



Selecting a Builder

“I Have a Friend in the Construction Business”

Carol Smith

Years ago when a pioneer family wanted a new home, they gathered some nearby neighbors and trees. The men put the house up while the women prepared an abundant feast. By sundown the new home was complete, if not fancy. Now residential construction demands so much knowledge that a carefully selected builder is your best ally in this process.

Selecting the right builder for your new home is akin to choosing the right surgeon when you need an operation. Not only must your builder have knowledge and skills, but your personalities should work well together. Tempted to serve as your own general contractor? Rent the video, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*. The mishaps in *Mr. Blandings* are entertaining as long as they're happening to Cary Grant—not to you and your checkbook.

Your Ideal Builder

Builders come in all shapes and sizes, just as customers do. Homebuilding firms can have from one to hundreds of employees. Some buyers prefer the security that a large corporate establishment represents. Others prefer the personal attention and family feeling of a small company. The type of home you want also influences the type of organization you select. To select a builder, begin by thinking about yourself. What kind of customer are you?

A key issue is deciding which type of product best meets your needs. Builders and their products fall into three broad categories: production, semi-custom, and custom.

Production Builders

Production builders organize their companies for high-volume construction. Production builders offer a collection of floor plans, each with a choice of two or more exterior designs or elevations.

Tour model homes to view the different choices. Buyers can personalize the floor plan they choose by selecting floor coverings, tile, countertops, light fixtures, cabinets, and exterior finishes. Adding features from a list of popular options can further personalize the home.

Advantages. Models you can view at leisure provide an opportunity to study the quality of the builder's work and get a feel of the home that blueprints alone cannot achieve. Having a standardized list of choices means it's faster and easier to make selections. The cost of your combination of selections is known quickly—sometimes immediately—making it easier to finalize your decisions.

Through repetition, the builder has worked any bugs out of floor plans. The total time to build is usually shorter than with a new design because construction personnel are familiar with the plans. Suppliers stock regularly used items, making material delays less likely. High-volume work, such as occurs in a subdivision, offers an advantage in scheduling trade contractors and can result in significant cost savings.

Disadvantages. Excitement over your new home may turn to frustration as you peruse the builder's prepared floor plans and approved collection of colors and materials. Altering the structural elements—those components that support the weight of the home, such as the foundation walls—requires re-engineering and re-submission of plans to the building department. These expensive and time-consuming steps disrupt the momentum of high volume construction. Consequently, production builders permit few structural changes.

Other purchasers have your floor plan and elevation. Although production builders plan product mix within a community and monitor exterior color choices, two similar homes can end up near each other. Although you can examine the quality of the builder's work in the models, little room exists for negotiating individual standards. Production builders usually work in subdivisions where they own the lots rather than on individual sites. If you want one of their homes, you must select a site in one of their subdivisions.

Custom Builders

These builders specialize in starting with a blank sheet of paper or computer screen and creating a unique home. You can also review existing floor plans and draw ideas from those. Custom builders tend to be small companies, both in the number of homes they build each year (typically 10 or fewer) and the number of employees.

Some custom builders establish relationships with one or more independent architects for plan development. For others, called design/build firms, the builder is also an architect or has an architect or draftsman on staff.

Advantages. Custom builders create one-of-a-kind homes on a homesite they offer or one you own. They design their operations around the customer's active involvement throughout the building process. You learn a great deal about home construction. If you enjoy the education, you will find this process rewarding in itself.

Custom builders have experience with a wide variety of finishes, unusual treatments, and design details. Often they have established relationships with trade contractors who perform specialized work, such as stained glass insets or copper roofing. Their systems and personnel are organized to build on isolated, scattered sites.

Disadvantages. Expect a significant initial investment in time and dollars for design development and the creation of working blueprints and specifications. Meetings can take many hours, followed by more meetings that take more hours. The preliminary stages can take months of changing the plans and then changing the changes.

Since alterations are possible throughout the process and choices are virtually unlimited, costs can rise dramatically unless the buyer has the self-discipline to stick to the intended budget. Again, because of the unique nature of each home, you lose the economies that large volume builders achieve. Custom-built homes typically take the longest to complete. Supervising scattered site work combined with the longer time needed to build one-of-a-kind homes also increases costs.

Semi-Custom Builders

These builders combine the characteristics of production and custom building. They work with preexisting plans and are flexible regarding changes, including those that require engineering and building department approval. Consequently, although you begin with an existing floor plan, many more opportunities exist for you to alter that plan.

Advantages. Many buyers feel more comfortable starting with a plan that is close to what they want rather than with a blank page or computer screen. Revising existing plans is normally faster and less costly than creating a new set of blueprints, yet this option still provides an opportunity for extensive changes. Semi-

custom builders are flexible about building location, working on individual sites, or in subdivisions that include the work of several builders.

Disadvantages. Fine-tuning a house plan takes time and money. You lose the economies of large-volume work and the resulting prices. Crews need more time when building from unfamiliar plans. Semi-custom builders are more open to plan changes than production builders before construction begins but less willing than custom builders to accept changes once construction is under way.

Which Type for You?

Can an existing plan satisfy your new home needs and desires? Do you have lifestyle circumstances to accommodate, such as a parent who lives with you? Do you make up your mind and that's it, or will you reconsider and make adjustments throughout the process? How much construction knowledge do you have? Are you interested in learning more? Do you have the time and interest to involve yourself in the day-to-day decisions about your home? How quickly do you want or need to move?

One caution to keep in mind: don't risk hiring a builder who operates in one style, thinking that you can coax, cajole, nag, bribe, or threaten the company to alter its culture. Each company's business style is shaped by the philosophies, personalities, and goals of the people associated with it. Their attitudes, systems, procedures, and even their documents are designed around them. Believing you can change all that can result in frustration, conflict, and dissatisfaction. Clarify in your mind which type will best serve your goals and look for that one.

Look at the Homes

Look closely at each builder's finished work and work in progress. Your home will receive the same attention to detail. Notice the quality of site management. Construction sites are intrinsically messy. It takes effort to keep them clean and under control. Are the homes and materials reasonably protected from weather, traffic damage, and theft? Take note of personnel you encounter. What are their attitudes toward you, each other, and the product they are creating?

Meet the Builder

Ask about things that are important to you and get a sense of the company's personality. Think of this as interviewing the company. When you visit the builder's office or the sales office, do you feel comfortable? Ask to meet the person who would be in charge of building your home. What experience does he or she have?

Ask about turnover. Excessive changes in staff and trade contractors create opportunities for missed details. Look at floor plans and talk about the home you want. How well does this company listen? Are the builder's suggestions and comments helpful and relevant? Are your questions answered clearly and completely?

Ask for an Overview

Many builders today provide a homeowner manual that guides buyers through the process and serves as a reference after move-in. Does the company schedule a preconstruction conference to review your plans and the process just before starting construction? Whom would you contact with questions?

Large companies may host one or more home buyer seminars during the process. If this situation is the case with a builder you are considering, ask to sit in on one. Such programs cover basic information. This investment of resources usually is a sign that the company is working hard to communicate with buyers.

Delivery Dates

What guidelines does the company use to determine a delivery date? Many factors outside the builder's control can cause delays, and builders who promise a firm date too early often disappoint their buyers. Every builder should have a system for updating you on the targeted delivery date.

Read Documents

Ask to see the contract documents and warranty. Pay close attention to sample specifications and written warranty standards. Also note the amount of detail provided; details demonstrate how precise the builder is in communicating. You can usually expect this same attention to detail to flow through the construction of your home.

References

Ads and signs merely alert you to the fact that a builder exists; they do not establish how the company treats its customers. For the answer to that important question, you must talk to the customers themselves.

Contact some of the builder's previous buyers or drive through an area where the builder has been working. Finding and talking with custom builder clients may require a bit of time. If the idea seems awkward at first, practice these words, "I'm considering having <name of builder> build my home. Can I ask you a few questions about your home and how you were treated?" You'll gain a wealth of information. Talk to at least five people and visit several areas if possible.

Throughout your explorations and conversations, visits and revisits, you no doubt heard the same names again and again. Comparing one detail after the next, you keep coming back to the same builder. Phone calls are returned promptly; questions are answered completely; information is forthright and clear. Suggestions about the home you want make sense; the chemistry feels right.

You're more excited than ever to get started. The price range is in line with your budget and the school district appeals to your children. Your hard work has paid off; you have found your builder.