



Viewpoint



By Dick Zeidler
OCA Chair, 1988

Why I like design build

My passion for the construction industry sometimes leads me to repeat myself. You could call it nagging. The dictionary defines nagging as "caus[ing] annoyance by repetition." With fifty years' experience in this industry, I claim rights to nag and here goes.

My favorite form of construction is design build. It's a team sport and I like team sports. In a design-build environment, you work as a team with architects and engineers—of course that's common with most projects, but the key difference in design build is that the constructors are the team leaders. 'The buck,' as they say, 'stops here'.

A successful design builder must have a developed sense of the architect's profession—which is not something most contractors can claim. Basic design work requires an in-depth knowledge of all applicable building-code rules, of course, and architects must balance an owner's functional requirements with budget and cost restraints. Last, but certainly not least, architects are expected to produce a unique piece of building art that will enhance the owner's image.

All of this means that design builders must balance not only the cost of work with project schedule and construction method, but also the responsibility of providing guidance to the design team in order to achieve maximum value for money. To be really good at this type of contract, the design builder must have a sense of good design and construction methods, and be a team leader. Not surprisingly, this combination of skills is not always easy to find.

Selecting an architectural partner requires care. Architects come in four talent groups. One is the true artist capable of creating beauty and function. One is the businessman who knows all the right people and belongs to the best clubs. One knows the building code like the back of his hand. And the last one can put together all the parts of the project and make them fit. You may find any two of these attributes in a single person, but seldom does one person have all four. With that in mind, it's important to know

who's who and make sure you link up with the right partner. Details can be a major cost in construction and it's sometimes necessary that your architect be prepared to compromise the perfect design to achieve something that looks good, functions well and doesn't add unnecessary cost.

One of the keys to a successful design-build project is communication. The team—including the owner—should meet frequently, both in the period leading up to site-plan approval and in the period when the design is being fully developed. These meetings are key to ensuring that everyone understands what is being built and the costs associated with the design.

It's my opinion that a good design builder has an obligation to properly and completely understand the owner's building requirements. If the client's business involves use of hazardous material or heavy weights, for example, it's incumbent upon the design builder to understand these requirements, or to retain the advice of someone who does. Nothing slows down a construction schedule like changes. All changes affect your bottom line and add cost, but few are worse than those that occur when the owner finds something missing from the finished product.

One final note on the subject of changes: make sure your client understands the contingency sum built into your budget and how it should be used. Make sure you

both agree to a clear distinction between changes arising as a result of necessary additions to achieve the original design and changes that are additions to the original intent.

Consider these recommendations as a guide to most design-build projects. There are, of course, many different ways in which an owner can call a design-build project. Some will prepare near-complete drawings and specification documents and call for a firm price only. In other cases, proposals are called just for the fee or the owner seeks pre-qualifications.

No matter the method, these recommendations are a good guide.

To be really good at design build, contractors must have a sense of good design and construction methods, and be a team leader — a combination of skills that's not always easy to find.
