

# DESIGN/BUILD OR ARCHITECT?

By Mike Patterson, CR

**Y**ou've hated that cramped kitchen for years. There's another child on the way. Your house would be better if only... And so the question arises: "Do I need someone to design my project, and if so, who?" The answer to that depends on a number of things—how large the project is, how complicated the project is, how much aesthetic sense you have, what your budget can support and finally, what your timetable is.

Smaller projects, like a simple bathroom remodel, may require input from a tile vendor, and visits to a plumbing or electrical showroom. Other projects may benefit from the input of an interior designer, especially when no structural changes are being made.

For larger, more involved projects—kitchens, a new master bathroom, additions, etc., there are basically two ways in which residential remodeling projects

are designed and built—working with an architect or working with a design-build firm.

## WORKING WITH AN ARCHITECT

A traditional way is for a homeowner to hire an architect, who then prepares some initial design schemes, costs them, and then assists the homeowner in either negotiating with a contractor, or in preparing a detailed set of drawings which can be given to multiple contractors to bid.

For some architects, this is where their involvement in the project ends. Others continue on, acting as the homeowner's agent; approving payment requests, answering contractor's questions. Still others help the homeowners to select finishes, paint colors, countertops, etc.

To an architect, these various levels of work are known as:

- Schematic design—where initial sketches and rough costing are done;
- Design Development—where an agreed scheme is further developed and costed;
- Construction Drawings—where final drawings and specifications are prepared;
- Bidding—where the architect distributes the plans and specifications to several contractors for the purpose of generating a firm quote from each of them; and
- Construction Administration—where the architect monitors the project, making site visits, approving payment requests, etc.

Architects vary in how they charge for these services. Rob Brennan, of Brennan & Company Architects, says that he charges an hourly rate, but gives an estimate of hours for each of the five phases described above. Greg Wiedemann, of Wiedemann Architects, generally bills on an hourly basis, with a cap on his fee of a set percentage of the construction costs. Amy Stacy, of Stacy Studio, bills on an hourly basis; sometimes with and sometimes without a cap on fees depending on how tightly the project's work is defined.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: ANTHONY WILDER DESIGN/BUILD, INC.

# DESIGN/BUILD **OR** ARCHITECT?

Most architects will meet with you initially at no cost, and will bring a portfolio of their work, showing various projects. After discussing what you want to accomplish, most architects will be able to give you a budget estimate. Upon your approval of that budget, the architect will then prepare a design agreement.

Once the design development phase is completed, the architect will usually show the plans to several builders with whom they have worked with in the past, to generate more accurate pricing. At this point, clients usually elect to either negotiate with one contractor through final pricing, or will direct the architect to finalize the plans and issue them to several contractors for bidding.

In general, fees for an architect can range anywhere from 12 percent to 20 percent of the total cost of the job. On larger projects, such as a whole-house remodel, fees would be near the lower

end, while on smaller projects, they would be toward the higher end.

## **WORKING WITH A DESIGN-BUILD FIRM**

Design-Build places the responsibility for design and construction with one company. The design/build process is typically done in two phases, the first being where the homeowner will hire the design/build firm to do an initial “feasibility study,” where a few rough design concepts are explored, and some costs assigned to them. For smaller projects the design process is often streamlined.

The second phase takes the design and costing to completion, and allows the contractor to give a fixed price to the owner to build the project. Ideally, by this time, all product selections have been made, and the plans and specifications are as complete as those generated by an architect to issue to bidders.

As with architects, there are different ways that design-build contractors charge for their services. Tabor Design-Build charges clients a fee of between 5 percent and 10 percent of expected costs, depending on the complexity of the project. Merrick Design and Build quotes its clients a firm price for the design and planning work, based on the amount of time he feels will be needed to prepare the necessary drawings. At Patterson Builders-Remodelers, clients are charged an initial fee of 1 percent, to explore a few different scenarios. After deciding on a direction, clients are then charged a fee of 10 percent to prepare the final plans. Hopkins & Porter will charge clients hourly for the first phase of design, and a percentage of construction costs for the second phase.

Design-Build companies also vary as to who actually does the designing. In some companies, the work is done by the company owner. In others, there might



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be an on-staff designer or architect. In still others, the design work is done by a subcontractor, who may or may not be a licensed architect.

### SO, WHAT NOW?

Which route you decide to take in the planning of your project is up to you. With a positive attitude and respect for each participant's unique abilities, either way can work fine. As with any comparison, there are questions you should ask yourself. Here are a few:

- What size is your project? Though some will take on small projects, in general, architects tend to work on somewhat larger projects, such as additions, or whole-house renovations. Design-build firms have a bit wider spectrum of projects that they undertake. Any successful project requires planning, and many require drawings of some sort.
- How important is design and the design process to you? Architects have a design sense that results from specialized training, and when the obvious solutions are not evident, their expertise can really shine. Being more removed from the actual construction, they are often able to explore solutions

that have a less budget-centric view of the project. These solutions are sometimes more expensive, sometimes less, but can often make for a truly successful and economical design in a creative and original way.

- How important is your budget? Fees of design-builders are generally lower than those of architects, and include the planning time necessary to fully explore cost options. Because budget is the primary driver of the design process with design-build, cost overruns happen less frequently. The design, estimating, and construction teams are constantly in touch during the design phase, keeping budget foremost in mind.
- Do you find the construction process intimidating? An architect can provide valuable advice during construction to homeowners. Remodeling your home is a big event... one that can be intimidating. Architects are good at navigating you through and acting as your agent.
- Do you value efficiency? Timing of design to construction is often quicker with a design-build firm. The bidding phase is also removed, which saves time and money. Going "back to the drawing board" happens less often.

- Who is accountable? Working with a design-build firm places responsibility for the project's success with two people—you and your builder. For some people, this represents the ideal. Others liken the ideal project to a three-legged stool, in which each leg; the architect, the builder, and the client is separate, but all are necessary, keeping everyone "honest."

### TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY IS VITAL

Regardless of which method you prefer, trust and accountability is vital. Without it, neither arrangement is likely to succeed.

Obviously, the above questions are not exhaustive, nor are the answers absolute. The bottom line is this: when each professional's expertise and contribution to the whole is recognized, valued, and appreciated, and where each is trusted, things are off to a good start.

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#### Sources for This Article:

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