



What is Design/Build?

By Patrick G. Beckner

When talking with contractors and architects they often state that they are design/build architects or contractors. Just what are they saying? The problem is that many of them are not saying the same thing. The term has therefore become overused and misunderstood.

In the traditional building process the architect fully designs the project in great detail. They often specify the exact light fixtures, door hardware, exact carpet, etc. These plans are then given to several contractors who bid for the job based on the exact specifications given by the architect. This process has several problems. The contractor is much more knowledgeable about current material and labor costs that exist in that market. The contractor may also be able to purchase certain materials from their suppliers at lower costs than those specified. As a result the bids received often reflect changes in the specifications. Thus the owner/developer does not get parallel bids. They end up comparing apples and oranges. This process tends to pit the architect against the contractor. This can cause significant confusion and results in delays.

In the design/build process the architect and contractor are chosen before the design process begins. They work together with the owner/developer as a team. The plans develop taking both architectural issues and the abilities and resources of the contractor into account. The plans are in less detail since the contractor works with the owner and architect during construction to decide on final materials. This greatly reduces construction time since design and construction overlap. It should also greatly reduce the cost for architectural design since the depth of detail is reduced.

The design/build process is successful because the architect and contractor are highly experienced and knowledgeable. They must also agree to work together and share ideas and concerns. When they do the result is shorten construction time and reduced cost. Although they must be cooperative they also serve as a check-and-balance for each other. Design decisions are made with cost in mind. Construction decisions must have the approval of the architect.

Unfortunately, the term design/build has often been used to mean that the architect and the contractor work for the same company. When the process became popular many construction companies simply hired an in-house architect or an architectural firm entered the construction field. This did not provide the same service to the owner/developer. The check-and-balance process was reduced if not lost. Either the architectural or construction side became the dominant partner. Further, the depth of experience and knowledge was reduced by not having two equal partners.

Beckner & Associates, Inc. believes strongly in the design/build process. In choosing the team members we only select contractors who have experience in design/build. We require them to be active during the entire design process and provide initial cost estimates that are as accurate as possible as soon as possible in the process. We further require them to work under a cost-plus contract based upon a guaranteed

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maximum price. The decision to proceed with construction can only be made with a firm commitment from the contractor. Many contractors state that they are design/build firms but do not want to dedicate the time during the design phase. They want to wait until the building is fully designed to give a hard price. They are not design/build contractors. They are traditional builders who will also always complain that the design specifications were not adequate.

We also choose architects who are experienced in design/build. They realize that the time required of them in a design/build project is greatly reduced and will therefore reduce their fees commensurately. They are willing to discuss ideas and suggestions given by the contractor in light of the owner/developer's goals and expectations.

The design/build process is clearly the best process for most owners. It should result in reduced design and construction time as well as reduced costs. Beckner & Associates, Inc. can greatly facilitate this process. Through our Construction Consulting process we serve as the quarterback in the process. We bring our experience to the process and assist in choosing and coordinating the architect and contractor.