

Design/Build for Remodelers: One Company's Approach

Six years ago, we realized that in order to thrive in the very competitive "Gold Coast" region of Connecticut, we needed to do something different. Because we had already established a reputation for service and quality, it made sense for us to build on that. We felt that a design-build approach would expand our services to the customer, and offer us a way to provide flexibility, while controlling quality and expenses. Since then, we have grown from a small family-run business to a \$1 million-plus company. We've also learned a great deal about the benefits (and difficulties) of this approach. Among other things, it requires new billing, scheduling, and management procedures.

How We Got Started

Before we incorporated, we had a great deal of involvement with architects. They knew the design of a job inside and out—that's why we hired them. But they often seemed unable to have a job completed on time and within budget. Generally, they had little idea of the true cost of the project until they bid everything out. And often they created innovative designs that turned out to be impractical to build and in need of expensive, budget-busting modifications. As builders we would catch all the customer's heat, while we waited for the architect to come survey the situation and find a remedy. This would often take days, much to the frustration of the homeowners and ourselves.

In addition, whether practical or not, blueprints and designs can be misinterpreted. The architect designs his plans to be read one way, while the customer may have something else in mind. Meanwhile the remodeler may interpret the plans yet another way and builds as such.

Our decision to offer design services and avoid these problems led me to take courses, in architectural design, drafting, and interior design at local colleges.

Slowly, we incorporated what I was learning in many of our smaller assignments, such as porches, dormers, and great rooms. I would consult with my instructors, many of whom were licensed architects, who would review my drawings and suggest modifications. Eventually, I didn't have to depend on my instructors' critiques and we were on our way to becoming design-builders.

At first, I combined design responsibilities with production. My brother, Gregory, who is a tremendous help in evaluating the practical application of a design, became the production supervisor. As a family-run business, this worked well.

But as our company matured and grew larger, so did our responsibilities. We found it necessary to delegate duties to other professionals outside the family circle. Again, because of our emphasis on service and quality, it was very important for us to recruit someone who really cared about home remodeling as an art form. Most young graduates of design and architecture schools concentrate on landing a position with a firm that has many commercial and industrial concerns. But we were lucky to find a young and creative architect interested in applying his talent to the area of home remodeling. At this point, we had truly made the transition to a design-build firm.

How It Works

Although every customer is different, and some are more interested in the design, while others are more inter-

ested in cost, we generally proceed as follows:

Our first step is to meet with a customer. Here we function less as remodelers or designers and more as interpreters. During this "feeling-out" stage we listen very closely to the client as he talks about the things most important to him—his home and family. In this consultation we learn about the family's personality, habits, and lifestyle. We also find out if the potential client is a potential heartache to us.

Often the client will come equipped with magazine clippings to give us an idea of what they want. Client's requests can be pretty zany. We had one client that requested that the skylight in a new addition be located so that the moonlight would reflect on a certain spot. The fact that the moon isn't always in the same place didn't seem to matter—until the job was done and the moon wasn't in the right place that week. We ended up moving the skylight.

But generally we try to steer the customer into reasonable expectations. We supply the customer with our in-house design booklet "How To Get The Most Out Of Remodeling Your House," which includes checklists, and suggestions to help them formalize their ideas. We also have them complete a questionnaire (see Figure 1) to help them clarify their objectives. It covers everything from roofing, flooring, and window treatments to some personal questions regarding room traffic.

The form is titled "Home Builders Design and Planning Guide" and includes sections for "Client Information", "Project Information", and "Design Preferences". It contains numerous checkboxes and lines for text entry, covering topics like "Window Treatments", "Flooring", "Roofing", and "Decorative Elements".

Figure 1. Early on, a remodeler should clarify the client's objectives. Bolken Builders uses a form which covers items such as window treatments, flooring, and roofing, as well as lighting, and decorative elements.

After the consultation we prepare a "ballpark" estimate of the project and a preliminary cost of the plans themselves. Once we get a verbal go-ahead to draw up plans, Brian Matte, the firm's architectural designer, visits the site and takes a number of photos. He also records detailed measurements of the structure and the area to be remodeled.

We then work up preliminary plans—sometimes producing two to three different design alternatives, which we present to the client. If he likes what he sees, we go over the specifics involved in our design-build proposal (see Figure 2). The proposal makes clear to the client what he or she will be receiving: foundation plans, floorplans, elevations, structural sections, and detailed schematics if necessary. Kitchens and bathrooms often require such detail. The proposal will

also provide a budget range for the construction based on these plans.

It is at this point that we ask for full payment for the design aspect of the remodeling. We also aim for a complete understanding of the client's goals. This is a time for keen listening to the client. His feedback will at this point be instrumental in generating a set of plans that should satisfy his objectives. Since no actual construction has taken place yet, careful attention to the client's message can eliminate costly delays and mistakes. Listen hard and ask the right questions. If we plan to use any non-standard materials that might affect the total cost (but increase the quality), it's at this point that we explain why. Hopefully they understand and approve.

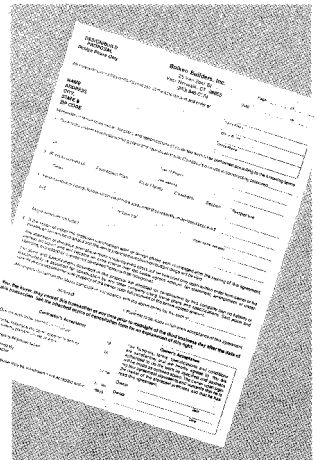


Figure 2. The design-build proposal makes very clear what kinds of plans the customer can expect: foundation, floor, elevation, perspective, and sections if necessary. It also provides a budget range for the proposed project.

After a couple of weeks, usually after some additional phone consultation with the client, we produce final plans and drawings that incorporate the client's suggestions. We then present these to the client. If the client is happy with the presentation, then this is the final rendering. There are times, however, where additional fine-tuning may be needed. Again, time and patience are the operative watchwords here. Don't forget, this isn't just one client we are working with. We're working on the best form of marketing there is—the satisfied customer's testimonial.

Once they sign off on the plans we get into the production phase of the project.

Billing for Design

Unlike architects we don't charge a fee based on a percentage of the estimated final project. Our fee structure is based on the project's complexity. Some remodeling projects are very simple to design, and we feel these should be priced accordingly.

Although all clients have the option of taking the design out to bid once they have paid for the design, most (85 percent) of our design customers have us do the remodeling. We find that the willingness to pay a design fee is evidence of a serious commitment to the project. The fee also takes care of those who would have us design for free and walk away to another builder who might build more cheaply. However, we do refund the design fee upon the first scheduled payment for the actual construction for the project.

Benefits of Design-Build

A full-fledged design-build team can

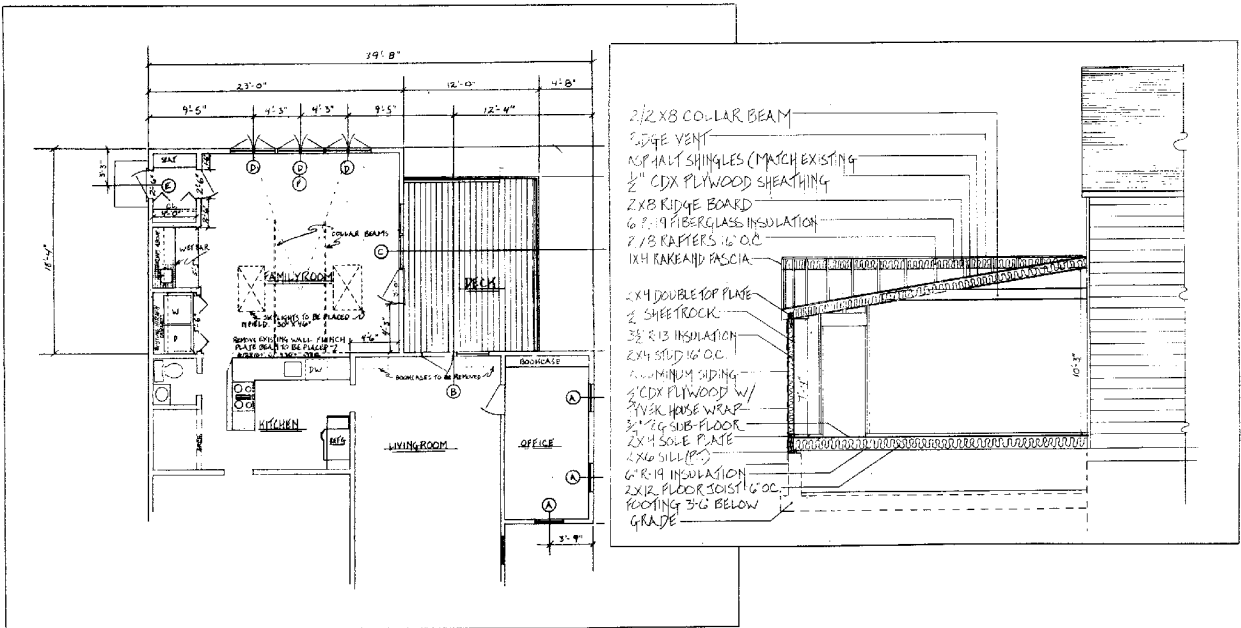
by Matthew DeTroy

A unified approach marries
design creativity with
controlled costs

Lacroix House



Before: After the first meeting with the client, Bolken Builders' designer-in-residence visits the site, and takes a Polaroid snapshot.



Elevations and floorplans are drawn back at the office. In this case, a section of the family room was drawn as well.



After: In this project, the client wanted to add a family room and deck, and enhance the kitchen. The renovated kitchen is completely open to the family room, to accommodate the client's desire to cook and supervise three young children. A new mudroom off the kitchen includes a built-in bench seat to store the kids' muddy shoes in winter. The family's lifestyle was an important factor in the new design.

The Return of the Master Builder

Long before the rise of the architect, complex and beautiful buildings somehow got designed and built. The person in charge was the Master Builder, who was the contractor, engineer, architect, crafts-person, and builder, all-in-one. He either generated his own designs, or depended on pattern books and house manuals. These contained many of the home building and design trade secrets that have been passed down for generations. In profusely illustrated books like Asher Benjamin's *The Practical House Carpenter* and Minard Lafever's *Beauties of Modern Architecture*, both the Master Builder and his client could find every detail needed to produce a house in a stylish, contemporary manner. All aspects such as finishes and ornamentation were included.

Most older New England homes are classic examples of design-build. It wasn't until the early 1800s that architects began to make their debut on the American scene, and it wasn't until the late 1800s that the profession achieved legitimacy. During this time, Americans such as Thomas Jefferson who had traveled to Europe and educated there, returned to change the face of building design. They reworked many pattern books, adding Latin and Greek text, and filled the books with classical allusions and drawings of fine European architecture. The local master builder, or "vernacular builder," could no longer use the design books with any ease.

The term "vernacular builder" has been attributed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, in 1857, to mean "an unaffected...way of building, com-

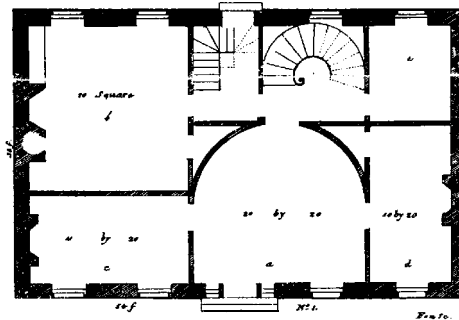
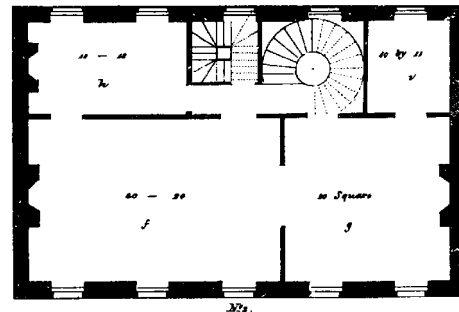
parable to the speech of a common man who has never left his region, and speaks the local accent without affectation, without pretense of a 'better' class accent."

So the common builder was shut out from many of his basic references. In addition, new publications were singing the praises of the professional architect. Popular magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* (a modern-day pattern book), continually reinforced its claim that an architect had something to offer that a builder could not. According to this and other design sources, architects offered more convenience, more beauty, better construction, than a master builder could, and hiring an architect would be able to save them money in the long run. In 1887, one admirer praised architects as "artists" who wrote "frozen music."

Although this attitude still prevails in *Better Homes...*, *Architectural Digest*, and *House Beautiful*, design-build is making a comeback. And while design-build regains credibility, horror stories such as those depicted in Tracey Kidder's *House* of architect-related delays and cost overruns are being shared with the public. The pendulum is swinging.

The condescension that sometimes exists in architectural trade journals towards builders and remodelers are remnants of a snobbery from an era gone by. Design-build and the master builder concept for home building and remodeling can be cost-effective, and provide high quality in the design and execution of a project.—MDT

Before the use of architects became popular in the late 1800s, books such as Asher Benjamin's American Builder's Companion provided builders with designs and construction details. Reprinted by Dover Publications in 1969, the "pattern" book includes this plan and elevation for a town house. According to the text the "basement story floor" will be fifty-four by thirty-five feet, and will include a "hall, or principal entrance; kitchen, twenty feet square; an office, eleven by twenty feet; and a library, ten by twenty feet."



provide the client with virtually all the services generally accorded to an architect during the design phase, such as developing the outlines, schematics, preliminary drawings, and blueprints.

There are several immediate benefits that a design-build team has over the use of a separate architect and contractor for home remodeling. Some of these advantages are:

- **Control.** A design-build team supervises the whole remodeling job. The issue of having to hire, schedule, and interact with a horde of subcontractors is left to the builder or remodeler. Over the years, we've learned which subcontractors we can trust to turn out various phases of the remodeling project on time, on budget, and on a consistent basis.
- **Quality.** As builders we are on-site from design to finish—to ensure adherence to plans, codes, and quality workmanship in construction.
- **Flexibility.** Design-builders don't seem to get in the type of bureaucratic logjams that the "traditional" approach to high-end home remodeling often results in. The design-builder can alter plans during the construction without having to consult another professional. Such a consultation normally means added downtime.
- **Savings.** In addition to downtime, additional architectural consultations cost money. But even if additional consultations are not required, architectural fees can eat up a remodeling budget. Fees for architects in Fairfield County vary from 8 to 15 percent of the building costs, but can be higher. Our design process is billed at a much lower rate—usually less than five percent. If the design fee is refunded, as it is for most of our clients, the cost of the design process is covered under overhead.

"Disadvantages" of Design-Build

Perhaps the biggest difficulty of being a design-builder in the remodeling field is that the approach is unfamiliar to most consumers. Generally consumer magazines play down the clear advantages of the design-build approach and treat the designs offered by a design-builder as pedestrian. If the design-build service is not understood by the customer, he will not pay for it. So the biggest challenge is educating the consumer about the design-build idea.

A secondary problem lies in the standards that we have set for ourselves. As design-builders, we have more than just our reputation for quality workmanship at stake, we now have to maintain a standard for design excellence as well.

Without a doubt, every remodeling project is an opportunity to improve the existing home. A good design will carefully harmonize an addition with the original house and create a well-proportioned and hopefully, better-looking house.

Therefore, we like to discourage clients from cutting corners for the sake of economics when the result detracts from the house architecturally. A poorly designed addition is never a wise investment and should always be avoided.

We believe that the design-build approach, an approach that harkens back to the long gone days of the Master Builder (see sidebar), is a viable solution for most remodeling projects. But the burden of proof lies with the designer-builder whose challenge is to design and build in ways that enhance the home—most families' largest investment. ■

Smith House



In this case, it was critical to blend the addition with the original structure. The clients did not want passers-by to notice the new "mother-in-law" apartment. The drawings and photos show how well this was accomplished by matching existing rooflines, and mirroring the existing building forms.



Matthew DeTroy is president and director of Bolken Builders, Inc., a design-build team with over six years experience in Fairfield County, Connecticut, and is interested in hearing from other design-build firms located in the New England region. Write to him at Bolken Builders, 25 Van Zant St., East Norwalk, CT 06854, or call 203/846-0174.