determination.

May an unlicensed individual design, plan, or prepare instruments of service for storefronts or interior alterations?

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Yes. Unlicensed persons may prepare and submit plans for nonstructural or non-seismic interior alterations or additions, provided such alterations do not change or affect the structural system or safety of the building. [BPC § 5538]

May an unlicensed individual design interior alterations or additions for nonexempt structures?

Unlicensed individuals may prepare and sign plans for nonstructural or non-seismic store fronts, interior alterations or additions, fixtures, cabinetwork, furniture, other appliances or equipment, and any nonstructural or non-seismic alterations or additions necessary to provide for their installation. However, an unlicensed individual may not prepare and sign plans for any components affecting the structural system or safety of any building as determined by the local building official. [BPC § 5538]

May unlicensed individuals prepare and sign plans for the interiors of any type of building? Are there square footage limitations?

Unlicensed individuals may prepare and sign interior designs for any type of building subject to the approval of the building official. There are no square footage limitations imposed by the *Architects Practice Act*; however, some building departments do set square footage limitations applicable to design services by unlicensed individuals. [BPC § 5538]

May unlicensed individuals design and sign mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems?

No. Such systems must be designed and signed by appropriately licensed or registered design professionals or appropriately licensed contractors as allowed by the *Professional Engineers Act*.
[BPC §§ 5537.2, 5537.4, 6737.3]

May licensed contractors prepare and sign drawings for their respective systems without supervision of an architect or engineer?

Yes. The *Professional Engineers Act* states that appropriately licensed contractors may design electrical or mechanical systems for any building if they also install them [BPC § 6737.3]

Appropriately licensed contractors may design mechanical and electrical systems in accordance with applicable construction codes if they also install those systems. If they do not install the systems and supervise the installation of the systems, they must have an architect or engineer design the systems. The licensed contractor shall sign all plans and include their contractor's license number.

May a general contractor prepare and sign drawings pertaining to mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems for nonexempt structures?

No. If the general contractor does prepare mechanical or electrical drawings, he or she must do so under the supervision of an architect or appropriately registered engineer. The architect or engineer must stamp and sign the drawings. [BPC § 5537.2]

What criteria does the Board use to determine what it considers the "safety of a building"?

See the *California Building Standards Code*. The local building official should determine which components of building systems affect safety and required to be designed by an architect or engineer

May unlicensed individuals alter exterior wall, door, and window configurations on non-exempt structures so that they are coordinated with new interior construction?

No. The *Architects Practice Act* does not allow an unlicensed individual to prepare and sign plans and specifications for the alteration of exterior walls, doors, or windows except for nonstructural or non-seismic alterations to storefronts as determined by the local building official. [BPC § 5538]

Are building officials required to verify whether the individual who prepares engineering documents has a current license?

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They are not required to do so by law, however, the Board encourages building officials to verify licensure. Building officials may verify that the individual who prepares engineering documents is currently licensed or is working under the responsible charge of a licensed engineer. To verify licensure online, visit the Board's Web site at www.bpelsg.ca.gov

Can a building official require a civil engineer to prepare plans, drawings, specifications, or calculations for portions of a wood-framed residential structure?

Yes. If any portion of any structure exempted by section 6737.1 deviates from substantial compliance with conventional framing requirements for wood frame construction found in the most recent edition of Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations or tables of limitation for wood frame construction, as defined by the applicable building code duly adopted by the local jurisdiction or the state, the building official having jurisdiction shall require the preparation of plans, drawings, specifications, or calculations for that portion by, or under the responsible charge of, a licensed architect or licensed engineer. The documents for that portion shall bear the stamp and signature of the licensee who is responsible for their preparation. [B&P Code § 6737.1]

What engineering documents are required to be signed and sealed?

All final civil (including geotechnical and structural), electrical, or mechanical engineering plans, specifications, reports, or documents must bear the professional engineer's seal or stamp, as well as his/her signature. If there are multiple pages, the seal or stamp, and signature must appear on each sheet of the plans, and on the original title page of the specifications, calculations and reports. Each licensee shall include the date of signing and sealing immediately below or next to the signature and seal. Interim (non-final) documents are not required to be signed and sealed. However, the interim documents must include the name and license number of the engineer, as well as a notation as to their intended purpose, such as "for review only," "not for construction," or "draft." [B&P Code §§ 6735, 6735.3, 6735.4; 16 CCR § 411]

Are professional engineers and land surveyors required to include their license expiration date when they sign and seal engineering or land surveying documents?

No. January 1, 2010, professional engineers and land surveyors are no longer required to include their license expiration date when they sign and seal engineering or land surveying documents. It is also no longer required that the license expiration date be included in their professional seal/stamp. [B&P Code §§ 6735, 6735.3, 6735.4, 6764, 8750, 8761 & 8764.5]

However, licensed architects are required to include the expiration date on their stamp.

What information must be included in a professional engineer's seal?

The professional engineer's seal (stamp or digital representation) must contain the licensed engineer's name, license number, and branch or authority of engineering in which licensed

Are electronic seals and/or signatures acceptable?

Yes. Licensed engineers may choose to affix their signature and seals to their documents through electronic means. However, a rubber stamp of the signature is prohibited and may not be used. A rubber stamp for the seal is acceptable. Local agencies may adopt ordinances or regulations requiring "wet" stamps and/or signatures. [16 CCR § 411]

Can a civil engineer sign mechanical or electrical engineering drawings if the civil engineer is not licensed in those disciplines?

Yes, as long as the electrical or mechanical work is in connection with or supplementary to civil engineering work. [B&P Code § 6737.2]

Who can sign and seal for the engineering design of building components?

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A licensed engineer designing a portion of a building is in responsible charge of the engineering of that portion of the project and is required to seal and sign the documents related to that portion of the project. The licensed engineer must indicate on all documents exactly which portions he or she is in responsible charge of. [B&P Code § 6735; 16 CCR §§ 404.1, 411]

What happens when a licensed engineer does not complete a project and a new licensed engineer takes over?

The new licensed engineer (successor licensee) may assume responsible charge of a project and complete the design as long as he or she exercises the extent of control and assumed responsibility for the engineering decisions. Thus, this successor licensee must review drawings, calculations, studies, etc., to the degree that meets the responsible charge criteria. The successor licensee cannot be required to assume responsibility for portions of the project where responsible charge was by the original licensed engineer (stamped and signed by the original licensed engineer). However, the original licensed engineer is not relieved of any responsibility arising from engineering services of which he or she was in responsible charge (documents stamped and signed only by the original licensed engineer). [16 CCR §§ 404.1, 411]

Can a licensed engineer modify or add to a project for which another licensed engineer is in responsible charge?

The licensed engineer (called a "successor licensee") can modify or add to a project which has been designed under the responsible charge of another licensed engineer. The "successor licensee" must exercise the requisite extent of control and assume the responsibility for the engineering decisions for all new work and for the effect the new work has on the existing work. The "successor licensee" is not required to assume responsible charge of the entire project. [16 CCR § 404.1]

Can ALL civil engineers practice land surveying?

Only civil engineers licensed prior to January 1, 1982, are authorized to practice all land surveying. The last license number issued to a civil engineer before January 1, 1982, was 33965. Civil engineers licensed after January 1, 1982, may only practice "engineering surveying" as defined in Business and Professions Code § 6731.1. A civil engineer licensed after January 1, 1982, can offer land surveying work incidental to his or her civil engineering practice, provided all the land surveying work is performed by, or under the direction of, a licensed land surveyor or licensed civil engineer legally authorized to perform land surveying. [B&P Code §§ 6731, 6731.1, 6731.2, 8731]

Can land surveyors prepare grading plans?

No, only licensed civil engineers can prepare grading plans. [B&P Code §§ 6731, 8728]

What surveys do not require a professional land surveyor or legally authorized civil engineer?

Engineering surveys as defined in B&P Code §§ 6731.1 may also be done by civil engineers licensed after January 1, 1982. Surveys made exclusively for geological or landscaping purposes not involving property line determination do not constitute surveying under the Professional Land Surveyors Act. [B&P Code §§ 6731.1, 8726, 8727]

Can a civil engineer licensed after January 1, 1982, determine property boundaries?

No. Civil engineers licensed after January 1, 1982, cannot determine property boundaries. [B&P Code §§ 6731, 8726, 8731]

Can a civil engineer licensed after January 1, 1982, prepare site plans?

Site plans showing grading, utilities, paving, and layout of a building site may be done by all civil engineers, no matter when their license was issued. However, civil engineers licensed after January 1, 1982, may not determine the property boundaries in relationship to the fixed works shown on the site plan. [B&P Code §§ 6731, 6731.1, 8726, 8731]

Can a civil engineer licensed after January 1, 1982, certify elevations and prepare topographic or elevation surveys?

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All civil engineers, no matter when their license was issued, may certify elevations of any portion of a structure or other fixed work and may prepare topographic and elevation surveys. However, civil engineers licensed after January 1, 1982, may not determine the property boundaries in relationship to the fixed works shown on the topographic or elevation surveys. [B&P Code §§ 6731, 6731.1, 8726, 8731]

Can licensed mechanical and electrical contractors prepare and sign drawings for their respective systems without the supervision of a licensed engineer?

A contractor appropriately licensed by the Contractors State License Board (CSLB) may only design systems which he or she will install. An employee of the contractor may perform the installation. However, the contractor cannot subcontract the installation to another contractor. [B&P Code § 6737.3]



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