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The "extras" in home construction and who should pay for them

By William Marquand, AIA

Whether you are remodeling or building new, the 'extras' in home construction can make or break your budget. Careful, detailed agreements with your contractor are key, with provisions about possible added costs. But what, exactly, should you expect for the price you already agreed to pay?

Good contracts provide for a fully functioning building. If your budget did not include a shelf and pole in bedroom closets, or a gas connection to the gas stove, it should have. You can't have a bedroom without a closet, or a gas stove if there is no gas. They should not be billed as extras by the contractor.

Buildings have to be built 'to code.' If the contractor omits insulation in some places required in code, he can't plead "the City changed their mind and is going to make us put it in." This can include everything as critical as roof vents in the attic and windows with the right ratings, to something as small as address numbers on your house.

Suppose the contractor suggests an extra skylight. You approve it and ask for the cost, but you don't get the cost until after it's installed. It's too expensive. And it's more costly to remove it than to pay the invoice!

Extras are profitable for the contractor. He's already paid the costs of setting up the project and getting workers to the site. Make sure he respects the "change order" process that should be called for in your contract. In the case of the skylight, if you only pay half the invoice, you probably won't have that problem again.

Suppose you requested a significant change. The contractor said he did not think it requires building department approval. The inspector drops by. He shuts down your project for being out of conformance with your permit. Now you are stuck with a longer project and permit fees.

Your contractor should either know what will require a revised permit, or find out. Don't play dumb to your expert advisors. Don't pretend that the building department won't care about significant changes. It can turn a dream home into a nightmare.

As the one who hired the team for any project, you are in the driver's seat. That is not to say that you need to be a 'control freak' to end up with the best project. Sometimes you should take advantage of the spontaneity of the building process.

Also, be respectful toward your team. We've discussed being firm and businesslike. But you want the project to be a good experience, one that everyone arrives at, day after day, wanting to do good work. Accusative language hurts

loyalty and quality. You probably won't need it in order to be firm.

There is even a place for forgiveness. You can't count on a flawless contractor. If he is up-front about a mistake, and you think he is careful overall, you may want to go easy on him. This is especially true if you are getting extra value, like the skylight.

You and your contractor are bound at the hip for the length of the project. It will take careful work to be fair to him. In return, he should work hard to be fair to you.

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