

BY MELANIE HODGDON

## Unholy Trinity

**One of my clients** called recently to share a frustrating experience involving a customer and an architect, and I was reminded why many companies are moving to a design/build model. The scene sounded much like stories I've heard from other contractors; in this instance, my client (let's call her Jane) had actually introduced her customer to the architect, who was a relative newcomer to the area and someone Jane's company had not yet done business with.

Her tale is a tragedy in three acts.

### ACT I

Initial conversation about general scope of work and budget range takes place.

- Customer is excited that her vision seems doable.
- Jane is excited about the project, which will nicely fill her schedule.
- Architect is not yet in the picture.

### ACT II

Jane, the customer, and the architect meet.

- Architect begins to offer ideas, options, and recommendations (without tying these to costs).
- Customer gets excited and emotionally invested in the new ideas (without realizing the effect on the budget).
- Jane sees where things are headed and

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attempts to slow the process down by bringing up the unpleasant reality that the new stuff would increase the cost of the project, but she feels like she is raining on both the customer's and the architect's parades.

### ACT III

The customer angrily pulls the plug on the project.

- Customer feels betrayed when she realizes that she can't afford what she's now emotionally invested in, and she blames Jane for bursting her bubble.
- Architect is frustrated that the project won't be produced but at least walks away with a fee.
- Jane is frustrated and disappointed that her relationship with the customer has gone south and that she's lost the job (which had already been put in the schedule), and wonders what she could have done to better manage the customer's expectations.

### THREE DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES

So what happened? Let's look at what each party is hoping to get out of the experience.

**Customer.** The customer is trying to have her dream realized at the lowest possible cost. She hopes to get everything she wants (and more!) for a budget figure based on wishing.

Customers are highly susceptible to ideas offered by "experts" like architects and designers and can't be expected to know whether or to what degree changes will increase the budget. They don't have a clue about what things cost outside of what they may see on HGTV. To them, moving an already-framed window 4 inches to the right seems as simple as swapping out an ivory toilet for a white one. No biggie, right?

**Architect.** The architect is trying not only to meet the customer's stated requirements, but also to add flair, style, utility, and (often) evidence of his or her personal

involvement in the project. Architects are artists and their ability to see opportunities can make a ho-hum project into something special.

Is it their job to talk about specific costs when introducing new concepts and additions? Not really. Many haven't a clue about what things cost. In fact, based on anecdotal accounts from my clients, I've concluded that any cost quotes from architects to customers are more in the line of, "Well, they should certainly be able to do this for \$x per square foot," using numbers that are shot from the hip and that only succeed at setting the customer's expectations.

**Contractor.** The contractor wants to produce the job to meet the customer's stated requirements while also meeting code, using durable and reliable materials, making a target profit on the job, and fitting it nicely into the schedule. Is it the contractor's job to manage the customer's expectations while educating them about cost considerations? Absolutely. Sad but true, there's nobody else whose objectives include keeping everybody abreast of reality.

### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Architects cannot be permitted to align themselves with the customer to the detriment of the contractor. That means you, the contractor, need to partner with your architects and train them to present the concept of "there's no free lunch" when offering new plans to customers—especially when you're not present in the meeting. This relieves you from being the bubble-bursting spoilsport and wet blanket. After all, it's hard enough to tell your customers how much that turret will cost without also being the one to break it to them that turrets add cost.

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