

## Three Models for Design-Build

**N**o one in the remodeling world is unaware of the term “design-build.” And for the most part, when asked what design-build is, no one has trouble answering the question.

That's not to say everyone agrees on how design-build works. In fact, when you drill down into the specifics of the product or service, it can get confusing. Some see design-build as a credential; others see it as a process; and still others see it as a marketing strategy and a way to control the remodeling process.

Design-build was the subject of my thesis in architecture school in the '70s. This doesn't make me an expert, but it does mean I have been thinking about the subject for many years. I argued with my professors that design-build would be the future in residential design and construction, and that it would be a viable way to do great work. They were skeptical. So were contractors. In 1982, when I delivered my first industry seminar on design-build to a group of remodelers, many said that it was impossible to ask a homeowner up-front for design fees or a deposit. Today, what seemed impossible 30 years ago is standard practice for a growing number of remodeling companies.

### THREE MODELS

That said, I bring up this bit of history because many different design-build models have emerged. For every 10 professional design-build businesses there are eight different concepts about what works best. Here are a few of the basic models.

**Remodelers that offer design services.** In this case, the design can be performed in-house or in collaboration with independent designers or architects. One motivation is to differentiate the company by offering expanded services, but the main goal is to control the design process, which allows for increased efficiency, predictability, and profitability.

**Design firms that build.** This model is practiced by both architects and designers, also as a business differentiator, but it is motivated

either by profit or by the client's desire for a one-stop shop. In this case, design-build services can include construction management or actually subcontracting to build the projects. Typically, the firm still does design work for a fee, but will have a few projects that it handles A-to-Z. The benefit here is consistent quality.

**The pure design-build firm.** In this model, design and construction are truly integrated; like offense and defense on a football team, both are equally important to the success of the project and the client experience.

Most often, a company taking this approach will have both design and construction competence in-house because it's important to having architectural or professional design credentials as well as professional craft and production knowledge.

Also important is the fact that this type of firm is not interested in design-only or construction-only projects. This means companies that practice this model in its purist form will not bid on plans prepared by others, even though they have the ability to build the project. Conversely, they do not design for other contractors who build their work. Design fees are positioned to motivate the client to continue into a construction contract, and on the production side, the construction documents, while adequate to build from, are not as detailed because of the in-house craftsmen.

### SELLING & PRODUCING DESIGN-BUILD

Variation exists here as well. Some practitioners believe in a designer who sells, while others

believe that it is more effective to use a salesperson backed up by a designer in the office who produces conceptual drawings and preliminary plans. On the production side, some companies use project managers who take on many projects at once, while others use lead carpenters who manage and produce one project at a time.



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### TIPS FOR DESIGN-BUILD SUCCESS

While there is no single “best” approach, here are a few tips that will help you succeed with design-build:

- Identify what you do best. Stick with your ideal project size and client demographics.
- Write down your processes in detail, then follow them consistently—no exceptions.
- Make sure that the whole team understands the model.
- Regularly reevaluate to identify opportunities for improvement.

Design-build is here to stay. Despite the different approaches, design-build can consistently provide clients with a great product, while helping a remodeling business grow in a predictable way.

One reason for this diversity is that most of these design-build businesses are a product of evolution, not of design. **PR**

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