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So exciting. You've been clipping images of your fantasy bathroom, living room or kitchen and sticking them on your fridge. Or perhaps you built a folder of a hundred gorgeous images on Houzz or Pinterest. You're ready to create your dream home. Now how do you move forward?

Unlike going to the doctor or getting your car repaired, most of us only work with an architect, interior designer or home builder once or twice in our life. Which means that we are going into a major legal, financial and creative relationship with few reference points as to what is normal for the industry and smart for ourselves. Here are some quick tips to help guide your way:



ASK THE ARCHITECT

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● UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF CONSTRUCTION.

The three priorities on any project are cost, schedule and quality—on a good day you might get two. Don't try to re-invent or outsmart the normal process. Don't micro-manage. Trust your team.

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HOW TO PICK & WORK WITH YOUR DESIGN PROFESSIONAL

● BELIEVE THE PROS WHEN THEY TALK TO YOU ABOUT COST AND SCHEDULE.

Every single client I have ever had wants 30% more house than they want to pay for. Don't rely on prices or schedules you hear on an HGTV show. In reality, construction costs vary dramatically from place to place (San Fran is three times the cost of building in Atlanta or Houston). Trust the price ranges that your architect, interior designer and builder tell you. Make sure that when you ask your professional to give you a range that they are including the total project cost (design and engineering fees, permits, site work and utilities, contingency, etc.); professionals will sometimes leave out costs that are outside of their normal scope of work (ex. the builder may not include permits or design fees).

● DON'T EXPECT PERFECTION.

Understand that these people are human too and that there has never been a perfectly executed project. It's art, not science. And no one has done this exact project before. I tell every client, "I guarantee that I will personally screw up on your project." That shocks a lot of folks, but it's important to realize that every project will have three major things and five minor things go wrong. The numbers are debatable, but the idea is real. If you go in with this attitude, then when you inevitably hit one of these bumps, you'll be able to take it in stride. Include contingencies in your budget and schedule. You will use them.

- Not all projects need an architect. If you're just redoing a bathroom, an interior designer is probably fine. On the flip side, if you are doing an entire house, you need an architect. Find out if they offer full interior design services; some do, some don't.
- Choose someone who is the right scale for your project. A big firm with an impressive portfolio might assign smaller than their norm. When interviewing them, ask who will actually be doing the work; meet them and make sure that you like the way they communicate.
- Find someone who is good at listening to you. One of the most challenging aspects of our job is knowing how much to push back (offering our own opinion as artists and technicians), and how much to just do what our client asks. Let your design professional know what you want in that regard, and give them feedback along the way so they can fine-tune the process for you.
- Make sure you are clear on the contract terms. Designers can work on a fixed fee, hourly or percentage of construction cost basis. If the scope of the project is uncertain at the start, then the latter two are best. The downside of those methods is that there is no limit to the total fee charged, and scope (and fee) creep is the source of most project conflicts.
- Before signing on, make sure you ask a few of their prior clients how the process went, and ask the designer if you can visit some of their projects in person.
- Know that some designers have a signature style, and some let you dictate the style. Ask them which kind they are.
- Make sure you understand who will be creating the "specifications" (the product selections) on your project. It can be the designer, the builder or you, but it's a major and necessary portion of the work, and sometimes it falls between the cracks.
- Lastly and very importantly, sustainable design has become part of the definition of "good design." Ask them how they would incorporate "green building" into your project in order to save you money on utilities, support your health through good indoor air quality and protect the larger environment in general.

» HOW TO PICK & WORK WITH A BUILDER

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Much of the above advice on picking a designer applies similarly here. I believe it's usually best to hire the designer first, as they will often be able to recommend builders. That said, bring in the builder early in the design process, as they are the most qualified to help you predict and control costs. Sometimes they will charge for these "pre-construction services," as you often won't sign the actual construction contract until after all the design work is completed and the builder gives you a formal bid. Sometimes they will credit you back some or all of the pre-con fees when you sign the construction contract. Alternatively, your designer can put the project out for competitive bid to multiple builders, and then help you evaluate the bids (the lowest price isn't always the best choice).

Ideally, your designer and builder will give you a balanced perspective so that you can make well-informed choices. It's very helpful to have a design and construction team that has worked together before, as they understand what the other needs in order to be successful.



ASK THE
ARCHITECT

» WHO'S THE BOSS?

The most important person on your construction team is your "site supervisor." This is the person who is on site every day managing all of the work that is going on. Meet them during the interview process. They are about to become your best friend.

» CONTRACTS.

There are several common ways to work together. Fixed fee (aka "stipulated sum"), cost-plus (aka "time & materials"), pass-thru (of costs) with a set management fee or guaranteed maximum price (which is just T&M with a cap). All are acceptable. If the scope of work is clearly described in the construction documents (drawings and specs), then fixed fee is usually your safest bet. In all cases, make sure the section around "change orders" is clearly spelled out, and ask the builder to give you examples of how that would work, as it's a common area of miscommunication. Lastly, if your project costs more than \$100K, I recommend having a lawyer review the contract and the warranty prior to signing.

» PAYMENT.

The most common conflict you are likely to have happen is at the end of the project, when the builder runs out of fee, but still has some work to do. Suddenly they no longer show up to finish the work. One common way to prevent this is to hold back a 10% "retainage" of the total contract amount, which you don't pay until the "punch list" of incomplete items is done to your satisfaction and the house is turned over to you.