



A Tradition of Stewardship  
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**Planning, Building & Environmental Services**

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**Plans Requiring Design by Licensed Architect or Engineer**  
TB17-01

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this technical bulletin is to provide information on the types of projects that may be designed by non-licensed individuals and the types of projects that require design by Architects and Engineers.

**DEFINITIONS**

**Architect** – a person who is licensed by the State of California under the authority of Section 5500 of the Business & Professions Code (B&P 5500).

**Civil Engineer** – a professional engineer in the branch of civil engineering and refers to one who practices or offers to practice civil engineering in any of its phases (B&P 6702) and is appropriately licensed by the State of California to practice or offer to practice civil engineering in any of its phases (B&P 6704).

**Non-structural** – not structural; see definition of “structural” below. Determination of non-structural building elements other than screening or ornamental elements is outside the scope of unlicensed persons due to the requirement of understanding what is structural which requires the opinion of a architect or civil engineer.

**Professional Engineer** – a person engaged in the professional practice of rendering service or creative work requiring education, training and experience in engineering sciences and the application of special knowledge of the mathematical, physical and engineering sciences in such professional or creative work as consultation, investigation, evaluation, planning or design of public or private utilities, structures, machines, processes, circuits, buildings, equipment or projects, and supervision of construction for the purpose of securing compliance with specifications and design for any such work (B&P 6701). A person must be licensed to practice civil, electrical or mechanical engineering by the State of California to be entitled to take and use the titles “consulting engineer,” “professional engineer,” or “registered engineer,” or any combination of those titles B&P 6704).

**Structural** – of or relating to the load-bearing members or scheme of a building as opposed to the screening or ornamental elements

**Structural Engineer** – a person licensed as a civil engineer who has been found qualified as a structural engineer according to the rules and regulations established for structural engineers by the Board for Engineers (B&P 6736).

**Unlicensed Person** – a person who does not possess a license as an Architect, Civil Engineer or Structural Engineer.

## **BUILDING DESIGN LIMITATIONS**

Architects may design any building, including engineering elements, of any type except:

- structural portion of a hospital

Applicable statutes: H&SC Section 129805; B&PC Sections 5500.1 & 6737

Civil Engineers may design any building, including architectural elements, of any type except:

- hospitals
- schools

Applicable statutes: H&SC Section 129805; B&PC Sections 5537.5, 6731, 6735; Education Code Section 17302

Structural Engineers may design any building, including architectural elements, of any type:

- no limitations

Applicable statutes: B&PC Sections 5537.1, 6731, 6736

Unlicensed Persons may design and furnish plans for the following residential structures and other structures that are accessory to residences:

- Single family dwelling not more than two stories and basement in height when designed in accordance with the California Building Code (CBC) or not more than 3 stories and a basement in height when designed in accordance with the California Residential Code (CRC).
- Multiple dwellings containing no more than four dwelling units and not more than two stories and basement in height when designed in accordance with the CBC or not more than 3 stories and a basement in height when designed in accordance with the CRC. Note that an unlicensed individual may design a maximum of four dwelling units on any lot when allowed on any lot.
- Garages or other structures appurtenant to single family dwelling or multiple dwellings not more than two stories and basement in height.
- Agricultural and ranch buildings unless the building official deems that an undue risk to the public health, safety, or welfare is involved.

If any portion of any structure exempted by this section deviates from conventional framing requirements for wood frame construction found in Chapter 23 of the California Building Code or deviates from the prescriptive requirements of the California Residential Code, the Building Official shall require the preparation of plans, drawings, specifications or calculations for that portion by a professional Engineer or Architect and may require the preparation of plans, drawings, specifications or calculations for the entire structure by a professional Engineer or Architect.

Unlicensed persons may also design and furnish plans for the following non-residential projects:

- Accessible elements and systems including slab-on-grade ramps, interior and exterior signage, break room and office counters.
- Nonstructural store front systems that include ornamental and screening work (illuminated wall-mounted lettering up to 10 lbs/letter).
- Interior alterations that include ornamental work, customer counters, breakroom kitchen cabinets and counters, interior nonstructural alterations or additions such as systems furniture with partition heights not exceeding 5'-9", fixtures, cabinet work, furniture, or other appliances or equipment.
- Additions including ornamental elements, screening, on-grade patios without covers.

Applicable statutes: B&PC Sections 5537, 5538, 6737.1

An unlicensed person may not prepare plans for those alterations that will change or affect any components of the structural system or life safety elements of the building. Plans prepared for the following works except as specifically noted above, shall be deemed as affecting the safety of a building or its occupants and shall be stamped and signed by a registered engineer or architect:

- New buildings, additions to existing buildings;
- Projects with interior or exterior structural alterations;
- Interior alteration with an occupancy change;
- Residential decks over 8' in height;
- Installation or replacement of a rated fire door;
- Non-residential decks;
- Interior alteration with walls and partitions over 5'9" in height or ceiling work in non-residential occupancies;
- Storage racks over 8' in height;
- Remodeling projects with changes to fire rated corridors, fire rated occupancy separations, area separation walls;
- Alteration with changes to exiting requirements;
- Tanks and vessels;
- Machinery and equipment requiring design per Section 1632 of CBC;
- Roof mounted mechanical equipment;
- Projects associated with any Hazardous occupancy;
- Projects associated with any Assembly occupancy;
- Projects associated with school and day care occupancies;
- Projects associated with hospital occupancies;
- Projects associated with Essential Facilities of any occupancy;

- Projects associated with storage occupancies;
- Projects associated with hotel, motel and apartment occupancies R-1;
- Projects with mixed occupancies;
- Remodeling projects in a high-rise (having floors over 75' in height) building;
- Lateral force resisting systems utilizing poles or piers embedded in the ground;
- Cripple walls exceeding 4' in height or adjacent to garage door openings;
- Non-exempt fences, retaining walls, landscape walls;
- Ground-mounted solar and photovoltaic systems with an installation height greater than 6 feet above grade;
- Any project deemed by Building Official to require professional design by a California Registered Engineer or Architect.

## REFERENCES

California Business & Professions Code  
California Health & Safety Code  
California Education Code  
Webster's Third New World Dictionary, Unabridged