

Architect-Led Design/Build

By Rosemarie Buchanan

Forty percent of all new construction in the United States is produced using the design/build delivery method instead of the typical design-bid-build process. Locally, the Harold Washington Library and the addition to McCormick Place were delivered



The Chicago offices of OWP/P by OWP/P Design/Build

Lincoln Avenue condominiums in Chicago by Atul Karkhanis Architects



Courtesy of the Firm

design/build. Yet less than 10 percent of that 40 percent is led by architects. Why? Some architects are wary of the increased insurance exposure (see Feature story), while others are reluctant to compete against contractors with whom they would otherwise be partners.

Although many architects are gunshy when it comes to design/build, even when they could lead the effort, proponents cite the advantages of greater control, higher margins and the ability to ensure that their design is constructed as they intended.

Architects may earn higher fees for design/build, but at a price. The design/build entity assumes total responsibility for the on-time, on-budget delivery of a project. The contract with the owner generally (though not always) specifies a guaranteed maximum price (GMP) which is usually determined after schematic design. If the GMP is not met, the design/build team makes up the difference, although a contingency may be agreed upon as a cushion for owner-initiated scope changes.

Christopher Barrett, Photographer



Optima's Michigan Place condominiums at 31st and Michigan Avenue in Chicago

Scott McDonald © Hedrich Blessing



Euclid Square townhomes in Oak Park by Metropolis Architects and Builders

Courtesy of the Firm

Architect-led vs. Contractor-led

“There are some owners who will never trust a contractor to lead design/build, and it’s directly related to concern for the quality of the building,” says Hill Burgess, AIA, leader of the commercial/institutional group at McClier and former chair of the Design/Build PIA.

Contractors may continue to lead design/build projects that are not design-intensive, such as warehouses and sewage treatment plants, Burgess adds. However, he feels that there is a definite market for architect-led design/build, from non-profits to schools. These owners want to outsource the entire design and construction process yet remain assured of design integrity. “They need to have a more traditional relationship with their architect and do not need to put the lowest cost as their first priority.” Ream agrees, pointing out that “most contractors are cost-driven, while architects are generally driven by client need and project quality.” OWP/P Design/Build takes the lead role on all of its projects.

New Business Models

Architect-led design/build has shaped the services architects offer and the way they organize their firms. These changes include greater vertical integration and the creation of separate business entities for those firms offering multiple delivery options.

“An analogy to design/build is what happened to many firms in the ‘60s when they became horizontally integrated, offering engineering and interior design,” Burgess points out. Now design/build presents architects the opportunity to vertically integrate. Some offer financing services and will even act as building manager and lease it to the owner.

A few architects have chosen to become developers themselves. Glencoe-based Optima, Inc. was a pioneer in assuming control of every phase of the process, from site selection through building management. Why haven’t more firms followed their lead? According to vice president Tod Desmarais, AIA, “it might be psychological. Architects may feel that it wouldn’t be right to act as developers because they’ve spent so much time fighting developers to make buildings better.”

Optima is currently completing the 13-story Optima Towers, a condominium development in downtown Evanston that includes 8,000 square feet of retail space. Its 105 units range in price from \$170,000 to \$600,000. The wide price range is appealing for Optima, which strives to create a context for some economic diversity—a goal that’s counterintuitive for most developers, Desmarais adds.

Two local architects who have assumed the role of residential developer while maintaining traditional architecture practices are Atul Karkhanis, AIA of Karkhanis Architects and John Schiess, AIA of Metropolis Architects & Builders.

“Design/build is great for the client, but it’s good for the architect, too,” says Karkhanis. He has been delivering design/build projects for 15 years. He prefers to build on spec for more control and greater profit margins, but continues to perform as a design/build for clients with a specific site and project in mind. Recent work includes a private residence in Park Ridge and two multi-family developments in Chicago.

“You can modify things as you go along, you can be more resourceful and you can drive the project,” he says. “Many times the architect is looked at as just the one who draws the blueprints, and the contractor at the job site doesn’t bother calling you [for guidance]. That doesn’t happen here.” It also enables him to better manage the risk inherent in the process. “If you’re running a little over, you have the control to opt out of the marble tile.”

Schiess of Metropolis Architects & Builders in Oak Park also prefers to act as developer for the single-family houses, townhouses and condominiums that he builds. Schiess became impatient with the traditional services model because “99.9 percent of the time, the owner came back and said it was either over budget, or the builder can’t build it.” The firm’s recent projects include Euclid Square, a 14-unit townhome development, and The Astor, a four-unit luxury condominium.

Metropolis offers a gamut of services, including financial pro formas and other pre-design services such as feasibility studies. The firm is officially