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The Design-Build Method: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW



What is Design- Build?

It's a question we're asked a lot — and luckily, one with a simple answer! The Design-Build process is a more efficient and collaborative way of creating your desired space.

It's a method of (you guessed it) designing and building that provides significant benefits for both residential and commercial developments. It means that owners can hire a single entity (the Design-Builder) to deliver their project under just one contract. From estimations to architectural drawings, engineering checks, construction phases, final sign-off, and move-in— responsibilities and risks are defined and managed.

The working relationship with your architectural and construction teams is vital to the success of your project. Whilst the Design-Build process offers a simplified approach to construction, it's important to understand exactly how this works.

Today, we explain Letter Four's Design-Build process in detail. With this step-by-step guide, you'll have a clear understanding of what you can expect at every phase leading up to the construction of your project.

So let's get started...



Step 1:

01

Research and Due Diligence



This is the first phase of any Design-Build process. Due Diligence involves gathering information and evaluating the project's unique goals and constraints.

At Letter Four, we take time to listen to our client's specific needs and design preferences. We understand each project is unique — meaning that thorough research and Due Diligence form the bedrock of any successful collaboration.

This can include (but is not limited to) assessing the existing conditions of the building or plot, defining project timelines, budget, and deliverables, as well as local planning and zoning requirements.

As part of this phase, you can expect:

Initial project meetings and calls to coordinate proposals and deliverables from consultants

Consultations with local authorities to understand zoning and planning constraints

Drawings to show what is existing; such as site plans, floor plans, roof plans, and interior and exterior elevations

Collection of design inspiration imagery

Discussion of topographic surveys, client inspection reports, photo documentation, confirmation of project scope, and goals before moving on to the next project phase



As part of this first phase, Letter Four will prepare detailed notes outlining any findings, questions, or concerns on the project. Whilst we make every effort to collect all necessary information relating to project design, permissions, and construction, we cannot take responsibility for incorrect information provided by clients, consultants, the city/county, or other agencies.



Step 2:

Conceptual Design



It's now time to create conceptual design options! This is one of the really exciting parts of the Design-Build process – when your dreams start taking shape.

Conceptual Design involves creating hand sketches to scale to address options for the project design based upon information gathered during the Due Diligence phase. This includes floor plans, interior and exterior features, and inspiration imagery to help you to understand the project design. You can expect to review this Conceptual Design Package for comment and approval before moving on to the next phase.

This phase can include:

Project meetings to confirm and define the design inspiration

Reviewing local planning codes and regulations for the project

Presenting hand-sketched plans (including one round of revisions) for your approval

Budget review and the creation of an initial pricing document as we segway into the next phase of the project





Step 3:

Preliminary Pricing



Once the Conceptual Design is approved, we get to work preparing preliminary pricing for the project as a whole. To create accurate and realistic pricing estimates, we provide an assumed cost range based upon past and current projects.

Unless otherwise specified, pricing will be limited to the building itself — and will not include site work or landscaping.

As part of this crucial Design-Build phase, you can expect:

To receive pricing assessments based on approved conceptual designs

A project meeting and calls to discuss any outstanding details

The creation of an “all-in” estimated project cost and timeline

A clear list of what is included in and excluded from the project budget



Step 4:

04

Schematic Design



So, how exactly does “Schematic Design” differ from “Conceptual Design”? Well, this phase involves drafting detailed plans and models based on the approved conceptual sketches. We work in a BIM software called Revit, in which we model your project in 3D. This is a great time to get a sense of the project massing, rooflines, openings, and proportions.

If needed for budgeting, we will consult with structural engineers to better understand the structural considerations of the project.

As part of this phase, work can involve:

Project meetings and calls to identify any areas requiring additional expertise

Preparing drafted plans, including floor and roof plans and exterior elevations

Client approval of drawings as we prepare to progress to the next phase of work



Step 5:

05

Design Development



With the Schematic Design approved, it's time to start developing project documentation to the levels necessary for engineering and client approval to submit for permits.

As part of this, we'll prepare basic project drawings for initial city plan check submission. More detailed documentation for individual agency approvals will be prepared later in the project, as part of the Permitting phase.

During Design Development, you can expect:

Confirmation of local planning requirements and regulations

Preparation of drawings for initial plan check submission

Integrating consultant and engineering work into project documents

Alongside a budget review, preparing a more detailed, itemized construction estimate





Step 6:

06

Construction Documents



The Construction Documents phase is a continuation of the Design Development stage. As part of this, Letter Four will develop drawings and specifications to the level needed to actually build your project.

This will often allow us to finalize our construction bid, and will include additional details such as lighting and power plans.

As part of this, you can expect:

Preparation of the final construction bid and a project contract

Detailed drawings to include project notes, exterior elevations, lighting, and power plans

Initial elevations and 3D interior views with placeholder finishes and fixtures

The creation of a construction schedule and itemized project bid



This phase happens concurrently with the Permitting and Interior Design phases so that the final Construction Documents include all updates made through project permitting and interior selections. *This means that we're ready to build as soon as we secure your permits.*

A modern interior space with large glass windows and doors, featuring a yellow overlay. The scene includes a dining area with a table and chairs, and a kitchen area with a counter and shelves. A large white number '07' is in the top right corner.

Step 7:

Permits and Approvals



As part of this phase, we liaise with agencies, planning departments, and design review boards to secure required project approvals.

To ensure our permits are approved, we will:

Arrange and attend pre-application meetings with relevant authorities and consultants

Submit drawings to authorities and agencies, providing drawing updates if required

Coordinate and attend hearings, board meetings, or neighborhood councils, if applicable

Secure permit Ready-To-Issue (RTI) paperwork and full client approval



Step 8:

08

Interior Design



This is a particularly fun and exciting phase for designers and clients alike. At Letter Four, we pride ourselves on creating beautiful, functional, and truly inspiring spaces. Interior design plays a large part in this — including fixtures and finishes such as flooring, decorative lighting, cabinetry, tile, and plumbing fixtures. Should you choose, we can even help with selections of furnishings and accessories!

We'll help keep your budget and schedule on track during this phase. Once choices are approved, we'll also update drawings to include accurate installation details based upon your selections.

As part of the interior design phase, work can include:

Meetings and calls to define interior design approach, materials, fixtures, and fittings

Identifying quantities and providing preliminary pricing estimates

Arranging physical samples for client presentation, review, and approval

Updates to specifications, drawings, and details to reflect interior selections

Purchasing items whilst tracking budget and delivery, as well as installation schedules





Step 9:

Construction Administration



With your building plans (both inside and out) completely finalized and approved, Letter Four will ensure you have a seamless experience from start to finish. Our architectural staff will provide hourly work and services to make sure the project is built as-designed, and the construction phase is kept on time and budget.

We'll do whatever it takes to keep this essential phase on track. This can include, but is certainly not constrained to site visits, interpreting

drawings with construction experts and engineers, assessing project decisions, and full project management services.

If Letter Four is providing architectural design-only and not acting as Design-Builder, we can still liaise with your contractor — reviewing progress and ensuring your project is completed as originally envisioned.





READY TO KICK-START YOUR PROJECT?



Letter Four is a full-service architectural design and construction firm based in California. We understand that every project has a unique set of needs and goals, and offer stand-alone architecture and construction services as well as the full design-build process. From planning and pre-construction to the closeout process, we ensure your vision comes to life on time and on budget — reach out to us today.