

# **What is a Design-Build Contractor and What Questions Should I ask Before Hiring One?**



Advice from  
Professional  
Builders



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## **Design-Build Construction**

When planning for a large home renovation, addition or new home build, finding the right designer and builders can seem overwhelming, especially to people who don't work in the construction or real estate industry. The design-build process has gained popularity in recent years because it provides the client with a single contract and a single point person for both the design and construction phases of the project. Having both these services under one roof – so to speak – fosters collaboration, lowers costs, reduces the number of change orders and provides faster delivery.

Here we explain how the design-build process works and provide questions you should ask before hiring a design-build contractor.

## **Hiring a Design-Build Contractor**

For decades, property owners who wanted to construct a large project first went to an architect to develop the design and plans. Once finalized, the plans are used to solicit bids or estimates from builders and contractors. Both the architect and the builder work for the owner, but often have competing interests. The architect monitors the project to make sure the design is being followed and that the contractor is not cutting corners. The contractor is expected to follow the designs, but may run into problems if the designs are faulty or leave out key information. If problems arise, the designer and builder may end up pointing fingers at the other. The owner is left to manage both teams and mediate problems, both of which can be very time consuming and exhausting.

In the design-build model, these kinds of conflicts are avoided. The designer and the building team work for the same company. Together, they can create a well-designed plan and efficiently execute it using the designer's professional training and the builder's expertise.

The owner has one contract for the project and one estimated price. The project cost is less likely to go up due to preventable problems, such as change orders caused by miscommunications. Because both the design team and the building team are working together, the client can trust the design will be built to high-quality standards, executed both efficiently and in a timely manner.

When starting your search process, remember different design-build firms have different approaches. Some are headed by a licensed architect that produces innovative and stylish work. Others are a joint effort between trained designer and experienced builder who have teamed up because they work well together. Others still are more builder-focused, using standard designs for projects

that are well proven, but may lack originality. Whichever kind of design-build firm you speak with, think of them as one company performing two separate functions – create a list of questions you would ask of an architect or designer and create a different list you would ask of a builder. And of course, check references.

On the design side, does the firm create projects that match your style? Review its portfolio and speak with people who have worked with the firm before. How does the firm view the design process? How does it work with clients throughout the project and will there be additional fees for changes in design?

On the construction side, do a similar check of past projects and references as you would for the design side. When talking to past clients, ask if the project came in on time and on budget. Was the craftsmanship of high quality? Were the materials used the same quality as discussed up front? Were the builders courteous of your property when on site, and in general, how pleased are they with the finished project?

## Whittling down the choices

Once you've found one or two firms that meet your quality and pricing standards, schedule a consultation with them. When it comes to residential projects, we at Dube Plus like to conduct an in-home design consultation with our clients. This gives us a better understanding of the project site, as well as the client's dreams for the home. It also helps us uncover potential problems and propose optional design ideas that the homeowner may not have considered.

Armed with information from the home and a clear vision from the clients, we are able to draw up an agreement that includes a scope of work and proposal.

Homeowners looking to renovate should consider hosting an in-home consultation before signing a contract. This consultation allows clients to ask the design-build firm tough questions in the comfort of their own home. You will want to ask the following questions of the firm at this point, if you haven't done so already:

- What is your fee structure and what is your required deposit?
- How long will our project take?
- How often will you communicate with us about the status of the project and any setbacks?
- How much "customizing" can be done versus standard features?
- Can appliances be up- or down-graded?
- What local permits or building permit fees are

required?

- What are the property taxes in the town or will the renovation affect my property taxes?
- Do you offer a warranty program?
- Do you have a financing plan available?

Once your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, the design-build team should come back to you with a proposal that includes the scope of work and initial design draft. At this stage, a design-build firm typically asks for a contract to continue any work on the project. This contract should include cost, timeline for completion, change of order rules, proof of insurance and bond coverage, and rules for the job site and material maintenance.





The first step is the design phase. The firm will take additional measurements, select products, draft design drawings, and review zoning and deed restrictions. During this phase, the design-build firm should be in constant communication, sharing their plans and incorporating your comments as they revise and finalize. Before moving on to the construction phase, finalized costs should be submitted to you for review.

Before construction begins, ask for a pre-construction conference to go over all the details of the construction process, from schedule and location of dumpsters to the hours of operation and means of communication with client. Make sure all permits are secured and materials have arrived or were ordered.

In the last week or two, ask for a walk-through of the project. Make sure the materials and quality of work meet the contract specs. If there is a question or change request, it should be done now. This is also the time to clarify the finishing touches and clean up expected of the firm.

As you can see, completing a major renovation project requires a lot of moving parts and constant attention to detail. By employing a design-build firm for your project, it lessens the stress of dealing with a separate designer and builder, while ensuring your vision is clear throughout the process.

# Getting to work!

Dube Plus has experts available to discuss your new home or remodel.

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