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How a design-build approach offers advantages for construction projects

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Design-build is a collaborative construction approach in which the owner, designer, and general contractor work together to jointly design and deliver a construction project. The design-build method promotes a team environment and has all parties at the table for every meeting and every decision from beginning to end. It's now the most popular and fastest-growing project delivery method, according to the Design Build Institute of America.

Traditionally, construction projects followed the design-bid-build method, where the stakeholders' (owner, designer, contractor) activities and interests were siloed and compartmentalized. Once the design was completed, the general contractor would price, or "bid," on the project. More recently, however, alternative procurement methods like design-build have been adopted by owners. This method allows owners the freedom to choose their partners and encourages a team approach.



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Teamwork and accountability

A design-build partnership is typically formed in one of three ways:

The owner asks the contractor which architectural firm would be best for their project type.

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The owner independently selects a general contractor and an architect and asks the two to work together.

In most cases, the relationship is formalized with a single contract, where the general contractor is the single point of contact for the owner and hires the architect. In other instances, the owner has two separate contracts – one with the contractor and one with the architect. "Despite the structure of the contract, the ideology behind the process doesn't change. It's still a collaborative approach," said Bryan Knupp, senior vice president at Edifice.

This collaborative approach saves both time and money and results in a high-quality project. "Having all stakeholders involved can more efficiently create a design that meets the owner's needs," Knupp said.

No costly surprises

The contractor speaks to issues surrounding the cost of various products or systems, schedule impacts, constructability, building methods and labor-intensive details, all while paying attention to the owner's budget. The owner can then make informed decisions based on real-time costs and schedule analysis.

"Everyone shares their thoughts and impressions right from the start. It offers checks and balances. Sometimes we see an issue that the designer may have missed; other times the designer sees things that we missed. And sometimes the owner sees things that neither of us saw," said Mike Carlisto, vice president and project executive at Edifice. This three-pronged team approach promotes open lines of communication and is often less adversarial than other approaches.

The design-build method also reduces risk for everyone involved. The architect's risk of re-design is lowered and the contractor's risk of discrepancies in the documents and confusion during construction is minimized. As a result, the likelihood of owner change orders is also reduced.

It's not just the designer looking at the project, said Knupp. "Early on, the owner asks for input from the contractor. Together, the team builds a much better set of documents for the craft trades to price. The documents are more complete, which ultimately means fewer field delays due to changes and fewer change orders. Our goal is zero changes, and this is one of the best methods to obtain this goal." Having the contractor on board early allows the plans to be reviewed through each design phase (schematic design, design development, and construction documents), which benefits the owner and architect. Continuous constructability reviews throughout the planning phase ensures a well thought out set of plans that are within the owner's budget.

"We're still going to the market to have multiple subcontractors that represent each trade associated with a particular component of the building bid on the project," said Gary Creed, chief operating officer at Edifice. "The owner benefits by getting a competitively bid project and the best value for their dollar." This method also allows opportunities for the inclusion of the minority and historically underutilized contracting community.

Speed to market

Another benefit to the design-build method is the increased speed to market. The traditional design-bid-build method does not allow construction to start until design is complete. The design build method allows the early stages of the project (sitework, foundations, and structural aspects) to start before the design is complete.

Early release of the site led to the faster completion of a public administrative office building, for example. While the design was being finished and permits obtained, the building's concrete pad was being laid. This resulted in the project being completed in 19 months as opposed to 24. "The ability to fast-track the site saved several months of the build process," said Carlisto.

"Design-build has become a preferred method across all sectors, both public and private. It is getting widespread use in industrial, medical, office, education, church, and municipal sectors," Knupp said. "We are finding more and more clients wanting to do business this way."

For more information on Edifice's design-build delivery methods, visit edificeinc.com/services.

Edifice, Inc. is a locally owned and privately held general contractor headquartered in Charlotte. In business since 1978, Edifice has contributed to projects ranging from complex multi-faceted structures to interior renovations. Edifice is one of the leading commercial contractors in the Southeast and is listed as an Engineering News-Record top 400 U.S. general contractor.