



Project Types

by Gordon F. Tully

Sometimes it seems that every custom house or renovation has a unique working relationship between client, designer, and builder. Any general statement about the process is immediately contradicted. This column will attempt to bring some order to the confusion by defining a series of prototypical project types.

Before beginning any project, I always try to answer the following questions:

What kind of client builds this kind of project?

How predictable is the project regarding time, budget, and quality of construction?

How long is the project likely to take?

How much will it cost?

How well built is it?

What kind of working relationship is likely among the participants?

How experimental is the design?

How much control will the owner—versus the architect—exercise?

Is the process likely to have conflicts? Or even end up in court?

How many other design profession-

Maximum Experiment, Minimum Client Control

This is the "patron of the fine arts" route. An affluent client with architectural knowledge—and experience building or remodeling previous houses—seeks out a highly visible architect.

- Everything is cost-plus (or bids are sought only from first-class firms) and the budget is generous.

- Agreements may be elaborate, but they need be only a handshake because everything in the project depends upon mutual trust.

- The owner's needs must be flexible enough to give the architect design control. Either the architect adjusts the "program," or the building is made large enough to get in everything the client and architect want.

- A high standard of quality is set.

- The technology is likely to be as experimental as the design, so maintenance problems and callbacks are expected.

- The builder is usually selected for experience and quality of work rather than lowest price.

A moderately affluent client reads a lot of architectural magazines and decides to take the plunge with a "high style" design.

als and specialty subcontractors will be involved?

Will the result be publishable by the architect?

Will there be callbacks?

Typical Project Types

Minimum Experiment, Maximum Client Control

This is the "no surprise" route; there is little out of the ordinary. It works for anyone.

- Design and technology are tried and true. Since you can refer to similar examples, it is easy to select materials and set a construction-quality standard.

- Builders and design professionals can make accurate estimates, so prices are fixed.

- Many professionals and builders are able to do the work, so competitive bids are possible.

- Agreements can be simple, and conflicts readily resolved because the issues are straightforward.

- Projects can be built rapidly, or in a known time period.

- Design errors are not expected. Callbacks to fix construction errors will occur only if a low level of quality is set.

- Other design professionals (landscape architects, interior designers) and specialty contractors are seldom used. Landscaping is done by a gardening outfit; interior decorating by the owner.

- Other design professionals and specialty contractors are the rule.

- The result is a showpiece and almost certainly publishable although the owner, to the architect's regret, may want anonymity.

- An important variation on this type is the "restoration" project, where everything in a handsome old house is rebuilt as it once was, to a high standard of quality. Costs are almost impossible to predict. Dedication and involvement by the client—and a generous budget—are essential.

Formula Design, Client Control Within Known Limits

This is the "Architectural Record house" route. A moderately affluent, well-educated client reads a lot (especially architectural magazines) and decides to take the plunge with a "high style" design.

- Cost is an issue, as is the program.

- Agreements are important, and should follow standard AIA format.

- The client seeks out a particular architect.

- The client wants to be in charge, and discourages the architect from experimenting outside his known stylistic limits.

- Prices are reasonably certain because the architect has a known set of details, and probably a familiar contractor.

- Other design professionals and

specialty contractors are usually—but not always—involved.

- The result will likely be a handsome house that the owner would like to have published.

An important variation is the manufactured home. Some companies offer an extraordinary variety of designs, and all can deliver a house with a much higher level of predictability than is possible in a typical client/architect/builder relationship.

One-Off Design, Maximum Client Control

This is the vineyard in which most architects toil—the "one-off design."

Home manufacturers can deliver a house with more predictability than in a typical client/architect/builder relationship.

The clients are usually first-timers, often professionals.

- The design will, in some important ways, be different from anything either the architect or the owner has done or seen.

- The client has limited resources and/or a severe set of design demands.

- The architect is a problem-solver, called in to take charge of a difficult site or program.

- Or the architect is feeling his way into a style, and is not sure how the project will come out.

- Or the owner sees that the architect is flexible and might be able to accommodate specific, or perhaps poorly understood or eccentric, goals.

- Often, the owner has not shopped around and has selected the architect at random or through rumor or reference.

- Other design professionals are usually involved, though often not to completion due to budget cuts.

- The building will be unusual enough to make it difficult or impossible to secure accurate bids.

- The cost is likely to be much higher than either the architect or client expected.

- Written agreements are important, but trust is the basis for a successful project.

- The chances for litigation are high.

- The results might be publishable, but more likely will not be.

- Despite all the problems, this is the only possible route for most people with limited resources, complicated sites and programs, or a long wish list.

I am sure I missed some important species of house project, and I deliberately left out combinations that don't work. Most projects are mixtures, anyway, and not pure examples of any one type.

It is always worth a try to bring some order into the amazingly haphazard process by which people make the single largest investment of their lives. ■

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