

Project Planning Pack

Residential



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Introduction

(So You're Planning a Custom Home...)

Building a custom home can be an exciting journey. This is your opportunity to see your vision come to life, from initial sketches to technical drawings, finish and fixture selections, and completion of construction. In just a short period of time, you get to move into what might be your dream home. Such excitement may cause you to jump into the process without first taking the proper steps.

That's where this process can also get incredibly stressful. Challenges are sure to arise, and without the right team to help, your project can go sideways, fast. This has happened to many homeowners who had the misfortune of partnering with an unqualified Architect or Design-Builder, or attempted to manage it all on their own.

Because designing a home and coordinating its construction involves complex planning, there are many opportunities for things to go wrong. Poorly planned design can lead to expensive revisions, and a lack of the right logistics or connections can cause significant delays. You can end up with a low-quality build that fails to meet your expectations, even after going over budget and beyond deadlines.

To avoid finding yourself in this position, it's absolutely essential to find an expert team who will invest extra time and effort into pre-design consultations, surveys, estimates, and other planning tasks that establish a clear strategy from the start.

So before you leap into your project, we recommend using this guide to prepare. You'll learn how to figure out whether a team is the right pick for the job, and how to thoughtfully determine your project goals. Once you've completed each section, you'll reach the point at which you're ready to start officially planning your project with the right professionals.

How Letter Four Helps

About Us

We offer a one-stop service to those who want the efficiency that comes with having a single team handle their project from start to finish. Every custom home we work on is entirely designed and built by our own dream team, allowing for a superior level of cooperation and communication. Our approach helps us avoid the friction of the traditional process, where separate design and building teams struggle to work in synchrony.

Letter Four's Design-Build process is supported by intensive pre-design work, which we offer in the form of consultations and preliminary planning and pricing packages. These early efforts have been instrumental in delivering projects that run smoothly and as-planned, ensuring complete satisfaction for our happy homeowners.

By creating this guide, we hope to arm you with some of the tools and exercises that we use in our own pre-design work. Leveraging these insights will help you get ready to plan a project that's destined for success. Should you choose to partner with our team for your custom home, you'll have already laid the foundation for a productive project kick-off that correctly addresses your needs, preferences, and limitations.



Letter Four is a Design-Build firm that has served Los Angeles residents since 2010. Our company was founded when our Architect, Lauren Adams, and Contractor, Jeremy Baker, combined forces to provide clients with a completely turnkey design-build experience.



FAQs

We've met with a lot of clients who are in the initial phases of looking for an Architect or Design-Build team, and most ask very similar questions. Having an idea of the answers beforehand can help you ask more targeted questions during your sessions, and focus on specific points you need to devote more attention to.

Q: How much is it going to cost to build my custom home?

A: The cost of every custom home is different and depends entirely on your desired size, design elements, and even the features of your lot. At the lower end, custom homes with more basic scopes cost around \$350 per square foot, just for construction. For more luxurious builds that include premium materials and features, you may be looking at \$700 per square foot, or higher. In this guide, we've included a worksheet to help you determine the budget that should be set for your project. This will allow you to estimate your construction costs,

You should be able to take as much time as you need to feel certain about your design choices before starting construction. Your timeline will be heavily dependent on how much work you've put into thinking through your wants, needs, and budget.

While the project planning, design, and permitting required to start your build can vary significantly depending on your scope, site, decisiveness, and communication style, on average we recommend allowing 8 to 10 months for a project without special approval requirements.


Q: What about all of the "red tape"? (HOAs, Building permits, other approvals)

A: The authorities that need to review and approve your project can be extensive depending on where your lot is and what your project scope is. These can include:

- Homeowners Associations (HOAs). These organizations often have very specific limitations on home design, landscaping, and other property features.

“

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

as well as the "soft" costs (i.e. design, engineering, permitting, etc.) that will contribute to your project total.

Q: How much time will I have to plan out my project, and how long can I expect my build to take?

A: The right team won't rush the planning phase of your project.

FAQs

Continued

- Design Review Boards. If you are in a jurisdiction that requires this, it can add several months to your project approvals.
- Specific Plans. Several areas throughout Los Angeles fall under Specific Plans and require certain design criteria and reviews by the Planning Department.
- Historic Preservation. Similar to Specific Plans, but even more limiting.
- California Coastal Commission. An agency separate from the city which has very stringent requirements and long turnaround times. Approvals can take a year or more.
- Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). If you have an easement on your property, which many homeowners do, you could be required to secure LADWP approval, which takes 4 months
- Bureau of Sanitation - Low Impact Development. If you're in Los Angeles and building more than 500 square feet,

you'll need to address storm-water on site. This includes showing a plan to capture and percolate this water. The plan needs to be approved by your plan check engineer and Bureau of Sanitation, then recorded with the LA County Recorder.

- Grading Permits and Haul Routes. If you live on a narrow street in a hillside area and need to export soil, you'll need approval from the grading division based on prepared plans.

This is by no means a complete list of special approvals, but it should help to give you a sense of what agencies might need to get involved and how that can impact your schedule. If you have a standard lot, without complex requirements, we recommend planning for 3-4 months of permitting and approvals.

Q: What if I don't have a clear idea of what I want in my custom home?

A: Ideally, you should be coming to your first consultation with a pretty good idea of what you're looking to accomplish with your build. However, it's common for many to need some expert advice on what features are worth the investment, and what elements might add value to your property

or lifestyle. Your Architect or Design-Builder should be able to walk you through your options and discuss how they may contribute to your home's performance and lifestyle. A quality Architect or Design-Builder will be able to suggest ideas that you may not have even thought of. This is yet another reason why consulting with a seasoned professional is essential for getting the most out of your custom home.

Just keep in mind that the more time you need to explore ideas, the longer your project will take. That's why we strongly recommend completing the exercises in this guide, and enlisting the pre-design services we offer before full project kickoff.

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

A: The right team for your project will have an outstanding portfolio of work that demonstrates their ability to execute beautiful and harmonious home designs. 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 draw-

ings, 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.

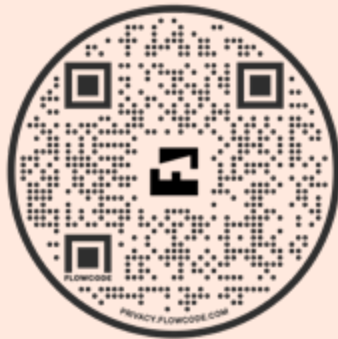




Their level of professionalism and communication is unmatched, which is of the utmost importance when embarking on a big housing project!

Stacey J., Culver City, CA

Clear™ 4-Step Process



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

1 Action Plan

- 1.1 Due Diligence
 - As-builts
 - Surveys

2 Technical Documentation

- 1.2 Conceptual Design
- 1.3 Preliminary Pricing
 - Pricing Phase #1

3 Final Touches

- 2.1 Schematic Design
- 2.2 Design Development
 - Pricing Phase #2
- 2.3 Construction Documents
- 3.1 Permitting

4 Construction

- 3.2 Interior Design
- 3.3 Landscape Design
- 4.1 Construction
 - Pricing Phase #3
- 4.2 Construction Administration



Figuring Out Your Real Needs

Before you start officially planning your project, it's a good idea to ask yourself some questions. Conducting an "interview" with yourself before you talk to an architect can help you get a better idea of what you're looking for and how to communicate your goals. You'll be able to arrive to your first meeting with the ability to clearly describe your wants and needs, shortening the design process and ensuring that you get results you're truly happy with.

While this step may not seem that critical at first glance, the truth is that it can go a long way toward preventing complications later on. Most problems with "runaway projects" result from under planning and not having full clarity from the start. Plans end up needing to be changed, or work has to be done over again because the results did not fully address project needs and wants. That's why it's so important to give these questions some thought and iron out the answers before you forge ahead with design.

As you ask yourself questions about your goals for your new home, you'll likely come to the conclusion that certain features are the best way to meet particular needs. However, we recommend that you take a bit of time to analyse these assumptions before deciding that these features should be integrated into your design.

Often times, taking a moment to more deeply assess why you want certain features can uncover deeper needs, and the deeper reasons that shape them. You may just discover that there are better solutions to the problems you're trying to solve.


Example: A couple with young children decide that they want a closed kitchen. Their "why" is because they want to keep the kids from running into the kitchen while they're cooking - a daily problem they have in their current home.

This happens because the kids are always playing in the living room, which is connected to the kitchen via an open floor plan. Although they enjoy having an open floor plan for their frequent get-togethers, it's too hectic having the kids make their way into the kitchen all the time.

What if this problem can be solved in a different way? Maybe the best solution for everyone is to build a separate playroom. That way the kids have their own designated space to play away from the kitchen, and the parents don't have to give up the entertaining value that an open kitchen and living room offer. Evaluating the deeper reasons for choosing a closed kitchen would help this couple realize that there's no need to select a feature that isn't 100% ideal for their lifestyle.

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

 Stacey J., Culver City, CA

Question List

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

2. Why did you choose to purchase your current home? How long do you plan to stay once your project is complete? Is this a forever home or are you building to resell?

3. 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?

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

5. What's working well with respect to your current home? What's not working?

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

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

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

9. Do you have any particular goals when it comes to eco-friendliness or energy efficiency?

10. What are your limits in terms of time-frame and budget?

11. Do you have adequate funding for your project? Do you need to think about breaking the project up into phases?



Budgeting Guide/ Worksheet

Working out your budget is a critical step in the pre-planning work. By determining likely costs before design planning begins, you can get a better idea of what you can actually achieve in your project. A good Architect or Design-Builder will be able to help you make design choices that are in-line with your budget limitations, helping you avoid spending more than you can afford.

Using the worksheet below, you can calculate a rough estimate of how much your custom home will cost. Expenses are divided into two categories: construction costs and soft costs. These two will need to be added together to calculate your project total.

Total Project Costs

When it comes to custom home projects, there's a lot more work that takes place than construction. This is why you'll also need to account for "soft costs" when estimating your budget.

Soft costs entail all of the services that are performed outside of construction. These include architecture and design fees, consultant fees for surveying and engineering, and fees associated with approvals and permitting. These fees are typically a combination of fixed fees and hourly charges. Some of the services that are billed hourly are interior design, construction administration, and entitlements (securing permits). There is usually other essential work, like landscape design, that you'll need to see your project through to completion.

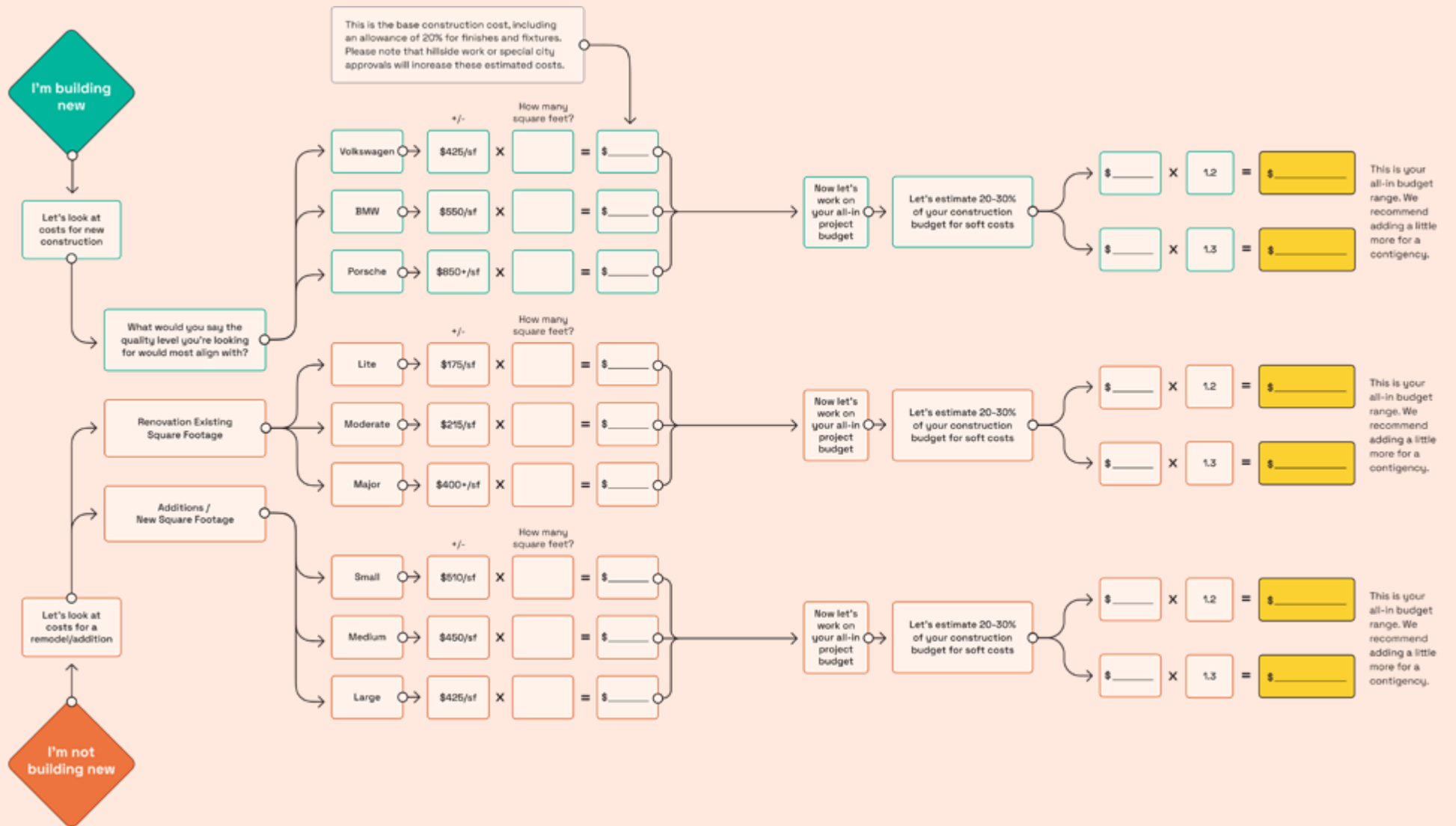
Your soft costs will typically amount to a certain percentage (10% - 30%) of your construction costs. It's important to note that the percentage is typically higher for smaller projects, since soft costs usually represent a range of services that are similar in scope no matter what the project size. Especially complex projects (such as those built on hillside lots) may also see higher soft costs, because they often require more extensive surveying, engineering, and approvals.

To see a full breakdown of how we price soft costs at Letter Four, please refer to our review of Architectural Fees:



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Let's estimate your total project cost.



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. "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 will 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.

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



[Go to page](#)

2. "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](#)

3. "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, even in challenging conditions. 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.

We've provided a list of questions you can ask to better understand an Architect's or Design-Builder's approach and service philosophy on the opposite page.

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

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

5. Who works on my project, and at what stages do they work?

6. How is your business structured?

Choosing the Right Team

Continued

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Directory of experts



As-Builts

- 🏠 Precision Property Measurements
- 👤 Jessica Alt
- ✉ office@ppmco.net
- 📞 (562) 621-9100

Note: We draft in a software called Revit. If you think you'd like to work with us please request as-builts in Revit.

Surveyor

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- 👤 Perfecto A. Arca
- 📞 310-768-3828
- ✉ pert@paarcaengineering.com
- 🌐 paarcaengineering.com

Soils (Geotechnical Engineer)

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- 📞 (310) 429-6681
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Windows + Doors

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Appliances + Plumbing Fixtures

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Wood Flooring

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- 👤 Frankie Lightfoot
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- Culver City, CA 90230
- ✉ frank@universalwood.com

Real Estate Agent

- 🏠 Wheeler Coberly
- 📞 310-351-6234
- ✉ wheeler.coberly@compass.com
- 🌐 compass.com



We have gotten nothing but good comments about our home and I am as pleased with the outcome as I am with the service that Letter Four provided to us.

👤 Adriana Z., Beverlywood, CA

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 You Ready for Design?


When you're ready to move on to designing your custom home, you'll have ironed out the key points that are essential for smooth planning. See our checklist below.

- Your Budget Range is Set**
You've worked up the numbers and you have a clear understanding of what you can afford. You've established a ballpark budget for your project with a firm maximum, and you already know how you'll fund it. If you're counting on financing, you've verified that you have the credit needed for approval.
- You Know What's in Store for the Future of Your Home**
You have decided whether or not you're planning on staying in the home or reselling soon. Therefore, you know whether you should be prioritizing your personal needs and preferences, or designing for optimal market value.
- Everyone is on the Same Page**
Every person who has a say in the design and scope of your project can agree on the budget and the main goals. While there still may be differences of opinion when it comes to the small details, there's solidarity on project priorities and vision.
- You Have a Realistic Picture of Your Lifestyle Needs**
You've thought long and hard about how you're actually going to be using your home. You know what every household member needs out of the design, and you feel like you've determined what functions the spaces should be able to perform. You've also figured out what ideas aren't actually going to be very useful in real life. If you still have some uncertainties, you understand which topics you need to ask for advice on.

- You've Identified Your Must-Haves, Nice-To-Haves, and Don't-Wants**
After determining your lifestyle needs and style preferences, you know exactly what features need to be present in your design, which ones would be nice to have but can go if they don't fit in your budget, and which ones you absolutely don't want. You can clearly describe these to your Architect or Design-Builder and explain why they're necessary (or why they don't work for you).
- You Can Describe the General Style You Want**
You don't need to have every finish or paint color picked, but you do feel like you have a clear idea of how you want your home to look. You can verbalize this aesthetic accurately, and you may even have some visual examples of the vibe you're trying to achieve.
- You Have a Good Idea of Your Desired Size and Layout**
You've determined your desired square footage range and the number of stories. You know about how many rooms you need, and what type of space each room will be. If there are outdoor spaces to include in the design, you have a fairly good idea of their scope and their size in relation to your home and lot.
- You Feel Comfortable & Confident with Your Choice of Architect or Design-Builder**
You've been through the consultations and you've established enough of a rapport to pick the right design team. You've confirmed they have the skills and methods to deliver the results you want, and you feel like you have a relationship that allows for easy collaboration.



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

When Can I Start Building?

While it's tempting to start work as soon as possible, it shouldn't begin until every phase of planning is fully complete, and your Architect or Design-Builder has created all of the official materials necessary for construction. Proceeding before all design plans are set in stone can create opportunities for misunderstandings and cost overruns. Your complete list of design selections and documentation should include:

- As-built drawings and surveys
- Full Construction documents including lighting and power plans, and exterior elevations showing approved finishes
- All permit approvals and City-stamped drawings
- Finish and Fixture selections and interior elevations showing tile layouts and millwork designs, heights of sconces, plumbing fixture locations and configurations, cabinet details, etc.
- Doors and windows selected
- Appliances selected

When it comes to the contractor who's going to build your 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 on the opposite page:



- Verify License # with Contractors State License Board (CSLB)
- Follow-up with 3 references from past custom home clients
- 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
- Finalize a payment schedule with clear amounts set
- Confirm your cancellation rights
- Check that down-payment does not exceed 10% of the project total, or \$1,000 - whichever is less

Getting Your Project Started

If you've reached the point where you're ready to start planning your project, the first step is to do an initial consultation with our team. You have two options for this: an Initial Consultation with our Office Manager (short and general), or a more in-depth Conversation with the Principals.

These calls serve as springboards 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 next phase.

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

(323) 275-1140

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