

Challenge Your Design Team

When you hire a design professional, what are you really hiring? Well, you should be hiring experience, creative solutions, contacts, and a variety of other resources, all in the form of a partner who is going to commit to you and your project. It is natural to assume that anyone who presents themselves as a design professional would, in fact, have the necessary expertise to execute his or her job effectively. But expertise alone does not guarantee that your designer will be able to develop and implement the best solution for your unique scenario. Like it or not, you need to play an active role in the design process. If you are not familiar enough with plan reading and standard design practices, you can make a very costly mistake by trusting misguided advice.

There are an infinite number of design solutions that may work for a particular scenario, and as a result there is no “right” answer. On the other hand, there can be a “wrong” answer. Recently, I have seen some design solutions that were surprisingly inadequate. Whether it was a lack of talent or poor communication between the design and ownership teams, it was clear to me that they did not understand the client’s needs. As a result, the proposed design solution did not work.

Examples

In one recent example that I saw, the designer developed a plan for a small assisted living facility that had many flaws. First, the plan had no flow to it ... none of the work areas related to one another well. The ware washing was literally touching the cooking area. The dry storage area was only accessible from outside. Yes, you actually had to leave the kitchen and go outside to retrieve, say, a can of tomatoes. In addition, the designer had provided a typical chef’s counter for this application. The chef’s counter was simply not required, as such a configuration is applicable when each individual meal is being prepared to order. In this instance, the meals were being prepared in bulk.

In yet another example, I came across a ware washing room layout that featured a 66-inch conveyor dish machine, connected to a clean dish table that was 48-inches long. In other words, the designer had decided to include a dish machine that could handle approximately 250 racks per hour and a clean dish table that could only handle two racks at a time. When the clean dish table is full with *both* racks, it will shut down the dish machine. So ... the dish machine's capacity and productivity will likely be significantly reduced.

Why This Occurs

Most often, inadequate design solutions are a result of a communication breakdown between the owner and designer(s). It is the responsibility of the designer to obtain sufficient information to develop a layout that will meet the needs of the owner. In addition, it is the responsibility of the owner to stay involved in the design process and challenge the solutions presented by the designer. Challenging a design is not disrespectful ... it is healthy and important.

In one recent, personal example, I was brought in to review the layout produced by another designer. It was not until I pointed out the flaws in the design that the owner realized and appreciated the mistakes that had been made. Frustrated with the fact that a significant amount of money was paid to the original designer, combined with the fact that the facility was already under construction, the owner was in quite a quandary. Fortunately, we were able to catch the mistake before it was too late. In that instance, we were able to reduce the owner's budget by 35% and improve the facility in the process. Despite the anxiety and disappointment associated with the realization that you have paid for a poor product, keep in mind that it is much cheaper to change paper (i.e. modify the drawings) than it is to change concrete and wood (i.e. construction that has already begun or been completed).

Averting Disaster

In most situations, the owner or owner's representative has the capacity to prevent a designer from implementing a design solution that misses the mark. The keys are communication and involvement in the design process by both the

owner and the design professional. It is the responsibility of the designer to present the proposed solutions to the owner at major stages in the design process. More importantly, the designer should be sure that the owner fully understands the design and is comfortable before proceeding.

Likewise, the owner should take the time to fully understand the design solution that is being presented. There is no shame in asking questions and challenging the designer. Rather, it is far worse, in my opinion, for an owner to blindly accept the designer's solution without fully understanding the concepts and implications of the layout. This dialogue will ensure that the final design solution effectively meets the needs of the owner.

Conclusion

No one is as concerned for your own welfare as you are. Take it upon yourself to become involved in the design process and be sure that you are in agreement with the design solutions that are being presented. If you are not satisfied, demand that the necessary changes be made before you enter the construction phase. The only thing worse than a bad plan, is a bad plan that is actually used for construction. As an owner, you have the opportunity – and responsibility – to look out for your own best interest. I encourage you to take the time to properly review and understand the drawings that you have paid to have developed.