



Selecting the Right

Contractor

For Your Luxury Home

Designing Innovative Spaces to Suit
Your Vision and Lifestyle
Resulting in the Home of Your Dreams.

2e Architects PETER R. TWOHY



Selection of the best general contractor for your residential project is an extremely important decision. That choice will determine the quality of craftsmanship and the timely completion, within budget, of the project. It will also minimize emotional stress and surprise extra costs.

The following are considerations and questions for interviewing and ultimately hiring a reputable contractor in your area. You should also rely on your architect to help you with this process.



Peter R. Twohy AIA

Find A Contractor

Ask for referrals from people you know and trust. Your architect is an obvious source, but so are family, friends, neighbors, lawyers, real estate agents, and others who have built projects similar to yours. Local building suppliers, design firms, and other trade-related businesses can offer referrals too. Are there recently completed or projects similar to what you have in mind for your home under construction in your area? If so, ask the owner about their contractor and their working relationship.

When you have a good number of referrals, begin your research. Start with a company's website. Review their portfolio. (The lack of an online presence says a lot about the contractor too). Consider the following:

- How long have they been in business?
- How big is the company?
- Where are they located in relation to your project?
- What does the local business bureau have to say about the contractor?
- Do they have good reviews on Houzz?



License and Registration, Please

Verify that your contractor candidates are licensed and in good standing with your city or state's respective license board. Ask to see the contractor's pocket license, a picture I.D. , and certificate of insurance.

Not only does proper licensing demonstrate a company's best practices management, but hiring a licensed contractor protects you. For example, Workers Compensation insurance is generally a contractor's responsibility. If a contractor is not licensed or does not carry proper insurance the liability may fall on you should anything happen with a worker on site. Check with local authorities in your city or state if you have questions about who's responsibility this is.

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Building A Partnership

Architecture is a Team Sport

At 2e Architects, we work hard to build lasting relationships with contractors and sub-contractors. Every person on the team is vital to the success of the building project. Working together we are able to create realistic building plans, a construction budget you can have confidence in, and build the home of your dreams.

We work with high-caliber contractors who are true experts at building. These trusted craftsmen have a keen eye for detail and truly care about every aspect of your home—the beautiful, visible details and equally as importantly, the "invisible" materials inside the walls.

3D Drawings Make the Difference

If the contractor or sub-contractors have any, even small, questions about the design, the tendency can be to raise the bid. 2e Architects provides unlimited 3D drawings for all our projects because they not only help our clients better visual the end product, but they also help the contractors and sub-contractors more accurately bid your home.

Interview Candidates

After the preliminary online and license check, narrow your candidate pool to three to five contractors. Set up an interview at their office, which will verify their business location. Consider the following questions:

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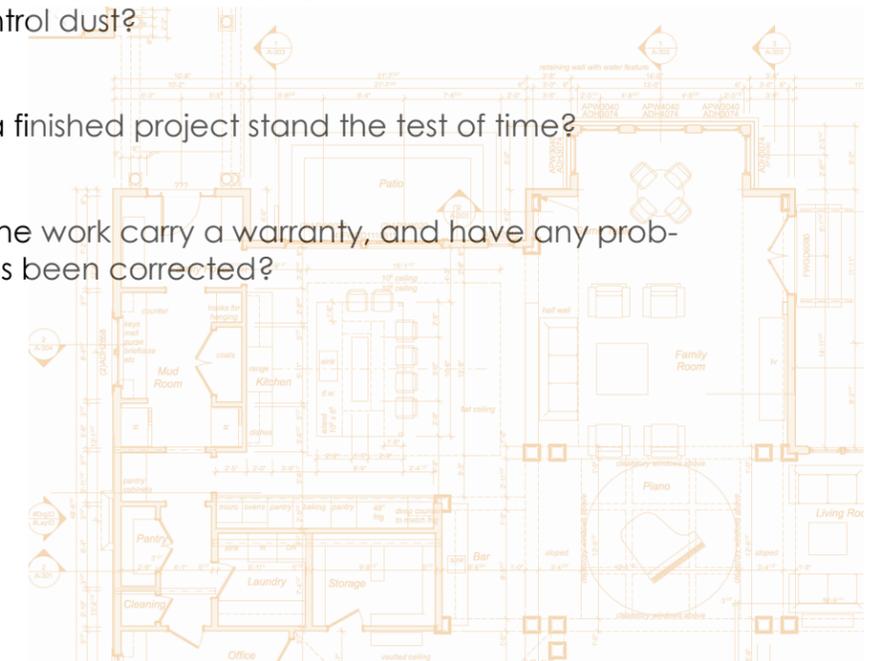
- What does their place of business tell you about their organization and the quality of their product and service?
- Is it a small, one-person company working from home or a larger firm with a business location and/or a showroom?
- What is their pipeline of jobs? Will they be able to start work on your project in a timely manner?
- Ask what plans do they have in place to complete

Review Recent Work

Request to visit three projects that are similar in size and style to yours. Check out one that was recently completed, one under construction, and a third project completed five to 10 years earlier. If at all possible, speak with the homeowners and consider the following during your evaluation:

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- How does the construction site look? Is debris cleaned up promptly, and appropriate measures taken to control dust?
- Does a finished project stand the test of time?
- Does the work carry a warranty, and have any problems been corrected?



2e Architects Client Floorplan

Check References

Ask for a referral list. In private, discuss with previous clients their experiences working with the contractor. Consider asking the following:

- Was it a pleasant working relationship?
- Was it easy to communicate with the contractor?
- Was the project completed on schedule and within budget?
- Were there extra costs or surprises?
- As there will almost always be unexpected developments in a construction or remodeling project, how were problems handled?
- How was the quality of craftsmanship and follow-up?
- What advice would you give for working with this contractor?

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The Role of Subcontractors

“Do you use subcontractors?”

For many years, standard consumer advice has been against hiring a company that uses subcontractors. The truth is that now nearly every firm uses subcontractors for specialty trades like concrete or foundation work, electrical, and plumbing. Even the very busiest general contractor will not have enough concrete work (for example) to be done every day so they turn to a qualified subcontractor who works for other companies as well. This is not a bad thing. It means that people who specialize in that particular discipline do your work.

You may want to avoid a firm that uses only subcontractors and has no full time construction employees. Instead of or in addition to asking, “Do you use subcontractors?” you should ask, “What processes do you have in place to make sure your subcontractors keep their licensing and insurance up to date?” Just as the absence of workers compensation insurance on the part of your contractor may make you liable for jobsite accidents, so too will the lack of proper insurance for any subcontracted firms. A reputable general contractor will maintain files showing current licensing and insurance for all active subcontractors.

“Cement” A Relationship

Narrow your list of contractors to two or three. Invite them to your project site to meet with your architect and review your site and preliminary architectural plans. Consider the following when you meet with them:

- Can you trust and communicate with this person easily?
- Are your questions answered clearly and satisfactorily?
- How often will the principal contractor be at the job site?
- Who will be the day-to-day job foreman?
 - How long has that person been with the company?
 - Ask to meet the foreman to determine your compatibility.
- Does their schedule suit your time frame?
- Ask about a range of general construction costs. Are they within your budget and quality expectations?
- Where can you save money?
- As a takeaway from the meetings, ask for a preliminary, itemized written estimate based on their understanding of the scope of work.



Preliminary Estimates

When to Get Them

Remember it is important to bring in a contractor early in the design process to ensure that you are designing a project that you can afford.

At 2e Architects, we follow a three phase approach to architectural design: 1) Concept Design 2) Design Development, and 3) Permit & Construction. You want to have a contractor providing estimates at the end of Concept Design before the design is totally refined and floorplans and dimensions are set. Estimates performed by architects, mine included, are almost always too rosy.

Contractors are the experts in cost estimate arena. Most times the estimates they provide are right near where we thought they would be. In the cases where they are not, we still have 2/3 of the design process to reign the project back to align with the budget.

Getting the first round of estimates after this point, say at the end of Design Development, would be fine as long as the estimate is in line with the budget. If not the required rework to the plan would be classified as an extra service, costing you more money.

The worst time to ask for the first estimate from a contractor is after the Permit Drawings are complete in the middle of the Permit & Construction phase when the plans have already gone through a structural review and are ready for submission to the building authority. This would certainly mean that any changes to the design would be classified as an extra service for both the architect and the structural engineer, costing you more money and inevitably changing the project timeline. Avoiding any extra service surcharge is always a good idea.

Review Detailed Bids

When your plans have final design approval and the construction documents are ready to be submitted for local government permits, let the shortlisted contractors know that you will be considering detailed bids. Give them a deadline by which they can submit their bids for your consideration. Ask your architect to help you review and compare the bids. Look for the following when you receive the detailed bids:

- Ask for line item bids for various categories of work for comparison and to avoid possible mistakes. The line items are to be sure that all of the contractors understand the project in the same way. For example, if one contractor's painting number is more than twice that of everyone else, there are only two possible reasons. The first is that the painter is very expensive. The second is that there is an error in either math or the perceived scope (usually the latter).
- Ask for and set consistent "allowances" for unknown costs such as fixtures and finishes to be chosen later. This allows you to proceed with the project planning even if you haven't yet chosen every last faucet or door handle.



- For remodel projects where structural conditions are unknown, have the contractor open up a partial section of a wall or other area to help partly determine beforehand the extent of repair work that will need to be done.
- Ask about the payment schedule. Generally speaking, larger projects will be divided into greater number of payments. The schedule should be broken down into easily identifiable milestones like, "permits obtained" or "drywall complete and finished," and not vague benchmarks like "50% complete."
- Consider your "gut feel" in addition to the bid prices. Remember especially in a renovation project your contractor will be in your home for several months. Your gut will tell you which contractor communicates best with you. Assume that the communication level will not improve as the project progresses, or if it does, that it will improve equally with each contractor. Certain people you simply "click" with, my advice is to work with them.



Sign A Contract

There are far more reputable, honest and hard-working contractors than there are the slapdash, fly-by-night operations we read about in the news. With proper planning and prior research, you will find the perfect contractor for your project. Invest the time in the beginning of the process and remember that spending this time could save you thousands, even tens of thousands of dollars in the end. Creating a new home, or turning your existing home into the space you've always wanted is an exciting project. Make it an enjoyable one, too, by hiring the right contractor and considering the following points during the contract phase:



- Discuss the different kinds of contracts available and ask for one to review.
- Include a contingency clause that voids the contract if permits cannot be obtained.
- Include the ability to get updated construction bids if plans change for any reason at any time during the construction.

- Be prepared to pay a deposit at contract signing.

Depending on the scope of work and the payment schedule outlined in the contract, this may be anywhere from 10% (large projects) to 33% (small projects) of the total contract price. Many states limit the deposit to a maximum of 33%; our advice is never pay more than that initially. It may seem counterintuitive to pay a substantial deposit before any work is done, but remember that a large portion of the contractor's costs are material that are incurred upfront before work can even start.

- Plan 5% to a maximum 10% contingency budget.

Be aware that there are always unknowns in the construction process that will require changes to the original plan, usually, at additional costs. Examples include design changes made at your request, building department requirements, or unknown site or other existing conditions. This is normal. Expect it.

I have heard some say that clients building a custom home should set aside 10,15, even 20 percent of construction cost for cost over-runs. At 2e Architects we recommend setting aside 5-10%. The reason is our standard of making available unlimited 3D drawings to our clients.

- Use 3D drawings to minimize changes orders.

This type of visualization greatly reduces change orders and often completely eliminates them because any questions or uncertainties are clarified upfront during the design phase. 3D drawings allow clients and contractors to truly "see" the space as it will be once it is built. Contractors fully understand the design and therefore your expectations netting you better upfront cost estimates. You need unlimited drawings to get to this level of clarity. 3D shows details normally lost in traditional, flat 2D floorplans used by other architects. 3D drawings simply make the path to building your dream home run more smoothly and minimize the unexpected. Contractors LOVE this.



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