

8 Builders and drafting services

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Builders are the instrument by which your dream of a suburban house comes into reality. Finding a good builder is like knowing a good cook. They select their materials well, put them together in measured quantities, and exercise skills learnt from long hours of practice. The end result is a pleasure to live with.

THE WORLD IS FULL OF 'COTTAGE' BUILDERS

Australians have been building suburban houses for decades. We have the highest per capita home ownership in the world. Naturally we have lots of home builders and many of them keep stocks of house plans for prospective customers.

Many also have close relations with drafting services whose staff have done technical college drafting courses and service the 'home building industry'. Some of the builders can also draw their own plans. Either the drafting service's or the builder's plans will be good enough for Councils and their building inspectors.

One could say that 'cottage building', and 'drawing house plans' is in the Australian blood. We've been doing it for generations, and it's one of the reasons why many people feel they don't need an architect. Their relatives and friends have done it without an architect. So have their parents and grandparents. Everybody knows the type of house they like. Let's get together with the builder and his drafting service and get on with it.

How can 60 per cent of Australians be wrong? Sixty-eight per cent own, or are buying, their own home, and architects are only involved in about 5 to 10 per cent of new houses.

WHY USE A 'COTTAGE' BUILDER?

If it's a standard type of house you are after, with changes that the project builders won't give you and your budget is tight, working with a cottage builder may save you money.

Certainly it will save you the architect's fee, which as we have seen, can range between 5 to 15 per cent of the cost of construction. The drafting service only costs the builder about 0.5-1.0 per cent. You also have the advantage of the builder's costing at the time of selecting the design, and making the changes you want.

It can save you time if you don't change the design around much, and the builder's price is right the first time round.

Really, it's a simpler process. You limit the choices you give yourself by working with one of the standard plans, of which there are hundreds, and also working directly with the contractor who will build your house. If you're happy with the plan after checking it against Chapter 3 'Everybody Wants to be Comfortable' and Chapter 10 'Designing Your Own Home', and the builder and drafting service match your expectations, then, it can be a good way of getting housing at a cost you can afford.

CHECK OUT YOUR BUILDER

Builders come in all shapes and sizes. They also vary in quality. Home owners are a treasure trove of sad tales of woe when it comes to builders and their subcontractors.

The home building industry has always been a relatively easy field to enter. You can get started from the building trades, through material suppliers, or as architects, engineers, salesmen, accountants, solicitors or even just as a speculator. Some of those who start in the industry have not been schooled in the trade, practice, and management of building, but learn as they go along.

The industry is also subject to booms and busts, producing problems of economic instability and occasional bankruptcies. It pays to check your builder out. But first you must find him. Much the same methods apply to finding your builder as to choosing your architect. Talk with friends and relatives. Check out the annual awards of the Housing Industry Association, or the Master Builders Federation. If you have friends who know local tradesmen, have a chat to them. Talk to the local hardware store manager or timber merchant. After a while, the same names will keep on turning up.

Call them up, ask for names, addresses and telephone numbers of recent customers and go visit the houses. Ask:

- Whether the builder was easy to get along with?
- Was the contract straight forward?
- Were there any hidden costs that came to light after the builder started which became unexpected extras?
- Did the builder claim for extras that the owner didn't ask for?
- If there were extras, was the costing fair and reasonable?
- Did the builder start on time and finish on time? If not, why not?
- Did the builder supervise the job properly, or did the owner have to point out things that did not seem right?
- Were the subcontractors easy to get along with and did they do a good job?

- Were the standards of finish up to what the owner expected to pay for?
- Would the owner use the same builder again?
- Did the plans and specifications reflect the owner's instructions?

If three or four owners respond positively to these questions, you should then interview the builder checking:

- If he is licensed under State laws, and what his licence number is?
- How he came to be a builder? Was it through learning a trade, or by some other route?
- How long he has been in business?
- Does he have partners, who are they, and how did they get into building?
- Does he have staff, or does he subcontract everything?
- Who will supervise the construction? Will he do it personally, or does he have a foreman for that work? If so, it would be wise to meet the foreman, as he is the one who controls the day to day quality.
- How many jobs does he run at the same time and how many does he have on at the moment? Your job is not going to be his only job.
- What size job (dollar value) does he prefer to build? Yours may be too small or too big for him to efficiently and profitably build.
- Who his main subcontractors are, concretors, carpenters, electrician, plumber, etc., and who his bank and main material suppliers are? You may need to do a credit check, and knowing this information is essential for such a check.
- What sort of building contract does he use, and how does it handle the questions of progress payments, provisional and prime costs (PC) sums, variations, extras, defects and maintenance after practical completion?
- Will he supply you with a trade breakdown of the cost of the building and with any variations, a breakdown of the cost of materials, labour and overheads.
- If you were to proceed with him, how soon could he start the job and how long would it take to finish?
- Does he require a deposit to prepare plans for Council?
- Does he include payment of Council and other fees in his quote?

The builder's answers to these questions will give you a fair idea of his degree of honesty and method of operation.

If you feel satisfied with the answers, feel you can get along with him and any key partners or foreman, and are happy with the standard of construction and finish you have seen in his work you've done about as much checking as is reasonable and possible.

IS THERE A CONTRACT?

Some builders, and one of the best I've known, rarely sign a contract with their clients. When they did it was only at the insistence of the architect representing the owner. But then, they work on the principle that they only got new work by recommendation and a satisfied customer was the only way they could stay in business.

Today however, under some State laws they run the risk of not being able to recover unpaid debts from owners through court action, unless they have a written contract.

So is there a contract to sign? Often there is and often it will be one produced by the Housing Industry Association or the Master Builders Federation. Sometimes the builder has organised his own contract. Whichever it is, get a copy, read it cover to cover, note anything you don't understand, or don't like, and take it back to the builder and discuss it with him. If you don't like the answers, (and make certain you make written notes) ask a solicitor who is familiar with building contracts. The builder may be answering quite reasonably. Building contracts are not simple documents.

Remember, this contract controls the biggest single expenditure most Australian households make in their lifetime and it's going to take you 20-30 years to pay it off. It pays to read the contract carefully.

If, like the builder I know, he doesn't use a contract, check back with his clients about past performance on quality, costing of variations, defects, maintenance and completion on time.

The contract is there essentially for when things go wrong. If the job is going right, the contract sits in the drawer. But if things are not up to scratch, it's the first place to look for your rights, and powers to enforce them.

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

BUILDERS ARE BUILDERS, NOT DESIGNERS

It should probably be self-evident that builders know next to nothing about design, and that their drafting services are trained to be efficient and accurate at drawing with a dash of design training thrown in for good measure. So don't expect the builder to help you out too much if you want good design.

It's not that he won't have lots of advice to give, and some of it, maybe a great deal of it, will be quite practical. He has probably built dozens of houses and seen lots of owners who want, what he believes, are impracticable arrangements. And, he may have been right much of the time. However, you are hiring him and his drafting service to build well and draw the plan accurately, not to design the house. It's up to you to decide what house you want and whether the design is right.

If you are choosing amongst ready-made designs, or working out the design with the builder's drafting service, check it against the design principles in Chapters 3 and 10.

If you have worked out the design yourself, you'll need to sit down with the builder and drafting service and have them check it out for ease of construction, cost and compliance with the Council's and other authorities' regulations.

Either way, don't assume that the builder or the drafting service know best when it comes to design. Check it out before you agree to the things they want to change.

YOU ARE YOUR OWN BEST SUPERVISOR

It may seem strange to suggest that, in spite of having hired a builder to supervise the construction of your home, you are 'your own best supervisor'.

In spite of the fact that technically it is the builder and not yourself who is qualified, you are the one who best knows the quality you are looking for, and the details you expect to see built into the building. Hopefully you have ensured that this quality, and those details, have been properly described in the contract, plans and specifications. It pays the owner to visit the building site regularly, probably on a weekly basis, just to keep an eye on progress and the way things are being done.

It also pays to regularly clean up your own building site. Builders and subcontractors are messy. If you want a clean site, and to impress upon subcontractors your concern for quality, one good way is a regular site clean up. The builder will probably be happy to have you help if you agree it at the beginning, though it is normally his contractual responsibility to keep the site clean.

BUILDERS ARE MANAGERS, NOT TRADESMEN

Today's 'cottage' builders are organisers of subcontractors and suppliers. Though the builder may have trained in one of the trades, it is the rare home builder who today works on the tools. In the 'alterations and additions' part of the industry, it is still common to see the builder doing some of the trade work. Even so, a good proportion of his time will be spent organising and running around.

One consequence of this is your builder won't be on your job all the time. He may visit it every few days, or even daily at certain stages. The rest of the time he will be busy organising his other jobs, subcontractors, delivery of materials, accounts, quotations, and seeing new customers. This is all quite normal. He is, in fact, running a small business.

What it does mean however, is that it pays for the owner to keep an eye on the job. Get to know the various subcontractors. Make a point of talking to the builder about anything you feel they don't understand, or is not as you expected. Buildings are fairly complex things and the way they go together can often seem strange to those not experienced in the industry. It is also fascinating to watch them being built. The more you take a friendly interest in the whole process, the better the end result is likely to be.

PROGRESS PAYMENTS, INSURANCES AND DEFECTS

We have already touched upon some of these aspects of contracts. They are the nitty gritty of your contractual relationship with the builder.

You should re-read Chapter 5 'Sooner or Later You will Have to Sign a Contract', and also read Chapter 11, 'So You'd Like to be an Owner-Builder'. It's important you study these chapters carefully. Working through an architect, you pay him to act as an adviser on these matters, and to be your representative on the job. When you contract directly with a builder, you have to ensure you understand your own rights and responsibilities and act accordingly. Best to discuss these with the builder right at the beginning so there are no misunderstandings.

WILL YOU STILL BE FRIENDS?

All building projects start out with a rush of enthusiasm and excitement. The owners may have been looking forward to this moment for years. The builder may have wanted your job because he was having a bit of a low in business just then. Some of the subcontractors may also have needed the work. It can all add up to a lot of good feelings all round. But will it last? Almost certainly not. Time, for one thing, interferes. Six to nine months seems a long time for the owners to wait to move in. New building contracts will come the builder's way. Subcontractors will move onto other jobs. Mistakes will be made during construction. These may not be serious ones, but are bound to be annoying. One trade will damage work of another trade. Wet weather or strikes will damage or delay the job. A misunderstanding over interpretation of plans and specifications might arise. A supplier sends the wrong floor tiles, or inferior door handles. Kids get onto the job and cause damage. Certain materials are misordered or the delivery delayed. Someone breaks in and steals the new stove.

Any or all of these, and worse, can happen with no intention of bad will on anybody's part. By the end of the job, tempers may have worn a little thin and then there are the defects. It is the rare building which reaches practical completion, that stage at which the builder hands over the front door key, which does not have some minor items still unfinished, or some aspects of workmanship which are not quite satisfactory. It is par for the course.

So when you move in, you may still be calling the builder at night asking when the plumber is coming to fix the tap, or when the painter is going to finish off the eaves, or a dozen other items that may not be just so.

It all comes down to the way the industry is organised into a myriad of subcontractors, difficulties with trade education, problems of managerial skill and quality control for the builder, inadequate definition of standards of finish in the plans and specifications and poor communication.

The last two are where the owner can have some influence. Make sure the plans and specifications show and say what you expect to be built in every detail. Make sure you communicate clearly to the builder and the subcontractors on the job, what you expect to see built. Remember, *you are your own best supervisor*, but only if you know what you want, ensure the builder understands, see it in the plans and specifications and talk to the subcontractors about it. It's your house, and you're going to live with the results for a long time.