Smart Shopping Plans and Specs
Part Three

Since plans and specs are both important and expensive, we've been talking about shopping smart for them and the services that go with them. It's difficult to compare apples to apples regarding plans and specs, since they are instruments of service - the paper itself isn't what you buy - it's the information on it that's important. *Why you need the plans and specifications* is an important question. The three big reasons are:

1. To pursue building permits. This requires a minimal set directed to codes and structure.

2. Show the design concepts. This could include pictures, even drawing in the dirt with a stick.
3. Define roles and legal responsibilities. This requires by far the most information.

Fees for developing plans are sometimes based on percentages of cost. This is a bad idea almost always, since it creates an inherent conflict of interest. Cost over-runs benefit the designer, and cost saving ideas of the designer are penalized. That's not the kind of relationship you want!

The better ways to set fees are lump sum, hourly, or based on a fee schedule.

The simplest fees are fixed, lump-sum amounts to complete the work. That approach is great, as long as you can clearly define the scope of the project in great enough detail so the designer understands what it is that they are giving you a fee proposal on. The risk of not being clear is that the plans will cost more than you think, particularly if changes occur while they are being developed. A Fixed Cost doesn't mean that it's the same cost no matter what you decide to do, or how many times your mind might change. Again, since you're buying time, more

time should be expected to require more money.

If you can't clearly define the scope of the project, the next best thing is an hourly agreement with budgets for each step of the work as it proceeds. The budgeted steps helps you to know exactly what is being done and where the project is going, so you can manage the designer's time. Think of the designer as a tool that you can use to get your job done. You need to use that tool efficiently and be responsible for that efficiency with an hourly agreement. If you spend time going around in circles, that time is going to cost you money, so you should have a clear agenda for meetings, or see that your designer does.

A third approach that works well, even if you have a lot of options that you are going to consider, is a fee schedule. This is a pre-determined set of simple formulas, often based on area, that can be used to objectively calculate the fee amount. We developed the fee schedules we use by reviewing literally hundreds of projects, and breaking them into separate steps. We then looked at the time involved at accomplishing specific work items, and came up with a formula that reflected our cost. One aspect that some people like about this approach is that is clearly relates what you're actually buying - time - to an objective process. In other words, it's not based on how nice your house is, or how much someone thinks you can afford to spend. It's based on the cost of providing service.

Along with the actual pieces of paper that you need - the plans and specs - you should also consider getting advice and assistance during construction. The designer should be able to serve as your representative and assistant, interpreting technical issues for you, helping

negotiate with the contractor if that's required, and giving an objective perspective on what you should be expecting in terms of workmanship and materials.

The most efficient process of developing a design is a linear one, where you are always moving clearly forward, with evidence of progress at each point. That is rarely possible, because in the design process itself, to be most successful, you will be opening up possibilities and considerations that were not obvious. Although it's always better to have a clear idea of where you are going, you will be faced with uncertainty and indecision at times. When that happens, which is unavoidable, you should work out the uncertainty on your own as much as possible, using the designer and other team members as resources - your tools - to help you. Remember that if you give someone who is designing for you clear instructions to proceed, they are going to take your instructions seriously and get to work on drawings. If you later change your mind, those drawings still are going to cost money. Those are your precious resources - time and money being whittled away. Obviously, the more of those dollars that can go into sticks, nails, boards, paint, etc. the better.