

Why Growing Architecture Firms

— Hit a — Documentation Wall

A quick guide for architecture leaders whose success is starting to strain their system



The leaders of growing architecture firms have been noticing the change

- ✓ More projects
- ✓ More revenue
- ✓ A stronger reputation

...but less breathing room



⚠ Drawings feel rushed



⚠ Reviews pile up

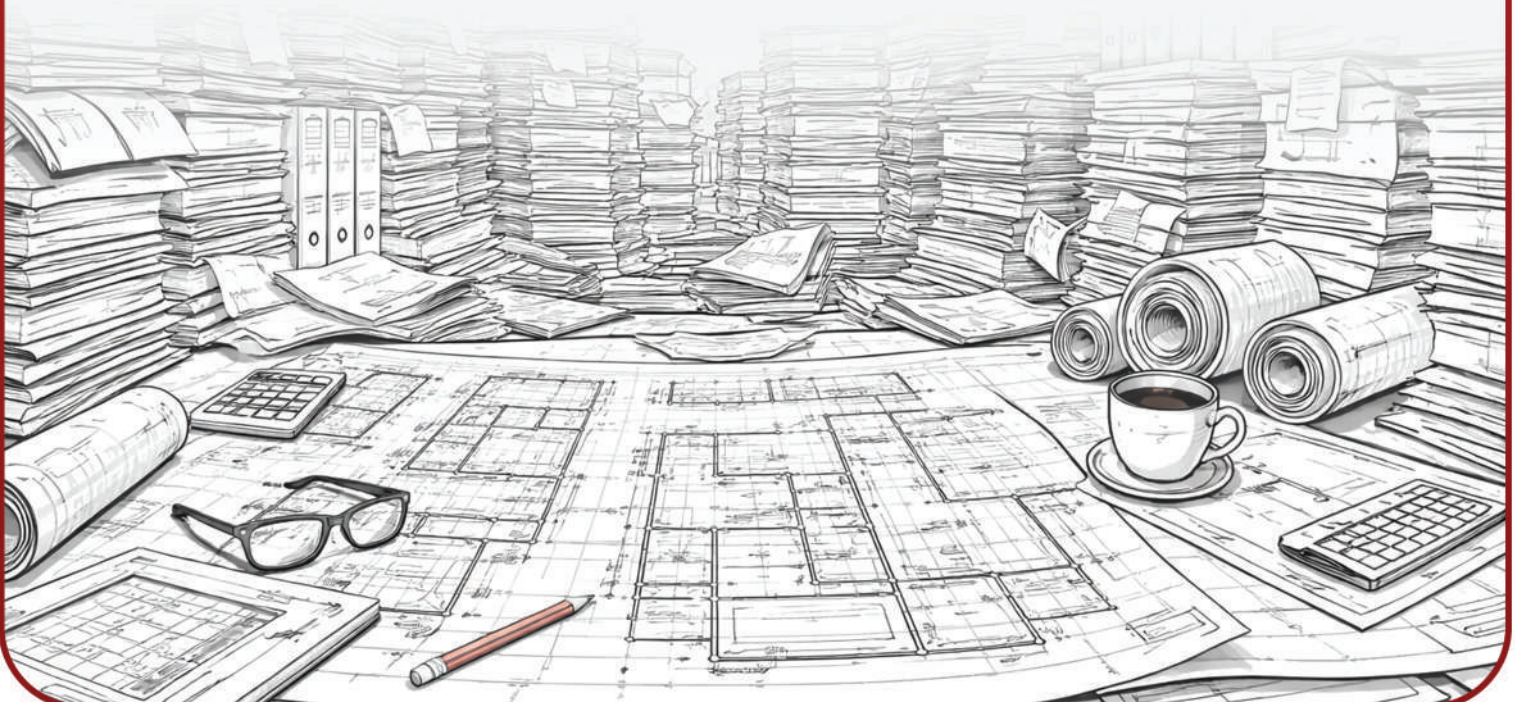


⚠ The best people of the firm become bottlenecks.

And somehow, even with more staff, the workload feels heavier, not lighter.

This isn't failure. This is the structural limit nearly every growing firm hits.

This short guide breaks down **why** it happens, **how** it shows up, and **what** it means for leaders of growing architecture firms in their next stage of growth. →



1. Why **Growth** Suddenly Feels **Heavier**

As firms scale past, something changes:

- ✓ **SD, DD, and CD** phases begin overlapping across 5–8 projects
- ✓ One or two **senior architects** become **the de facto reviewers for everything**
- ✓ **Leadership** spends more time **managing drawings** than shaping the work
- ✓ Projects that used to feel manageable **now feel fragile**

The hardest part of architecture isn't the design, it's **keeping the business running** while delivering on time", one of our clients said.



This is the beginning of the **Documentation Wall**, the point at which project volume grows faster than decision-making capacity, and senior architects become the throughput bottleneck.

The Real Issue: Decision Throughput

Production isn't the problem. Decision flow is.

- When SD and DD decisions slip into CDs, coordination gets compressed.
- When only a few people can approve work, everything waits.
- When everything waits, the whole project accelerates toward the deadline at once.

This is the moment firms start feeling busy in a way that no amount of extra effort can fix.

2. What the **Documentation Wall Really Means**

Let's be precise about what this is and what it isn't.

❌ **The Documentation Wall is Not:**

- Slow drafting staff
- Inadequate Software skills
- Poor individual productivity



✅ **The Documentation Wall** is a throughput bottleneck where decisions, not drawings, become the constraint.

What Firm Leads See	What's Actually Happening
CDs always rushed	Decisions from SD/DD bleeding into CD phase
Redlines stacking up	Review authority concentrated in 1–2 people
Quality varies by team	No enforced standards, only tribal knowledge
Overtime is constant	Brute-force effort compensating for system gaps

"The pressure comes not from being responsible, but from being responsible without the ability to make certain decisions." — Architect, industry podcast.

The Coordination Math Doesn't Work

One senior architect managing 5 projects in overlapping phases can easily absorb 35–40 hours/week of review alone.

Everything else like design leadership, QA/QC, client work, etc. gets squeezed into whatever time is left.

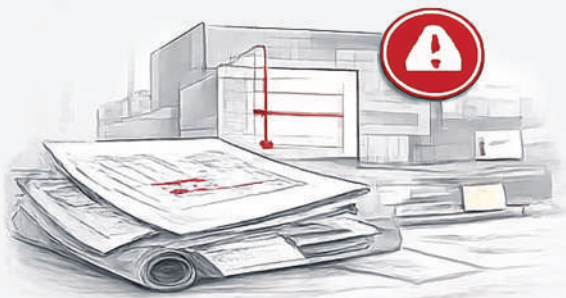
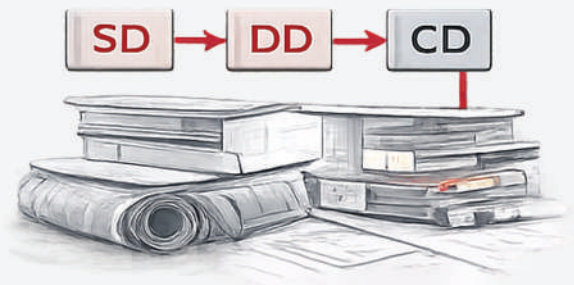
This is not an effort problem, rather capacity architecture problem.

3. Where the **Wall Shows Up First** (Operationally)

The documentation wall shows up in specific, recurring patterns.

❌ **Project Phases:**

- SD decisions leaking into DD
- DD changes forcing CD rework
- 30/60/90% reviews turning into crisis checkpoints



❌ **Coordination Workflow:**

- Redlines sitting days before action
- Engineers waiting for architectural answers
- Clash detection happening too late to matter



❌ **Documentation Quality:**

- BIM standards drifting between teams
- Permit comments climbing
- Revision cycles doubling



❌ **Team Experience:**

- "Where's the drawing set?"
- "Who talked to the MEP engineer about this?"
- "We are reinventing the wheel on every project."

If 3+ of these are happening, the growing firm has likely already hit the documentation wall.

An Architecture firm case study reveals that, "**Structurally, the firm is disorganized, relying heavily on memory and verbal instructions. There was no reliable reference point.**"

4. The **Brutal Truth:** Hiring Doesn't Fix It

When capacity feels constrained, hiring feels like the obvious answer.

It rarely works the way one expects.

How The Bottleneck Appears:

What Firm Leads Expect	What Actually Happens
New hire adds capacity	New hire requires 6–12 months to reach full productivity
Senior staff freed up	Senior staff now spending 10–15 hrs/week on review and mentoring
Quality stays consistent	Quality becomes inconsistent during ramp-up
Timeline improves	Timeline slips further while team absorbs onboarding load

What Happens Next

- Juniors ramp slowly
- Mid level staff burn out
- Seniors consider leaving
- The firm loses more capacity than it added



"We hired to fix this. By month 6, we'd hired 8 people but lost 2 experienced architects. We're now trying to mentor 8 juniors with half the senior staff we started with," — Architecture firm leader

5. The **Costs Firms Rarely Attribute to Documentation**

These costs get absorbed into margins, overtime, and missed opportunities.

How The Bottleneck Appears:



Rework: Jumps from 6–8% to 12–18% of hours



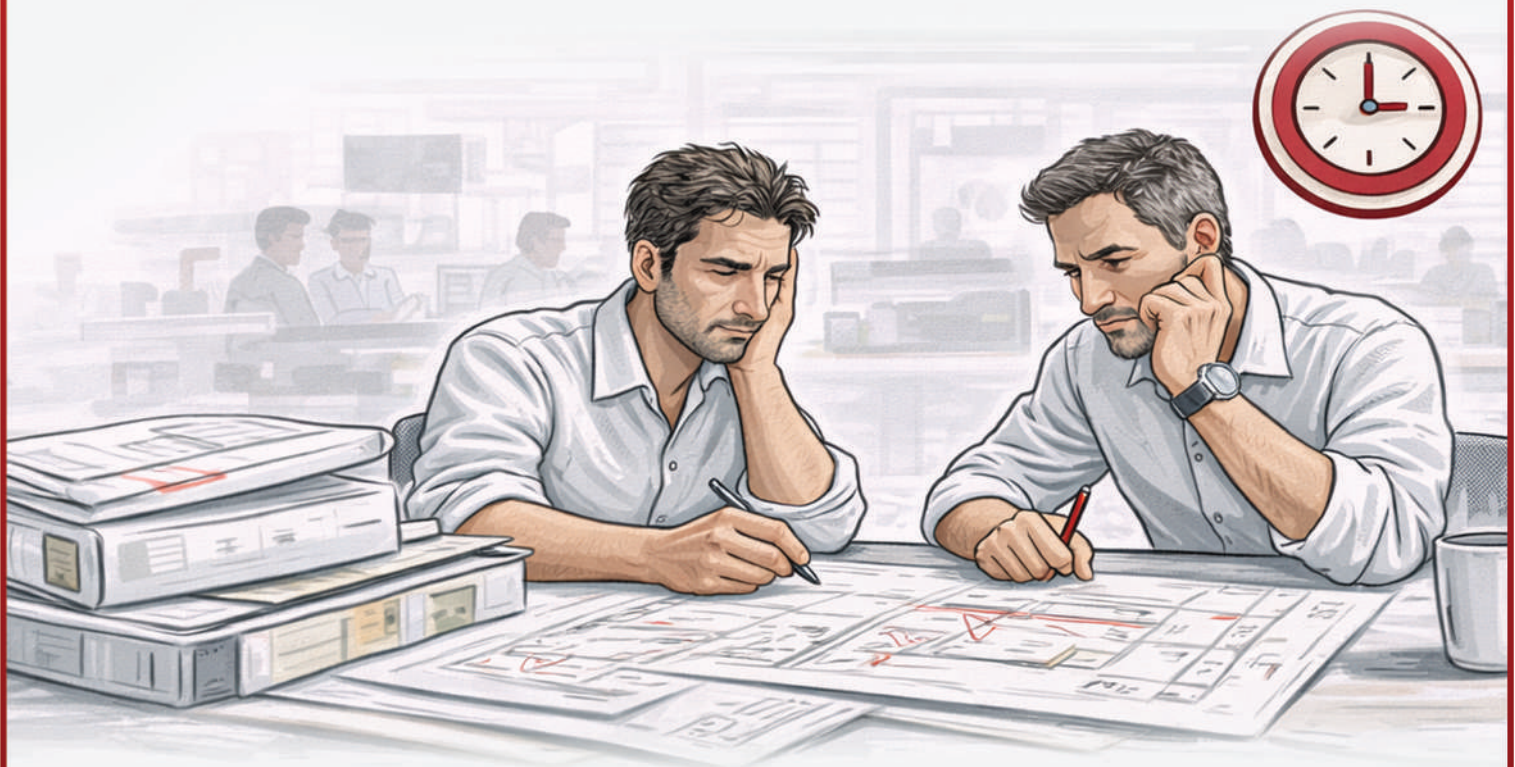
Decision fatigue: Seniors juggling 5–8 projects



Lost opportunities: Turning down 2–4 projects/year



Design leadership erosion: Top talent stuck in redlines, not design



"We can't even tell a client what it's going to cost. We're bleeding money on this one", said a Principal at a growth-stage firm

6. Why This Happens Specifically During Growth

This isn't a failure of leadership. It's a structural limit that shows up at this size for almost every firm.

How The Bottleneck Appears:





Firm Size	What Works	What Actually Happens
15–50 people	Memory-based coordination, heroics	Nothing yet, but fragile
50–75 people	Stress visible, but manageable	Coordination starts failing
75–150 people	Context living in too many places	Decision bottlenecks multiply
150+ people	Requires systems or collapse	Everything, simultaneously



The work scaled, but the system didn't. And this is not a leadership failure; it's an exposed operational limit.

7. What **Must Change** to Break the Wall

This is not about prescribing tools or recommending vendors. Instead, it outlines what firms that have successfully addressed this tend to have in common.

-  Increasing capacity without increasing senior bottlenecks
-  Integrating documentation into existing workflows
-  Achieving consistency, not velocity
-  Distributing decision authority without losing quality



The goal isn't faster CDs but a predictable flow, fewer surprises, and sustainable senior bandwidth.

8. What Firms Usually Explore Next

At this point, firms at growing stage typically do one of three things:

1. Absorb the Cost and Keep Going

This works until a key senior architect leaves, or a major project goes sideways.



2. Hire More Aggressively and Hope for Different Results

End up with a larger team that's somehow less capable than before.



3. Explore Structured, Embedded Documentation Support

A growing number of firms are shifting the question from "who do we hire?" to "how does work actually flow?"







This isn't about outsourcing. It's structurally increasing documentation and coordination capacity so senior architects can lead design, not live in redlines.

Next Step

If you are already feeling the strain, the real question is what it's costing your margins.

Let's Sanity-Check That Before It Grows

A short conversation can quickly clarify:

-  Where documentation flow is already becoming a constraint
-  How much capacity is being lost to bottlenecks
-  Whether the next hire would resolve the issue or compound it
-  What a scalable support model could realistically look like

Request a Documentation Capacity Checkup →

A **30-minute session** to quantify the bottleneck and what it's costing you today.



Schedule a Discovery Call