

## Getting Engaged - with a Design/Builder

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Mason:

What are the three best questions that a homeowner can ask when trying to choose a design/build firm and why?

Evan

Evan,

I appreciate your question... naturally, finding a good "fit" between yourself and a building / remodeling partner is the first and most important key to a successful project experience.

Take a look back at my archived post "On Selecting a Contractor" (August 2007). There, we talk about achieving a level of comfort with the prospective contractor, his reputation, people and processes. All of this applies regardless of any particular delivery system.

The search for a design / build relationship adds another level of questions toward finding the right, comfortable "fit". So, additionally, one might question and obtain satisfactory answers to a few more questions:

1) Obviously, one would want to look at the design / builder's capabilities in regards their design. Engaging design services is vastly unlike most anything else a consumer might purchase. When you buy a loaf of bread, you can see and feel what you're getting before you make the obligation to pay for it. Design services, on the other hand are like buying the proverbial "box of chocolates"... you never know exactly what you're going to get. Ask to review the design / builder's portfolio to get a feel for the level of design provided. Would you be looking for artistic "high" design, or just a basic, workable space response? Does the design / builder's portfolio indicate the level of thought and creativity that you are seeking?

2) Ask also to look at a representative set of finished construction documents (plans, specifications, structural engineering, and details). Do these appear to be very comprehensively detailed? Some design / builders use the fact that they are going to have construction oversight as an excuse to create a "thin" set of documents that is not-so-well thought-out... leaving the details to be determined later. Such an approach is likely to lead to disagreements over those missing details during the construction period, as well as inefficiency during that most critical, invasive period, time and cost overruns. Unless that's OK with you, a comprehensive set of documents is preferable.

3) Design / build is an approach that can work great for the homeowner as well as the contractor. Done properly, it's a "win-win, everyone stays happy" delivery system. Single sourcing should mean streamlined, efficient, and cost-effective. There is a non-adversarial partnering between all team members which leads to "no surprises" cost and communication (one aspect of which should be control of Change Orders) and the delivery of a product that meets everyone's expectations. Ask the design / builder - or better yet, a number of his past clients - how these benefits of the design / build system are leveraged in his experience. Obviously, if the benefits of the design / build system are not regularly recognized, then one might as well have their project done via the traditional design - bid - build manner, or find a design / builder that is good at implementing the system to everyone's advantage.

4) OK, this makes four, but it is a necessarily obvious, common and important question... price. What is the price structure for the design part, as well as the construction? On the former, know that the professional and comprehensive design work by on-staff or outsourced Architects may be as high as 15% or more of the projected cost of the project (for complex remodeling). That scale literally slides down to a few thousand for a quickie set of basic plans by a home designer or draftsman. Some design / builders give their services away for free, chalking it up to "marketing", or roll it into the cost of the job. The determination of "value" is ultimately up to the perception of the consumer BUT I can assure you that the old adage, "you get what you pay for" applies! A nicely-constructed poor design would likely be a bad investment, don't you think? As well, refer to #'s 1, 2 and 3 above.

As always my trademark, long-winded, but hope helpful!

Mason