

Selecting a builder for a domestic project

It seems that every time you go to a party or switch channels on television, all you hear are horror stories about cowboy builders, runaway budgets and mind boggling overruns.

So what on earth can YOU do to avoid your project turning into a reality-TV-style house of horrors?

Well, the first and most obvious tactic would be to ask your architect or project manager to do the job for you. Inevitably this will come with a cost requirement, but it's a cost one that should be recovered as many as 10x over during the following stages of the building process. Our own policy is that we always quote for this element of professional input from the outset; we firmly believe in our mantra that "Honesty makes the best property" - and it's only fair that our design clients are offered the full works, hands held service, from the outset.



If you do decide to take the plunge and go it alone, the bad news is that you really should identify not one, but three good quality firms, so you can ask them all to provide a competitive tender. While it might seem that finding 5, 6, 7, 8 or more firms to tender is a good idea, we would advise against this, frankly if any self respecting firm thinks they're in that level of competition for a 'small job' (let's be realistic here) they'll more than likely run a mile. The next point is you're looking for a quality, reliable, service and someone that will do the job to a suitable standard for a sensible price - not necessarily the cheapest price. (In fact the cheapest price quoted rarely produces the lowest project cost in the long run)

The good news is that it's not as difficult to find quality builders as you may think - you just need to follow a few simple but logical steps.

A recommendation from friends, family or colleagues is almost always the ideal starting point, however if you don't know anyone in your network that has had work done - don't give up! Why not open the field a little wider by sending an email to your (local) contacts, let them know exactly what you are looking for. You could also try twitter or other social sites like facebook and linked-in.

If that fails to discover at least a raft of recommendations for 'a good builder', you can always turn to local estate-agents, surveyors, or trade organisations such as the Federation of Master Builders who host a find a builder service.

The advantage with utilising FMB or others like the National Federation of Builders is that their members have (at least in theory) been vetted and *should* undertake their work in line with their body's standards. If

anything does go wrong, both have mediation services for peace of mind.

It's not just about choosing any old ?good builder?

You will also need to choose the team that's right for your job. Contrary to popular belief, size IS important - there's no sense in employing a 2 man band to build a 5 bed palatial villa, and likewise a national firm is almost certainly *not* going to be interested in a single storey extension to a bungalow.



It is best that the team you select have the most relevant experience possible - every firm is as good as their last job! So, if you are planning work on a listed building, find a company that has experience in conservation work rather than a contractor who specialises in new build work.

Whichever method use to source your builder, you should put them through vetting process of your own and, no matter what; you should always feel comfortable with them. You may need to work together for several months and through pretty challenging circumstances to boot.

In a self administered building project YOU are the client, it's your job to control it and, ultimately, YOU have control of the builder. If you're not confident in managing a potentially complex job; please take our advice and hire support from an experienced project manager IMMEDIATELY. No matter which firm you choose, the builder will need clear and firm direction - the success and satisfactory completion of your job depends on this fact alone. It is a common misconception by first time 'property developers' that builders will solve problems of their own accord... this is frequently not the case. As master of the project *you* must be able to make the many tough and potentially expensive decisions that lie ahead - and with confidence to keep the build on track...

Good references from their most recent clients are absolutely essential; don't just take them at face value. If you think you've found your firm - make arrangements to visit a couple of their recent sites and, ideally, speak to at-least one recent client; Ask them about the quality of the work, what the contractor did and their working methods. Check the reliability of the builder and whether there were any issues with the project.

Don't be shy or embarrassed about it either! If you are planning to invest several tens of thousands in a project you need to be sure that the firm will do what they say, and well. Imagine what you would do if things went wrong because you hadn't asked...

On the subject of things going wrong, in our opinion any builder doing anything involving structural work or even non-structural work for that matter **must** be fully insured - ask to see up to date copies of their insurance policies. Be very wary of any claims, professional qualifications, logos or memberships on business cards and letterheads; these can easily be faked. Don't be shy to check them with the relevant organisations to make sure they are genuine.

Having drawn up a shortlist of potential contractors, the next phase in the process is to ask them to produce a detailed quote and a detailed time-scale for the stages of the job. To make this as accurate as possible, make certain that the description you provide is as detailed as possible - again your architect or design technician will help if needs be. If you have full building regulations approval, the submitted documents will be a helpful document to supply to your builder (If you don't; you may need to stop looking for a builder and take additional advice from your designer ? there could be professional work to be done

yet!)

There is a big difference between asking for a quote and an estimate: An estimate, unlike a quote, is merely a rough guide or a guess taking into account the known site factors but allowing room for manoeuvre in the final price for the unknown too.

Mostly you should be very wary of open ended estimates in relation to any building works.

A quote is a costed price for the job - the figure(s) quoted is what you will pay for the job. Occasionally there may be 'Provisional Sums' quoted - these are where unknown item costs may be involved but an estimate for each item is allocated (typically these are for items that cannot be fully established until work has started for example, or for items that are yet to be decided; kitchen type, floor tiles, bathroom suite etc etc).

When asking for prices - it is important that all of your candidate builders are given the same level of information - it is easy to get into conversation with one builder and forget that he has received far more detail than the others. Ultimately you need to be sure that all of your shortlist are providing a quote on a like for like basis for fair comparison.

When you have your prices (don't be surprised if this takes some time) don't just chose the contractor on the basis of the lowest price; you will probably be spending a lot of money and you will have to live with the result for many years. Nor should you choose on the basis of the builders own availability; a good building firm is *normally* busy (even in recession) and so they may not be able to start work right away.

Once you have decided on the builder for your job, make sure that you tie down all the loose ends and create a formal contract with both a start and completion date. You can try to add in an overrun penalty clause, but be generous with its timings and realistic with the penalties. If you don't know how to set up a contract, *you can* download a number of standard documents for free from the Federation of Master Builders? website <http://www.fmb.org.uk/find-a-builder/free-contracts/> [1].

Alternatively you should speak to a Professional Property Consultant or Architectural Practice (like Keith Farmer Associates); either of whom will provide professional advice and add an additional layer of security for the hard earned money that you are about to sign away.

Within contracts of engagement you should also agree payment stages and how those stages are to be determined and signed off (if a bank is lending money for the project based on complete stages their input will be required at this stage also).

There are almost **always** unexpected extras involved in building projects, so you should also allow for the actual budget to swell by around 20%. **Never** pay too much money in advance and always be wary of a VAT free deal. No VAT registration means that there will be little or no paperwork to fall back on if it all goes wrong and dodgy accounting might well be reflected in the general management of work.

Finally, set up regular meetings to check on progress throughout the work and if you are not happy about anything at all, just ask plenty of questions **before** you sign!

Links:

[1] <http://www.fmb.org.uk/find-a-builder/free-contracts/>

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