

Fire Rebuild Project Planning Pack

Residential





Content

- 03 About Us
- 05 FAQs
- 11 4-Step Process
- 13 Defining Your True Needs
- 15 Question List
- 20 Common Myths
- 24 Choosing the right team
- 28 Helpful Resources
- 29 Warning Signs
- 31 Are you Ready for Design?
- 33 When Can I Start Building?
- 36 Getting Your Project Started

Recover, Rebuild, Renew: A Thoughtful Guide to Rebuilding Your Home

Rebuilding your home after the devastation is a deeply personal and emotional journey. This is your opportunity to not only restore what was lost but to create something even better—something more resilient, functional, and reflective of your vision. From the earliest sketches to material selections and the final construction, the process should be one of renewal and hope.

But rebuilding is also complex. Without the right guidance, unexpected challenges can arise, causing stress, delays, and costly mistakes. Too many homeowners have struggled through the process of more standard builds by partnering with the wrong professionals or attempting to manage it alone—only to face budget overruns, frustrating setbacks, or homes that don't meet their expectations.

Reconstruction, especially in fire-prone areas, requires thoughtful planning, expert coordination, and a team that understands the unique challenges of rebuilding. From securing permits and navigating insurance claims to ensuring fire-resistant construction and sustainable design choices, there are many factors to consider. Without a solid strategy in place from the start, you risk costly design revisions, logistical roadblocks, and a final product that doesn't align with your needs.

That's why having an experienced, compassionate team by your side is essential. At Letter Four, our comprehensive Design-Build approach prioritizes extensive pre-planning, from feasibility studies and budgeting to architectural design, construction, and even furnishings. We take extra care to anticipate potential obstacles, streamline the process, and ensure a smooth experience—so you can focus on rebuilding your life, not just your home.

This guide will help you lay the groundwork for a successful project, whether you choose to work with us or another firm. You'll learn how to choose the right professionals, define your goals, and understand the key steps that will set your rebuild up for success. If you do decide to partner with us, you'll already be well-prepared for a seamless and efficient process—one that brings you back home, stronger than before.

Thank you for taking the time to read this, we're grateful for the opportunity to help you through this process.

Let's rebuild better, together.

About Us

Rebuilding with Expertise, Care, and Collaboration

Since 2010, Letter Four has been dedicated to providing homeowners with a seamless, transparent, and truly collaborative design-build experience. As a team of licensed architects, general contractors, and interior designers, we offer a comprehensive approach to rebuilding—one that ensures clarity, efficiency, and peace of mind from start to finish.

We understand that after experiencing the loss of a home, the rebuilding process can feel overwhelming. That's why we've structured our firm to handle every aspect of your project, so you don't have to navigate it alone. Our truly integrated team works together under one roof, ensuring smooth coordination between design and construction, while minimizing

delays, unexpected costs, and miscommunications. Beyond our in-house expertise, we have a trusted network of specialized consultants—professionals we've collaborated with for years—who can assist with navigating insurance claims, soil studies, landscape design, energy compliance, and more. Whether it's structural engineering, permit approvals, passive house features, or fire-resistant design strategies, we ensure that every detail is handled with precision and care.

You've been through enough. Our goal is to make this next chapter as smooth and rewarding as possible. We're here to guide you every step of the way, helping you rebuild a home that is not only beautiful but stronger, safer, and designed for your future.





FAQs

Rebuilding After the Fires



[Visit our Blog](#)

Rebuilding after a wildfire can feel overwhelming, and we know you have many questions about the process. Below, we've compiled a selection of the most common questions we've received from homeowners navigating the challenges of recovery. Our goal is to provide clarity, support, and guidance as you move forward.

For more in-depth information on these topics, please visit our blog page, where we are continually updating resources, best practices, and insights each week. If you have additional questions, don't hesitate to reach out—we're here to help.



“

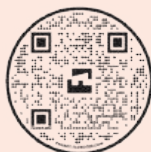
As new homeowners with no experience in renovation or design, we were very nervous about such a huge undertaking! However, we were immediately put at ease when we started working with Letter Four.



Rebecca S.,
Oberman Sherman Oaks, CA

Q: How do I handle property cleanup and debris removal safely?

A: As FEMA and the Army Corp of Engineers begin Phase 2 cleanup, homeowners who've lost their homes have the opportunity to take advantage of free debris removal. In order to participate you must complete the Right of Entry (ROE) form by March 31, 2025.



[Go to page](#)

- **Why is professional cleanup important?** Fire debris can contain hazardous materials, including lead, asbestos, and toxic chemicals. Government agencies and certified cleanup crews have the equipment and expertise to safely remove and dispose of this debris while protecting public health.
- **How do I apply for free debris removal?** Complete the Right of Entry (ROE) form to allow government agencies to access your property and conduct the cleanup. Forms are available at recovery.lacounty.gov/debris-removal or at local Disaster Recovery Centers.
- **What if I choose to opt out?** If you do not participate in the government program, you will need to hire a state-certified contractor at your own expense. Contractors must follow strict environmental regulations and obtain approval from local agencies before beginning work.
- **What about the soil on my property?** It's important to note that according to the latest news the Army Corp is removing 6" of soil as part of their cleanup in an effort to remove toxins in the soil. They are not testing the soil that

FAQs Continued

remains. We recommend doing so to ensure safety prior to starting construction.

For a full breakdown of cleanup options and safety tips, visit our [Blog](#).

Q: What are my options for rebuilding after a wildfire?

A: Rebuilding options depend on your long-term goals, timeline, and individual needs as well as insurance coverage and the amount you'd like to spend. Here are a few paths to consider:

- Rebuilding 1:1 on the same site using modern, fire-resistant materials and updated building codes. With this option we can rebuild as close as possible to your original home, while still making thoughtful improvements. The square footage and "bulk" of the home are the same and it is substantially in the same location, allowing for an expedited permitting process with a 30 day review period for the first submission.
- Rebuilding to 110% of existing is an option similar to the one above as it has a faster approval process with the benefit of some added square footage. This will cost more, as you may expect and could depend on available funding.
- Building your new dream home will follow a standard permitting timeline. If your home was too small to meet your needs or you were already considering a new build, this is the way to go.

Spending an extra few months is well worth it when it turns this devastation into a blessing in disguise and insurance has provided the primary funding for your dream home.

- Prefabs offer faster construction timelines and can include fire-resistant materials, though they are limited with respect to design style and customization.
- Temporary housing on site is an option if you need to reduce costs for rentals and increase income potential for the completed property. That said, we don't recommend living on a construction site while being exposed daily to your loss as well as that of your neighbors.
 - » Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) can provide additional housing flexibility while rebuilding your main home.
 - » Temporary housing such as an RV parked on site is an option as well

Our team at Letter Four specializes in fire-resistant home design, and we can walk you through each option in detail. Read more about rebuilding strategies on our [blog](#).

Q: How will rebuilding affect my property taxes?

A: Wildfire survivors may be eligible for property tax relief programs:

- Proposition 19 allows homeowners to transfer their tax base to a new home if relocating.
- Reconstruction tax reassessment: If you rebuild a similar home, your property taxes may not increase significantly.
- Disaster reassessment programs can provide temporary tax reductions on damaged properties.

It's best to consult with a property tax expert or your local assessor's office to determine the best approach. We also provide guidance on tax-related questions on our blog.

Q: What measures can I take to improve air quality and safety in my home after a wildfire?

A: Wildfire damage can severely affect indoor air quality due to lingering smoke, ash, and toxins. To improve air quality:

- Replace HVAC filters immediately and continue replacing them frequently.
- Use HEPA air purifiers in bedrooms and main living spaces.
- Hire a professional cleaning service to remove soot and deep clean ductwork.
- Avoid using central air or fans until all smoke damage is cleared to prevent spreading contaminants.

For a complete checklist on restoring air quality, visit our blog page.

Q: What construction methods can enhance fire resistance in my rebuilt home?

A: Incorporating fire-resistant design and materials can help protect your home from future wildfires. Key strategies include:

- Class A fire-rated roofing materials like metal, tile, or composite shingles.
- Non-combustible exterior walls using stucco, fiber cement, or fire-treated wood.
- Tempered glass windows to withstand extreme heat.
- Defensible landscaping with fire-resistant plants and cleared buffer zones.

For a full guide on fire-resistant home construction, check out our resources here.

Q: Are there expedited permitting processes for rebuilding after wildfires in Los Angeles?

A: Yes, Los Angeles has special permitting provisions to help fire survivors rebuild faster. These include:

- Expedited plan reviews for fire-affected properties.
- Waived fees for some reconstruction permits.
- Dedicated permit specialists to streamline approvals.
- Waived requirements like California Coastal review.

Our team has experience working with city officials to navigate the permitting process quickly and efficiently. Read more about rebuilding permits on our blog.

Q: What financial assistance or resources are available for homeowners rebuilding after wildfires?

A: Homeowners may qualify for:

- FEMA disaster relief grants for emergency housing and repairs.
- SBA low-interest loans for property damage and rebuilding.
- State and local assistance programs for temporary housing and rebuilding support.

Check out our comprehensive financial aid guide on our blog for up-to-date resources.

FAQs

Continued

Q: How do we expect construction costs to change due to the fires and new presidency?

A: The combination of labor shortages, material price hikes, and increased demand has significant cost implications for homeowners looking to rebuild in years to come.

According to a study by BuildZoom, single family residential construction costs in California are already among the highest in the nation, averaging \$250-\$400+ per square foot. As you might expect, construction costs in Los Angeles are significantly higher, with high end custom homes in areas like Malibu and the Pacific Palisades easily starting at \$600+ per square foot and extending beyond \$1,000 per square foot. With material and labor costs on the rise, homeowners could see these figures climb by 10-25%+.

We are still in the very early stages of rebuilding and understanding how Trump's policies will affect our efforts. Delays caused by labor shortages, material procurement challenges, and price gauging could cause economic inflation and further inflate costs for the construction industry. Homeowners may need to budget not only for increased material expenses but also for extended project timelines that add to overall expenses.

Q: How do I know if I've found the right team?

A: The right team for your project will be sensitive to your situation, knowledgeable about processes and best practices to move forward, and will listen to your needs.

They will have an outstanding portfolio of work that demonstrates their ability to execute beautiful and resilient homes that speak to your aesthetic. They will have an understanding of what style you are trying to achieve in your build, and can communicate about design ideas with ease. You'll feel like you can attain a good flow when brainstorming with them and organizing the next steps of planning.

In this guide, we've included a section called "Choosing the Right Team". There, you'll learn the hallmarks of a team with the level of professionalism you should be looking for, as well as a list of questions you can ask when interviewing candidates.

Q: What's the process like and how can I best prepare to get started?

A: Every Architect or Design-Builder has their own process, and they should be able to describe it clearly both in terms of the big picture and the smaller details. They will also be able to issue clear directives on what actions you can take to get ready for planning.

At Letter Four, we start every project with a Due Diligence phase, during



which we investigate your goals and assess their viability. Our team will advise you on what information they'll need relating to your design preferences, priorities, and financial constraints.

We then move on to Conceptual Design and Preliminary Pricing to investigate design options and their associated total project costs. Our goal here is to determine a design direction and required project budget before moving forward with the technical drawings, permits, and construction. This process eliminates unknowns and allows our clients to make the most informed decisions on how to move forward with their project. With our firm, these three phases are offered as an Action Plan - a package that does not require you to commit to the full project.

Once you're ready to move past the preparatory work of action plans, we advance to Schematic Design and Design Development. This leads to the creation of Construction Documents, the drawings and documentation needed to build your project.

While obtaining all required permits and approvals, we begin to zoom in on the details of your Interior Design, such as material and fixture selections and drawings of things like tile layouts and cabinet

particulars. While we build the project our architectural team stays on board for the Construction Admin phase, when we coordinate with the field to answer questions with a "design eye" and make sure that what's designed is what gets built.

Q: How can Letter Four assist me in the rebuilding process?

A: At Letter Four, we provide comprehensive design-build services to make rebuilding as seamless and stress-free as possible. Our in-house team of licensed architects, general contractors, and interior designers works collaboratively to ensure:

- A transparent, streamlined process from initial planning to final construction.
- Fire-resistant, high-quality home design that meets or exceeds modern building codes.
- Support with permitting, budgeting, and insurance coordination. We can help you to prepare your "as was" estimate to account for the value of your home prior to the fire, as well as the all-in cost to rebuild, including soft costs, construction, finishes, fixtures, furnishings, permitting fees, and more.

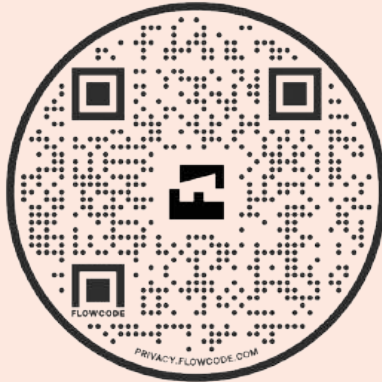


Their level of professionalism and communication is unmatched, which is of the utmost importance when embarking on a big housing project!



Stacey J., Culver City, CA

ClearTM 4-Step Process



[Go to Clear 4-Step Process page for more information.](#)

1

Action Plan

2

Technical Documentation

3

Final Touches

4

Construction

1.1

Due Diligence

└ As-builts

└ Surveys

1.2

Conceptual Design

1.3

Preliminary Pricing

└ Pricing Phase #1

2.1

Schematic Design

2.2

Design Development

└ Pricing Phase #2

2.3

Construction Documents

3.1

Permitting

3.2

Interior Design

3.3

Landscape Design

4.1

Construction

└ Pricing Phase #3

4.2

Construction Administration



Defining Your True Needs

A Crucial First Step in Rebuilding

After the devastation of such catastrophic loss, the thought of rebuilding can feel overwhelming. You're likely dealing with insurance claims, temporary housing, financial concerns, and the emotional weight of losing your home. With so much happening at once, it's natural to feel the urge to rush into planning—to regain a sense of control and start rebuilding your life as quickly as possible. But right now, before diving into floor plans and features, it's important to pause. Take a step back, breathe, and give yourself the space to truly think about what you need from your new home. This isn't just about rebuilding a structure—it's about creating a space that will support you and your family in the years to come.

Before meeting with an architect, take some time to reflect on what matters most. This simple exercise will help clarify your vision, streamline communication, and ensure your design truly aligns with your needs. Walking into your first design meeting with a clear sense of what you want will make the process more efficient, saving you time, money, and potential frustration down the line.

Looking Beyond Features

Understanding the ‘Why’

Losing a home is more than losing a building—it’s losing a space filled with memories, milestones, and daily routines that shaped your life. In the wake of that loss, it’s natural to feel drawn to rebuilding exactly what you had. Your home wasn’t just walls and a roof; it was the place where holidays were celebrated and where you gathered with loved ones. Recreating that space as it was might feel like the best way to restore a sense of normalcy, but it’s important to acknowledge that no matter how closely you replicate the design, it won’t be exactly the same. And that might not be a bad thing.

Instead of focusing on rebuilding a replica, take this opportunity to reflect on what truly made your home special. Now is the time to consider how your home supported your daily life, your routines, and your relationships—and how it could do so even better in the future.

Example: Rethinking the Kitchen from the Home You Lost

Imagine your previous home had an open kitchen that flowed into the living room. It was the heart of your home, where you cooked meals while chatting with family, where guests naturally gathered during holidays, and where you could be part of the action while preparing food. It was

a space full of warmth, but it also had its challenges—maybe it got chaotic when too many people were around, or perhaps you wished for more storage or counter space. Your initial instinct might be to rebuild the kitchen exactly as it was, to hold onto that familiar feeling. But before committing to the same layout, take a moment to think deeper. What made that kitchen special to you? Was it the openness? The connection to family and friends? The way it encouraged gathering? And were there aspects that didn’t serve you as well as they could have?

Maybe, upon reflection, you realize that while you loved the openness, you often struggled with too much noise while cooking. Perhaps you adored the large island but wished it had better seating. Instead of simply recreating the past, you now have the chance to refine and improve it—designing a kitchen that still fosters connection but also addresses the small frustrations you experienced before. By stepping back and considering why certain spaces mattered to you, you can build a home that honors the past while fully embracing the needs of the present and future. This is your opportunity to not just rebuild, but to create a space that truly supports and enhances your life moving forward.

Question List

1. What about the home you lost worked well for your lifestyle? What aspects did you love?

2. What challenges did you experience in that space? Was there anything that didn't quite function the way you needed it to?

3. What is your ultimate goal for your new home? How should it feel, and what should it provide? (Think big picture!)

4. How long do you plan to stay once your new home is complete? Is this a forever home?

5. Who lives in the household, and what are their individual needs? Does anyone in your household work from home? Do you need a space for your in-laws or elderly parents?

6. What will your entertaining habits be? Do you expect to host many guests? Is the exterior just as important as the house itself?

7. What are your top priorities for the project in terms of design? What do you consider “must-have” features?

8. Do you have a specific style you are trying to achieve? How would you define your personal style?

9. Who are the stakeholders in design decisions? Do you agree on the project goals?

10. Do you have any particular goals when it comes to eco-friendliness or energy efficiency? What about fire ratings and resilience?

11. What are your limits in terms of timeframe and budget?

12. Do you want to do a strict rebuild or add 10% to the square footage and/or height so that you can qualify for the expedited rebuild plan check process?

13. Given the expense and time required to design and build a new home, as well as the fact that site clean-up and testing will likely push your construction start into 2026, do you want to consider increasing the size by more than 10% and following the standard permitting timeline?





I could honestly go on for days about how good these guys are but the best endorsement I can give you about them is just to say this: I have subsequently hired Letter Four on three other projects and I have been more than happy with the results each and every time.



Nick T., Los Angeles, CA

Insurance Payouts and Projects Budgeting

By now, you likely have a solid understanding of what your insurance policy covers and have a general idea of your payout. You may have already received the advance payment you're entitled to, giving you some financial footing to start planning. However, as you move forward with rebuilding, you'll need to carefully assess how your insurance payout aligns with the actual costs of construction.

One key step is preparing an "as was" estimate—an assessment of what it would have cost to rebuild your home exactly as it stood before the fire. This is often essential for insurance negotiations and ensuring you receive the full amount you're owed. At the same time, you'll also need an estimate for your new home's construction, which may reflect design changes or upgrades you now want to include.

If you need guidance in reviewing or preparing these estimates or navigating the financial side of your rebuild, Letter Four is here to help so that you can make the most informed decisions on how to move forward.

Understanding Rebuild Project Costs

When planning your rebuild, having a clear and accurate budget from the start is crucial. **Letter Four will help you determine your all-in budget**—a comprehensive number that includes **everything**: construction costs, permits, design fees, engineering, finishes and fixtures, landscaping, and any other expenses tied to completing your home, including a contingency. This all-in budget gives you a realistic picture of what it will take to bring your vision to life, ensuring there are no surprises down the road.

If you're speaking with another contractor, be cautious—many initial estimates only include the base construction cost and do not account for design, engineering, or finishes and fixtures. A low estimate may seem appealing, but if it's not truly all-inclusive, you could find yourself significantly over budget once all the additional expenses are factored in. With Letter Four, you'll get a full, transparent breakdown so you can move forward with confidence, knowing exactly what to expect.

As labor and material costs are expected to fluctuate due to demand in our industry, new immigration policies, and tariffs, we will do our best to keep you updated on current market conditions every step of the way so that you stay informed and aware of the effects on your project's costs.



[Fire Rebuild Cost Calculator](#)

The form is titled 'COST ESTIMATE' and includes the Letter Four logo. It is divided into several sections:

- GENERAL CONTRACTOR**: Includes line items for demolition, foundation, framing, roof, exterior walls, interior walls, floors, and finishes.
- PERMANENT FINISHES**: Includes line items for kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, living area, and other interior finishes.
- CONSTRUCTION PHASE**: Includes line items for site work, foundation, framing, roof, exterior walls, interior walls, floors, and finishes.
- PERMITS AND FEES**: Includes line items for building permits, engineering fees, and other regulatory costs.
- LANDSCAPING**: Includes line items for site clearing, grading, and planting.
- CONTINGENCY**: A section for an all-in contingency budget.

The form also includes a 'TOTAL' section at the bottom, summarizing the overall project costs.



The simplest thing I would say is that, if we ever built a house again, we would do it with Letter Four.



Patrick S., Mar Vista, CA

Common Myths

There are some common myths about building custom homes that can keep people from getting the best results. It's important to understand the reality behind these myths in order to see the options that work in your favor.

1. "Building a Green or Passive House That Exceeds Fire Resistance Code Is Too Expensive"

It's a common misconception that building to Passive House standards or exceeding fire-resistant construction codes is prohibitively expensive. While it's true that incorporating higher-performing materials and systems requires a slightly higher upfront investment, the additional cost is often only 10-15% more than conventional construction. And what you spend upfront, you more than recoup in long-term savings. A Passive House or high-performance home dramatically reduces energy use—often by 60-80%—leading to lower monthly utility bills for the life of the home. Additionally, homes built with Type III fire-resistant construction can qualify for lower insurance premiums, which is especially critical in high-risk

wildfire zones where coverage costs are rising.

Beyond the financial benefits, a fire-resistant Passive House adds significant value to your property. Buyers are increasingly prioritizing energy efficiency, durability, and climate resilience, meaning a home designed to higher standards will command a premium on the resale market. Plus, a well-sealed, well-insulated home provides superior indoor air quality, comfort, and sound insulation, enhancing the overall livability of the space. At Letter Four, our staff member Tessa Park is a Certified Passive House Designer (CPHD), and helps us to ensure that your home can be designed to meet both fire safety and high-performance energy standards without unnecessary cost overruns. Investing in a safer, healthier, and more efficient home is not just a smart decision for

today—it's a future-proof strategy that pays off in comfort, security, and financial savings over time.

2. “Architects are too expensive. I can just hire a drafter to draw up plans I come up with myself.”

What sounds like a clever shortcut is actually a recipe for disaster. It's true that a professional drafter should be able to put your plans to paper, but they don't have the experience to point out potential problems with your design. That means that once building begins, you may realize that there are a lot of issues that will need to be resolved with extra work. Budgets can quickly bloat in such scenarios. Drafters (or home designers) also often lack the skills to help you develop innovative design features. Their work is typically suited to more basic types of builds that don't put a lot of emphasis on aesthetics. In fact, a drafter will usually recruit the services of an architect when their clients want a design that is more complex, so the costs rise anyway.

Rebuilding after a wildfire isn't just about replacing what was lost—it's an opportunity to build smarter, safer, and more resilient. Hiring an architect ensures that your new home is designed with fire-resistant materials, thoughtful detailing, and strategic site planning to better withstand future threats. Unlike a professional drafter, who simply translates plans into technical drawings, an architect brings expertise in building science, fire-resistant design, and code compliance, helping you make informed choices about everything from ember-resistant vents to non-combustible siding. With wildfires

becoming more frequent and intense, your new home should not only be beautiful, but also built for resilience for your long-term peace of mind.

To learn more about why an architect is usually needed when it comes to home design, see our blog post:



[Go to page](#)

3. “A General Contractor is the first person you should talk to and hire if you're looking to rebuild your home after the fires. They'll give an accurate all inclusive estimate based on the square footage of the home you're looking to build.”

Many homeowners assume that the first step in rebuilding is hiring a General Contractor and that they can provide an accurate, all-inclusive estimate based on square footage. The reality? Without a completed design, no contractor can give you a truly accurate bid. A square-footage-based estimate may sound appealing, but it's often a lowball number designed to get you to sign on—one that doesn't account for many critical costs. These bids typically exclude architectural design fees, structural and civil engineering, plan check and permit fees, finishes and fixtures, appliances, exterior work, and landscaping. Once the real costs start to add up, homeowners often find themselves over budget and facing unexpected expenses.

This is why the Design-Build approach is a far better solution for fire rebuilds. Instead of separating

the design and construction phases, Letter Four integrates both under one roof, as well as interior design, ensuring that every aspect of your project is accounted for from the start. We provide your all-in project costs early and often, basing costs on current projects in construction and accounting for contingencies given the current industry climate. This means no hidden costs, no surprises, and a streamlined, efficient process that keeps your project on time and within budget. When you work with Letter Four, you're not just getting a contractor—you're getting a team that ensures your home is thoughtfully designed, fully priced, and expertly built from day one.

The first person or team you should be hiring is an architect or Design-Build firm. They will need to prepare your project design, specifications, engineering, and secure permits before a contractor can provide an accurate bid. See the next common myth for more information about the difference between working with a separate architect and contractor versus with a true Design-Build, like Letter Four.

4. “Design-Bid-Build is the only way to make sure that you have competitive bids and get the “best deal” on the construction of your project.”

The Design-Bid-Build process puts your project up for bidding by different general contractors once your design is good to go. Each contractor will try to make the best case for why they should be chosen to build your home, and the main point they often compete on is price. Therefore, it's common to believe that this will allow you to

get your home built as cheaply as possible.

However, while the quote may be low, the final price could be anything but. It's not unusual for unscrupulous contractors to lowball quotes, only to argue for extra costs later on. They may also make compromises on the quality of materials used, or cut corners on important building processes that will affect the integrity of your home. In this case, you could end up eventually paying for repairs and rework - costs that could have been saved by choosing a contractor who didn't skimp on quality.

With the Design-Build process, your entire project is handled by a single company. Despite there being no competition over who gets to build your home, you can still end up paying less. That's because the whole process is streamlined by being kept in-house, coordinated among a single team. This holistic workflow includes multiple budget checks, with clear communication between all project contributors regarding expenditures. Such efficiency keeps misunderstandings out of the equation, minimizing opportunities for costs to rack up. One team is held accountable for adhering to the budget and preventing excess spending.

To learn more about why the Design-Build process offers superior benefits, see our blog post:



[Go to page](#)

5. “Architects only provide drawings, builders just follow the instructions. Therefore, builders don’t need to understand design.”

Architecture combines artistry with technical expertise, using advanced skills to develop designs that can embody a unique vision in the real world. Architects leverage their knowledge of space and the built environment to plan out buildings that offer perfect functionality for occupant needs while presenting an appealing aesthetic. They communicate their goals through drawings and blueprints, which are then passed on to builders.

Many think of building as a purely practical process. Almost like a paint-by-numbers picture, all contractors have to do is follow the drawings and use the materials that have been chosen by the client.

In reality, building is still very much connected to design, and the way

it’s executed can determine whether or not your home is true to your design vision. Because builders are responsible for installing structural and finish items and taking care of the final details, their work has a big impact on your home’s aesthetic.

Builders must be able to collaborate with architects closely, fully understanding the intent behind the design. This becomes especially important in the event that changes must be made in-field, whether in the form of material selections, fixtures, etc.

To learn more about why it’s necessary to choose a contractor who understands design, see our blog post.



[Go to page](#)





Choosing the Right Team

At your first consultation, you'll have an opportunity to scope out an Architect or Design-Builder's methods and personality. This session is essential for learning whether or not they will be suitable to lead your project, so we recommend that you treat it like an interview.

You should be asking questions about their typical protocols, the nature of their services, and how they facilitate your collaboration. Their answers should give clear information about their business practices and demonstrate that they have plenty of experience pulling off custom builds, especially in challenging times like these. You should get the impression that they have established a proven workflow for every project phase, with contingencies in place for any complications that may arise.

In the next page, we've provided a list of questions you can ask to better understand an Architect's or Design-Builder's approach and service philosophy.

1. How do you make sure you understand all of my needs and preferences before finalizing the design?

2. How can I expect the design process to unfold?

3. How will you communicate with me through the course of my project?
How often will we meet and when and how will I be updated on my home's progress?

4. What services do you offer in-house other than architectural design? Do you select finishes and fixtures? What about landscape design?

5. What would be your involvement in my project's construction?

6. Who works on my project, and at what stages do they work? How is your business structured?

7. When can you start my rebuild and how long will it take?

8. What pre-design services do you offer to help me prepare for the actual design planning?

9. Are you able to negotiate with my insurance company?

10. Do you offer any informational resources to help me understand what the custom building process entails?

11. What challenges do you foresee for my rebuild? How have you tackled these issues with other homes?

12. What do you do to stay current on the debris removal and cleanup process? What about the permitting timelines and exemptions for rebuilds?

13. How do you plan out my home's design? Should I expect to see 3D models, drawings, or other materials?

14. What happens if you realize my budget, scope, or timeline aren't realistic?

15. What's the best way for me to share my ideas and contribute to brainstorming?

16. What is your process for collaborating with sub-contractors and consultants?

17. How do you handle issues that arise after building has already begun?

18. What do you need from me to ensure this project is a success?



Links To Helpful, Verified Resources



**Planning for A
Safe Return Home**



**California
Government Fires
Website**



**LA County
Rebuilding Guide**



**CalOES Wildfire
Recovery**



**California
Department of
Insurance**



**Mayor Bass'
Press Release
Site**



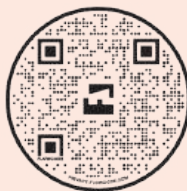
**CSLB Disaster
Help Center**



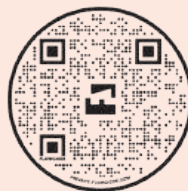
**Los Angeles
Wildfire Recovery
Resources**



**Public Works
Debris Removal**



**LA County Relief:
Funding and
Resource Portal**



**Insurance
Bulletin: Advance
Claim Payments**



**Right of Entry
Form for Free
Debris Removal
Program**



Warning Signs

As you're evaluating possible candidates for your build, you may encounter some red flags that they aren't the right fit. These signs should not be ignored, since they are often indications that either their experience level or communication style won't align well with your needs.



They have difficulty actually defining the steps of the design process.

This is a sign that the Architect or Design-Builder's approach may be too unstructured or disorganized. If they don't stick to a firm sequence of steps and checklists, your project's planning is likely to miss essential steps. You can expect to be putting out fires as your project unfolds.



You feel unclear about what to expect when working together, even after having multiple meetings.

This could be in relation to their process, time frames, budgets, and services provided, as well as their methods for conveying the design. It can also pertain to communication, if you never feel certain about when you'll hear from your Architect or Design-Builder next. At no point should you feel like you're in the dark regarding your own project.



There's a lot of communication friction.

Perhaps you don't feel on the same wavelength, or your communication styles just don't match. This could be attributed to anything from personality differences, to one party preferring e-mail while the other prefers phone calls. While it may feel uncomfortable to break ties for personal reasons, having a good connection with your Architect or Design-Builder is essential to achieving the results you want.



You seem to have clashing styles. Do you feel like the Architect or Design-Builder just can't seem to grasp your personal style? This usually becomes evident during the conceptual design phase. Drawings and vision boards they create will always look "off", even after you've given them a lot of specific feedback. You may just have different tastes, and that's something you can't compromise on when you're building your dream home!



They don't work well with others. Does it seem like the Architect or Design-Builder doesn't have a strong approach to collaborating? Or maybe they have too big an ego? This can be disastrous on projects as personal as custom homes. Architects or Design-Builders who have a "my way or the highway" approach aren't concerned about your vision, they just want to build their own. If you feel like they don't prioritize your preferences or exhibit condescending behavior, you don't have to accept it.



They don't have great relationships with contractors and sub-contractors. This could be related to the previous point - an Architect or Design-Builder that is difficult to work with isn't likely to have long-standing partnerships with quality contractors. However, inexperience could be another cause. A newbie without much in-field experience may not have had the opportunity to build up strong relationships yet. While this isn't their fault, it is a sign that they lack the necessary experience to make sure your project is built successfully.



Are they who they say they are? In times of high demand, it's crucial to verify that the architect or contractor you're speaking with is properly licensed and qualified. If they don't hold a current architecture license, they cannot legally call themselves an architect—so be sure to check their credentials. Additionally, consider their capacity to take on your project. Are they a sole proprietor juggling multiple jobs? Do they have a team to support them, or are they making promises they may not be able to keep? A busy industry means some professionals may overextend themselves, leaving you with delays, miscommunication, or a project that doesn't get the attention it deserves. Do your due diligence before signing on.



Everything was organized, itemized, and well communicated, and our Project Manager was top notch!



Jaime B., West L.A.

Are You Ready to Start Designing Your Fire Rebuild?

Rebuilding after a wildfire is a significant journey, and when it's time to move forward with designing your new home, having a clear plan in place will help ensure a smooth process. Below is a checklist to help you determine if you're truly ready to begin.

- ☐ **You Have a Defined Project Budget**
Even if budget isn't your primary concern, you have a realistic understanding of your total rebuild costs. You've worked with professionals—like Letter Four—to establish an all-in budget that includes everything from design and engineering to construction and finishing. If insurance is covering part or all of your rebuild, you've verified how that payout aligns with your overall goals.
- ☐ **You've Thought About Your Home's Long-Term Future**
You've considered whether this will be your forever home or if you may sell in the near future. If you plan to stay, your design choices are focused on long-term comfort and personalization, possibly even aging in place.
- ☐ **You've Evaluated What Worked—And What Didn't—in Your Previous Home**
Rather than rebuilding exactly what was lost, you've taken time to reflect on your old home's strengths and weaknesses. What spaces worked well for your lifestyle? What didn't? You understand how your new home can be more functional, comfortable, and resilient while still honoring what you loved about your previous space.
- ☐ **Everyone Involved is on the Same Page**
Anyone who has a say in your home's design—whether it's your spouse, family members, or co-owners—agrees on the big-picture priorities. While small design preferences might still be up for discussion, you have alignment on major decisions, including the scope, budget, and lifestyle needs.

- ☐ **You Can Communicate Your Design Aesthetic**
You don't need to have every detail picked out yet, but you have a clear vision of your home's overall style. You can describe the look and feel you're going for, and you may even have reference images that help communicate your preferences to your architect or design team.

- ☐ **You Have a General Idea of Your Home's Size & Layout**

You have a rough idea of your desired square footage, the number of stories, and the number and types of rooms you need. You've also considered how indoor and outdoor spaces will interact and how your home will fit within your lot. You know whether you want to limit your home's size to qualify for expedited permitting.

- ☐ **You're Prioritizing Fire Resilience in Your Design**

You understand that your new home needs to be built smarter and stronger, with fire-resistant materials, resilient construction methods, and defensible space strategies. You recognize that working with a licensed architect—not just a drafter— is key to ensuring your home meets safety standards and can better withstand future wildfires.

- ☐ **You're Confident in Your Choice of Architect & Design-Builder**

You've done your research and chosen a team you trust and feel comfortable collaborating with. They have the expertise, empathy, experience, and industry connections to bring your vision to life while navigating the complexities of a fire rebuild. You've verified their licenses, credentials, and capacity to ensure they can fully commit to your project.



I checked out many contractors and design firms prior to hiring them and none of them can hold a candle to these guys in terms of raw talent and honesty.



Nick T., Los Angeles, CA

If you can confidently check off these points, you're ready to move forward with designing your rebuild. If there are areas where you still have questions, we're here to help guide you through the process and ensure your new home is everything you need it to be.

When Can I Start Building?

Right now, the timeline for starting construction remains uncertain. Before rebuilding can begin, your site must go through an extensive cleanup and safety process, which includes debris removal, hazardous material cleanup, and soil testing. This two-phase process, overseen by multiple government agencies, ensures that the land is safe for rebuilding. While we wait for the official green light to break ground, **the good news is that we can begin the architectural design work now.** Getting started on design means that when the authorities

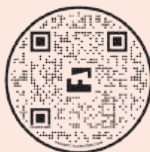
give the go-ahead, you'll be fully prepared to move forward without delays. Although it's tempting to jump into construction as soon as possible, it's essential to fully complete every phase of planning before any work begins. Rushing ahead without finalized plans can lead to misunderstandings, costly changes, and delays. To ensure a smooth build, your architect or Design-Builder should have all necessary materials in place before construction starts, including, but certainly not limited to:

- ☐ **Surveys and Soils Reports** – A complete record of your property's conditions and site-specific details. The Army Corp of Engineers is removing 6" of soil in an effort to remove toxins, but we recommend doing additional testing.
- ☐ **Full Construction Documents** – Including site plans, structural engineering, energy calculations, as well as other consultant work, lighting and power plans, exterior elevations, and fire resistant construction details and ratings, among lots of other drawings and details
- ☐ **Finish and Fixture selections** – interior elevations showing tile layouts and millwork designs, heights of sconces, plumbing fixture locations and configurations, cabinet details, etc.
- ☐ **Doors and Windows selected** – So orders can be placed in advance, avoiding long lead times that can delay construction.
- ☐ **Appliance Selections confirmed** – Ensuring your kitchen and utility layouts accommodate your choices without requiring last-minute modifications.
- ☐ **Pool Plans, Engineering, and Permits** – If you have a pool, it's important that your contractor is able to properly plan for and install the pool in the right sequence, otherwise site access can be difficult and increase costs.

By finalizing design and documentation now, you'll be ready to break ground as soon as it's safe to do so and Phase 2 cleanup is deemed complete. Taking this time to plan thoroughly will set you up for a smoother, faster, and more efficient rebuild when the time comes.

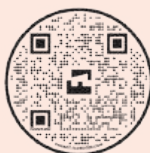
When it comes to the contractor who's going to build your new custom home, there are a number of qualifications that should be met before breaking ground. Don't sign a building contract until you check off all of the items below:

- ☐ Verify License # with Contractors State License Board (CSLB)



[Go to page](#)

- ☐ Confirm all permits and approvals necessary for construction
- ☐ Confirm contractor has worker's compensation insurance
- ☐ Ensure contract describes scope of work in detail (down to specific materials) and exact time frame of work and follows the CSLB requirements
- ☐ Completely read-through the contract and fully understand the terms
- ☐ Confirm your cancellation rights
- ☐ Finalize a payment schedule with clear amounts set. Please note that your contractor cannot bill ahead per CA law, see the CSLB website for more information
- ☐ Check that down-payment does not exceed 10% of the project total, or \$1,000 - whichever is less



[Go to page](#)



Getting Your Project Started

If you've reached the point where you're ready to start planning your rebuild, the first step is to do an initial consultation with our team.

This call or meeting at our office will serve as a springboard for your project, allowing us to get to know each other while we discuss your overall goals. From there, we'll make recommendations on what services will best suit your planning needs, and help you prepare for the journey ahead.

Learn more about our consultation calls and how to book them here:

(323) 275-1140

info@letterfour.com

**12822 Washington Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90066**

**ARCHITECTURE
License #C30146**

**CONTRACTOR
License #B1028949**

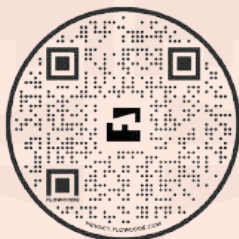


[Go to rebuild booking page](#)



Design-Build

Let's Go



(323) 275-1140

12822 Washington Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90066

info@letterfour.com