



AN OLD APPROACH REVSITED

Developing Master Builders

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The modern-day A/E/C industry is a highly fragmented industry. Design is separated from construction. Architecture is separated from engineering. Lighting design is separated from acoustic design. Electrical contractors are separated from mechanical contractors.

But through the constant development of new disciplines and trades, we create more opportunities for failure than success. Disciplines are created as more of us are convinced that we can't perform our services alone. We hire "experts" at the urging of corporate lawyers and paper pushers. But do we really need all these experts?

In addition, we write contracts that aim to reduce risks, rather increase opportunities. Through ever-increasing legalities and contract amendments, we fall further from the goal of designing and constructing buildings and structures in a creative, effective, and efficient manner.

The risk averse may say, "Why be creative if we can write more pieces of responsibility into somebody else's contract?" or "Who cares about the opportunity? Just make sure that we are protected and paid." If left unchecked, design and construction contracts intended to define scope, responsibilities, and project processes will only further fragment the industry and handicap A/E/C professionals.

Besides the experts and limited contracts, there is another evil our industry must deal with every day that continues to fragment us— the project delivery process of competitive bidding. Design firms produce a complete set of construction documents that, at best, are error-filled representations of a design intent. Then contractors interpret these documents with little or no input from the designer with the intent of developing the lowest bid possible. How can this make sense? Do owners really want their projects delivered in this manner? Can't we offer a better solution?

As an industry, we should move toward a more unified approach where we aggressively seek creative means for designing and constructing projects. We need to create a new process where the focus is not on finding the right expert, the correct contract, or the lowest bid. We need to apply a "master builder" approach to our projects.

The master builder approach is simple. It starts with an owner who wants to build a project and enters into a contract with a single entity for that project. This entity designs and constructs the project. Where this differs from design-build, partnering, teaming, or other catch phrase of the day is that this entity employs or is a master builder, a single entity who is able to design and construct projects completely. Master builders are driven to perform for the success of the project and make no distinction between design and construction as is currently done today with design-build.

The romantic ideal of a single person grasping all of the complexities of modern-day projects may be a little far-fetched. The technology and product options alone on a "normal" building project are enough to cripple the mental capacity of even our industry's best. But a single entity that shares the same mission, purpose, and even 401k – definitely is capable.

Rather, master builders can propose and manage projects completely. They understand and stand up for the theoretical aspects of design and design intent. They know what it takes to successfully construct a project. They thrive on good design, embrace technology, and study and practice the intricacies of construction detailing. They can harness the different talents and skills of other professionals and focus their combined energy for the success of the project.

These master builders are unique for our time. A few exist and Burns & McDonnell is one of them.

They are not just project managers, construction managers, engineers or architects. Master builders are able to manage, design, and construct with ease because they are culturally aligned to perform a project for an owner in ways that few can do today.

Your firm should work towards identifying and developing future master builders and remove the problems created by industry fragmentation. Those of us who employ a philosophy of a unified master builder approach will offer owners a better, more competitive option than current project processes such as design-build or design-bid-build. Owners, especially in lean times, will always choose the better project delivery method, and this one helps ensure that a project will not be overly burdened with costly construction claims.

The development of master builders starts with assessing your current personnel. Do you have people who stand out, continually succeed in what they do, and are passionate about their projects? Yes? Then invest in them where they are lacking, sharpen their technical and management skills, and develop them into solid project and ultimately practice leaders. Create a culture of cooperation and resist the fragmentation that defines design and construction disciplines.

Strive to hire fewer outside experts. Work first towards the goal of performing more of your services in-house. External experts will always have their place, but this approach will maximize your position and opportunity on the project, not somebody else's. It will simplify your contracts, expose your firm to more project opportunities in both the design and construction phases, and increase your capacity to accept more calculated risk and find more success in all phases of projects.

Developing and employing master builders can take your firm to a competitively dominant position. You will be more successful, and our beloved industry will be less fragmented. Clients

will never go back to the old fragmented systems that are so prevalent in our industry today. We all win in that scenario.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeffrey W. Ganthner, AIA is a proven and well diversified professional expertise leading teams and organizations in the architecture, engineering, construction and technology industries. Jeffrey casts the vision for innovative thought, leadership, and solutions. He has led a distinguished and diverse career as an architect, engineer, designer, teacher entrepreneur, and business leader. He can be reached at jeff@leadershiphunt.com.