

## Why can't architects and builders get along?

It's an old prejudice, passed down through generations. Builders think architects are snooty and impractical. Architects think builders are stubborn and unimaginative. Exceptions abound—surely there are as many pragmatic architects as there are imaginative contractors—but it often seems that those who design houses and those who build them see each other as players on opposing teams. Both groups want to protect their turf for each project.

It's a shame, because this attitude gets in the way of smarter home design, better construction, and in the end, happier homeowners. Old habits die hard, though, and bridging this gap will take dili-

gence and understanding. It will require architects to think like builders, and vice versa.

How can the black turtlenecks work more closely with the blue jeans? In the interest of improving the architect-builder relationship, we invited two longtime building professionals from Austin, Texas—architect Paul DeGroot and builder David Wilkes—to go at it. We asked them to put their friendship and their reputations on the line by challenging them to come clean with their complaints about one another. Then we asked them to face the truth from the other side. Here's what they had to say.



**The builder says:** *Architects need to understand that all builders aren't created equal.* We all know that architects like to stand out, so I'm sure they don't like it if we builders lump them all together regardless of their talent, design skills, and ability to work with others. It's the same with builders—they all have strengths and weaknesses. To assume they are all the same is unfair to the client. That's what architects sometimes do, though.

Architects should find a few builders they trust and build a good relationship with them. Architects know their clients and should help them to select the builder who best fits their personality and who will best deliver on their expectations.

**The architect replies:**

I think most architects are well aware that builders come in different stripes. I tend to divide them into three tiers based on what they charge for their work: lower, middle, and high end. For bidding, I try to match the project budget with the appropriate tier. Asking a contractor to bid against others who aren't comparable wastes everyone's time.

I can also happily attest that the lowest bidder isn't always chosen. Folks do recognize that quality trumps economy in some cases. We architects need to coach our clients this way; steering them toward builders with experience appropriate to the type of project they're undertaking is some of the best advice we can give.





**The architect says: "Custom" means everything to us and nothing to builders.**

It's well known that architects love to customize things, often to a fault. It's our way of showing cleverness and creativity, and of proving our self-worth. When our special little details are ignored or botched, our feathers get ruffled. When you see a curious detail on the plans, why don't you ask us about it? Design is the architect's calling card; neither he nor the homeowner who hired him wants to hear some builder say, "But that's how we always do it."



**The builder replies:**

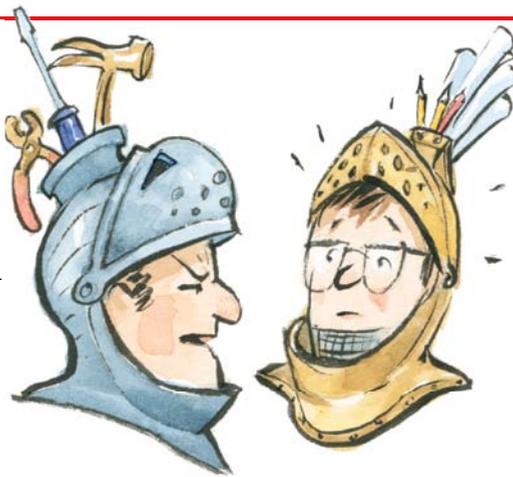
Architects should select good contractors who can read drawings and execute their details. Choose the right builder, create the right team from the beginning, and this will not be a problem. If the clients insist on a cut-rate builder, take the time to inspect that builder's past projects to see the quality of his work. If it's not up to your standards, inform the clients that they will get what they pay for.

**The builder says: Architects need to design within their clients' budgets.**

There is often a huge disconnect between a client's budget and the architect's design. This means that by the time the builder gets involved, he needs to perform miracles to get the actual costs close to the client's expectations. Unfortunately, at this point the client is excited about the design and has spent hours poring over the drawings with the architect. The builder then has to break the news to the client that the beloved design cannot be built for the expected price.

This leads to some awkward meetings in which the *builder* has to present ways to cut the budget by downgrading finishes and other options.

Builders always use the square-footage cost of similar projects to compare estimates versus actuals. Architects should find that number and use it as a guide to set clients' budgetary expectations. Most of all, architects should not be afraid to tell clients when they will not be able to afford either the size or finish level of a project they're dreaming of.



**The architect replies:**

You're right. It's all about managing expectations, and this is where we architects let down our clients most frequently. We've all had a project evaporate because our prized set of drawings was off the budget chart. We also need to sharpen our skills at managing scope creep.

Most clients have a wish list bigger than their budget, and that list grows with each new drawing you show them. When this happens, architects need to hoist the red budget flag. We're just being reckless when

we pile on the amenities without discussing the need for budget adjustments.

In our defense, we don't spend our days tracking prices and working up bids, so accurate costs are not usually at our fingertips. That said, we know what our previous projects cost, so we should use those as benchmarks. Affordable creativity is what most clients want.

**The architect says: Poor craftsmanship by builders makes us all look bad.**

We architects want to see parts fitting together precisely on all projects, regardless of budget. Sloppy work, especially on eye-level things, really grates on us. Nothing says "I don't care" like a big gap between trim boards, a door hung out of level, or a crooked AC vent. Builders who rush through the finish-out—the work that

homeowners touch and see every single day—have callbacks and disgruntlement that they and we *both* hear about.

**The builder replies:**

Yes, poor craftsmanship does make everyone look bad, just as fine craftsmanship can really make a project shine. For example, expensive glass tile installed by a sloppy tile subcontractor can look terrible, while inexpensive subway tile can look amazing when installed by a conscientious craftsman.

Too often, though, high-quality builders are excluded from projects due to budget constraints. Instead of excluding these builders, why don't architects simplify their designs or material selections? A simple job done well is superior to a complex design executed poorly.



**The builder says:**  
**Architects need to provide detailed, complete drawings at the start of a project.**

If builders had their way, a complete set of drawings would be provided at the commencement of a project. This would allow the builder to see the whole project and to make provisions for special details and other contingencies. In the real world, though, builders end up chasing details and changes from architects' offices.

It would also help if architects provided drawings that reflected dimensions to frame and not to finishes—what I call “framer-friendly” drawings. It should not be the framer's responsibility to make these decisions on site. This is particularly important on projects with a high degree of complexity and several different finishes of various dimensions. Builders can read drawings, but they cannot read minds!



**The architect replies:**

OK, I hear you. You look at our sketchy, incomplete drawings, and you think, “They’re paid to draw, so why don’t they do more of it?”

The short answer is that we feel we’re not paid enough to draw. Truth be told, we have a big-time inferiority complex regarding our salaries compared to other professionals. Sometimes this even causes us to do silly things, like compare our fee to design a custom home to the commission a real-estate agent gets to sell it.

Knowing this, I would venture that many poor sets of plans start with a poor fee structure. Not all clients are willing to pay for a complete set of drawings. Their preconceived notion of what an architect should cost may cover only the expense of an abbreviated “builder’s set” with just the basics. Of course, though, it doesn’t help when we then make things worse by designing an overly complex building that requires extra drawings.

**The architect says:** **Builders need to be more specific in their bids.**

Today’s clients want to see bids that are well detailed, and they’re frustrated by bids that are vague or too general. I get asked all the time to help my clients make apples-to-apples comparisons of the various bid formats they receive. When builders’ and homeowners’ assumptions don’t match up, the result is usually a change order. To the average Joe, a change order is a builder’s way of making extra money on something that should have been in the bid. Why can’t builders do a better job of giving clients the details they need to understand the scope and costs of their project fully?



**The builder replies:**

You’re right. A detailed cost estimate benefits everyone, and failing to offer enough details does make clients nervous. It all goes back to those drawings I was complaining about. Builders typically receive only schematics on which to base their bids, and it’s difficult for builders to give a detailed estimate based only on incomplete plans.

Change orders result mostly when clients select the cheapest builder, who has priced the project just to get the job. In those cases, clients can end up paying more than they might have had they chosen a conscientious builder whose estimate was higher. The sad truth is that unrealistic estimates make us all look bad. The best protection for both clients and honest builders is an architect who recommends good builders of equal quality.

**The builder says:**  
**Builders need to be brought on board earlier.**

Architects should encourage clients to get their team in place early in the process. Clients often secure the services of engineers and architects but wait until the drawings are complete to engage a builder. A builder involved early in the process can make a positive impact on the process and can help to keep the budget in check by being a sounding board for materials and methods.



**The architect replies:**

True enough, but that's far easier said than done. Many homeowners want competitive bidding on their jobs, and it's hard to ask a builder to donate hours of time early in the design process when he might have only a one-in-four shot of getting the job. What I can do is invite builders to participate in a round of cost estimating based on preliminary drawings. Even then, though, most clients want to meet several builders and get multiple estimates, so the exercise becomes a rehearsal for the competitive bidding they expect in the end.

Contractors get a foot in the door, but it ends up being more helpful to homeowners than builders. I love it when I can reunite with a builder on a negotiated bid arrangement. Everyone's in the loop from the start, and the builder keeps the design from getting overly complicated and expensive. With no competitive-bidding hammer to flatten him at the end, he's a vested partner in the project.



**The architect says: Too often, builders cut corners.**

Bring up the subject of "builders who cut corners" at a gathering of architects, and the discussion is sure to get lively. Unfortunately, cutting corners often involves eliminating important things that homeowners don't know much about. I see this quite a bit on my remodels, particularly in places like crawlspaces and attics, where workers know that it's unlikely anyone will check their work. Missing insulation, inadequate supports, missing junction boxes, pinched ducts—you name it, I've seen it. Considering the overall cost of a house, these are nickel-and-dime items, but dodging these chump-change costs can lead to big-ticket repairs down the road. Don't builders get that?

This is what happens when a builder doesn't properly supervise his subcontractors and the subcontractors start running the project. It's important that architects select a builder whose superintendent will actively supervise the project. Cutting corners happens when clients select a builder based solely on price instead of looking at the overall company and processes.

**The builder replies:**



**The builder says:**  
**Despite all this, we really want you around.**

Builders love to see architects on site! It would help us immensely if architects would take the time to walk the project throughout construction. For example, architects should come on site before the drywall is hung to check outlet heights, sprinkler heads, alarm boxes, placement of recessed cans—anything that may prove problematic to the design. It is frustrating to a builder who has hung drywall, taped, and painted only to have to open a wall to move an outlet a couple of inches.

**The architect replies:**

It's nice to know that you sort of like us, because there are times on the job site when we feel about as welcome as a skunk. That could also be our own fault for wearing the wrong shoes and for using words like *contextual* and *zeitgeist*. Job sites can be intimidating, particularly to architects who are young and unsupervised. As an intern, I once told a built-up-roofing crew that their kettle temperature was too high, having been sent by my firm to the site with the specs and a thermometer taped to the end of a broomstick. I couldn't wait to get off that roof—without the crew's help, that is.

But you're right. If we aren't spending adequate time on site because our fees don't allow it, we need to boost our fees. It's always helpful when the builder and the architect can discuss construction problems that are right in front of both of them. Maybe while we're doing that, we architects might find the opportunity to compliment the builders and subs on their craftsmanship. If we do, you builders might be impressed enough to take a second look at the plans in your hands and—maybe—commit to follow them. Or so we can hope.



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