



Design/build firms say they offer one-stop shopping; architects say they offer better design. Area residents have to decide which is best when it comes time to renovate their homes

By Rina Rapuano

When Bob and Tanya Thomas decided to renovate their Bethesda home, they immediately faced an important decision: Should they hire a separate architect and builder or a design/build firm that does both?

The Thomases decided on the former and chose Bethesda-based Wiedemann Architects to design the three-level addition to their home in the English Village neighborhood. "It was a sophisticated project," says Bob. "It was an old home and we wanted it to stay architecturally correct."

When Joyce and Robert Gwadz decided a few years ago to renovate their 1940s brick Colonial in Bethesda's Edgemoor neighborhood, they faced the same choice. The Gwadzses chose Brenneman & Pagenstecher, a design/build firm, to move the kitchen into what used to be the family room and build a new family room with garage underneath it.

For the Gwadz couple, the appeal of partners Dean Brenneman and Peter Pagenstecher was their combined experience: Brenneman has a background in architecture and Pagenstecher previously worked for a design/build firm, which provides one-stop shopping for people who don't want to go through the process of having an architect draw up plans and then having a builder bid on it, which was de rigueur for decades. Nowadays, however, consumers can choose between the two alternatives and, increasingly, variations in between.

"I looked to the design/build process as a method that allowed me to become an integral part of both the design and build teams," says Mark Scott, president of MARK IV Builders Inc., a design/build firm in Bethesda. "If I was going to be blamed for mistakes, I wanted to earn it!"

Scott was on the builder side of the process from 1988 until 1992, when his company bid on and built projects designed by independent architects. Now his company works exclusively on design/build projects. "What I truly like about the design/build process is the synergy that is produced by the entire team: the field superintendent, the painter, the roof truss designer, the HVAC contractor and so on," he says. "All of these people become part of the team early on. Their input is valued and considered when the plans are being made."

This process also aims to eliminate the sometimes adversarial relationship between the architect, the customer and the builder. "One of the things I was afraid of was when the architect and the builder are blaming each other when things don't work out," Gwadz says of her decision to go with a firm that offers start-to-finish services. "The few problems that arose just got worked out, and I didn't have to be in the middle of it."

Robert Maggin, owner of Paramount Construction, a design/build firm in Rockville, says using a design/build firm "results in a friendlier and more constructive relationship with the owner. If there is an error in the design, the builder cannot blame the architect, since the builder is the architect," Maggin says.

Design/build advocates also say using separate architects and builders is more costly. "Architects who do not build their own work have a very difficult time anticipating costs of construction," says Brenneman. "Because they have no in-house estimating capacity, they are at risk of designing things that exceed a client's budget because they have no way to check the price of each detail as they go through the design process."

Brenneman, whose company bills itself as an "architecture/build" firm to stress its emphasis on design, equates this process to the idea of going shopping for any consumer product. "It's easy to fall in love with everything you want and bring it to the register," he says. "Think about how much more difficult that is if there are no price tags attached to the things you are buying."

Bryan Whittington, owner of Whittington Design/Build in Bethesda, concurs. "Almost every time I have gotten involved in a...situation with a client who has a finished set of plans, it inevitably is always at least \$100,000 over the budget," he says. "I have stopped bidding plans in that way because I end up involved in trying to help solve the budget problem for free, basically. It almost never ends up in a good, clean process like design/build does."

Scott estimates that because of this, design/build firms save clients 5 percent to 8 percent in overall costs compared with what they might spend if they went with an independent architect and builder.

But architects dispute the cost differences, and say using separate architects and builders results in designed and built homes. "I would take huge if someone came to me and said designers don't care the budget," says Mark Giarraputo, a partner with S Design Concepts in Bethesda. "The whole not architects only caring about their egos is ridiculous, isn't an architect out there who isn't doing this responsible and to provide conscientious design work

Further, many architects maintain that using a design/build firm sacrifices quality as well as independence, since the traditional method allows customers to choose their designers and builders separately.