

FEATURE:  
BUSINESS

# The Homeowner's Perspective

Clients say design/build leads to better communication, a positive experience

*By Julia Fairclough*



**A**lthough Susan Gore did not know the proper industry term “design/build,” she was looking for it when planning to renovate her Wellesley Hills, Mass., kitchen.

All that she and her husband, Ryan Burdeno, knew was that they wanted a streamlined remodeling process involving one person, since the two accountants work long hours, travel a lot on business and don't have time to keep track of various contractors and a designer.

The couple had visited a kitchen design business and told the designer that they wanted to make their small, square-shaped kitchen more user-friendly. Part of the problem was that a poorly placed island in the middle of the kitchen made it impossible to both open the refrigerator door and to enter the room.

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“My husband asked the designers if they could do a ‘turnkey’ project, meaning could it be accomplished by one group of people, and they said, ‘Yes,’” Gore recalls. “When we met with them after they produced a design, we learned this was not so, and they had forgotten to add the refrigerator to the design. This was a high-end business, so I had lost faith.”

A few months later, Gore asked a real estate broker

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friend if she knew of anyone who could remodel older homes like her four-bedroom Colonial and keep its context. She also asked if this person could perform both the design and the building to avoid the inconvenience of dealing with multiple people.

The broker referred her to David Morgan, the owner of DRM Design Build Inc. of Southborough, Mass., and that's when Gore and Burdeno learned what design/build was all about. They were delighted to find that this formerly foreign term was what they had been hoping for. "We were just looking for one person to manage the process," Gore says.

Morgan, like many design/builders, creates the design and also executes the project, a process that cuts out the hassle of a third wheel. This model, as opposed to the traditional design-bid-build, comes in handy for homeowners for many reasons. But in particular, working couples, who don't have time to juggle who's doing what, prefer the idea of working one-on-one with someone and developing a more intimate relationship.

For example, Gore and Burdeno talked about their lifestyles in addition to what they wanted to do to their kitchen. While design/build does not necessarily save significant money, the personal time savings earned from a more efficient system is priceless, Gore added. It creates a direct line of communication to a single person. Gore and Burdeno also liked the more personal relationship of fully exploring their goals with their builder.

They initially wanted just a kitchen redesign. But after early discussions with Morgan, he convinced them — and rightly so, Gore says — to enlarge the kitchen, partly to ensure the design worked properly.

Morgan also asked if they had plans for

future remodeling since it would make sense to do both projects at one time. If one is taking off the back of the

house to expand the kitchen, the workers will have to deal with the upstairs anyway.

"It made sense to us, although we hadn't thought of

moving the bathroom," Gore says. "But he says as long as we were redoing the master bathroom, we had to move some pipes and align them with the upstairs bathroom."

Being flexible with one's design/builder is important, says Tom Nicholson of Needham, Mass., who worked with Morgan on several projects to upgrade his 1850 Colonial. Homeowners should, at a minimum, have a rough idea of what they want but should also defer to their builder, who has the ultimate expertise.



For example, when figuring out how to remodel a couple of sheds attached to the rear of his home, Nicholson wanted to keep the original footprint. But Morgan suggested raising the structures and rebuilding the kitchen-family room, bedroom and study. It resulted in a better design, and Nicholson ultimately had to agree.

"That's why the design/build concept always appealed to me; you not only get someone who is also an architect but a person who is interested in understanding what the owner is looking for," Nicholson says.

While Gore and Burdeno had agreed to expand, they did not have a clear design in mind. For that reason, Gore advises homeowners to thoroughly research a design. She spent several months looking through design magazines and ultimately gave Morgan 10 pictures to work with.

Martha Taft of Charlestown, Mass., agrees. When planning to remodel the tiny

kitchen in her 130-year-old row house, all she knew was that she wanted bigger and better. But she also had to deal with the difficulties of an old home with narrow hallways and unforgiving floor plans.

Taft also poured through tons of magazines. "I saw a kitchen in *This Old House*, and it looked exactly like what I had envisioned, given our floor plan," she says. "The magazines helped prior to hiring a professional."

Taft worked with Paul Morse of Morse Constructions in Somerville, Mass. The beauty of this design/build relationship was that Morse further helped Taft to visualize his drawings. Taft appreciated this more personal relationship and the fact that Morse really took the time to talk to her about what he planned to do.

Nicholson, who chose design/build because of the better

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— Virginia Hibbard

communication with one person, told Morgan what he wanted. When Morgan came back with alternatives, the two could discuss the best option and come up with a joint decision. For example, for a sunroom addition, Morgan recommended radiant heating since piping the heat through the floor would best fit a sunroom.

One of the greatest advantages of design/build is working closely together as the project moves along, says Virginia Hibbard, who worked with Morgan to undergo a kitchen-family-dining room addition in her Weston, Mass., Cape-style home.

"Right from the get-go you are working hand-in-hand with a person who is both designing and building," Hibbard says. "There's no need for explanations between the architect and the builder on what you want. You also avoid relying on the architect passing on information to the builder, which leaves room for miscommunication."

When Hibbard first decided to remodel her home five years ago, she followed the traditional design-bid-build model. She met with an architect to go over the plans. "But we didn't go forward because he didn't listen to what we wanted," Hibbard says.

The architect had come to the house and met Hibbard, but never returned to meet with her again. Instead, he preferred to do all the work in his office at his drafting table. To Hibbard's horror, the architect drew a design that added glass along the



north side of her house, which does not provide sufficient light and is also not energy efficient, since in the New England region, the winds tend to come out of the Northeast.

So Hibbard decided to work with Morgan. She knew about the design/build process since as a landscape designer, she was well-versed in designing options not only for the garden but for the home.

Hibbard's project entailed completely changing the floor plan to enlarge it. A key aspect was integrating the existing roof line with a new one. At the project's onset she told Morgan what she wanted, and then Morgan studied the existing architectural plans and came up with some design solutions. They discussed how expanding the dining room would impact the adjacent rooms.

Hibbard also noticed that, as a client, she had more control. When working with a design/builder, there is one per-

son who knows the whole project like the back of his hand. For example, at one point a doorway with moulding at the top didn't reach the top of the ceiling due to differing ceiling heights. Since Morgan was on-site each day overseeing the process, he could more easily handle the unexpected, she says.

"When things come up that you don't anticipate, the design/builder has that intimate knowledge of the project," she says. "The design/build individual is accountable for the entire project from start to finish, so he has to answer to you. It's a different relationship."

Since design/builders tend to employ smaller crews, the main point person can coordinate his subcontractors in a more organized fashion, Hibbard says. "The chances are that the experience will run more smoothly, since you have less anxiety when dealing with one person," she says.

This model also helps to prevent delays, Taft says. "A

third party can confuse issues,” she says. “It was clear to us what the scope of the job was.”

Janet Williams of Norristown, Pa., compared her sun-room/deck addition and kitchen/laundry/powder room renovation to watching a ballet. “One day the workers were taking out the trees and putting on the deck, and then they did the outside cement work, all under one person’s employ,” she says. “When the next guy was needed, he was there.”

Williams had never heard of design/build. Her daughter referred her to Dennis Gehman of Gehman Custom Builder Inc. in Harleysville, Pa. And it was a good thing since Williams was a bit nervous about spending a lot of money after watching her neighbors struggle through projects using various contractors and architects.

“When he came over the first time, I had no idea I would end up with a cedar porch with windows and sliding

glass doors,” Williams says. “I just wanted a screen porch, but we went whole hog, and I have never been sorry.”

For the kitchen/laundry room job, Williams called two different mason-contractors, and neither agreed to take it on since they thought the laundry room was too close to the garage and that it would affect their heater (located in the laundry room). They didn’t want to take on the responsibility of moving it and dealing with possible safety issues, Williams says. They also said it would be too expensive to call in another contractor just to take care of the heating problem. So Williams hired Gehman, who could handle moving the hot water heater to the garage to offer more space in the laundry room.

While everyone agreed that one finds a good builder through personal references, seeing is also believing. A good builder will take the time to show his or her portfolio or bring a client on a site visit, Hibbard says. ♦