

Planning From Start To Finish Is Critical To Success Of Your Next Construction Project



Nicole Andersson, arch. intern, Mike Phinney, principal, Andy Allison, sr. architect, and Jace Brown, arch. intern.

By Babara Brewer La Mere – Saratoga Business Journal

Think “construction project.” Chances are that the things that come to mind are visions of bulldozers or sounds of hammers pounding or of mortar being sloshed onto brick. Think again. Think back to the point where the project was an idea in the mind of a homeowner-to-be or a developer or town board or city council member. Then remember that in most cases there are time and financial constraints involved in bringing this vision to fruition.

Long before the dozer or the hammer are part of the scene at the construction site, the project begins in conversations, in meetings, in research, and in relationships established between the client, the architect, the landscape developer, any involved engineers and the general contractor. It’s clear that good communicators and good listeners, including the client, make up the most likely team to bring in that dream project within the nitty-gritty necessities of not overspending the homeowner’s, developer’s, or taxpayers’ money and of completing it before the new baby arrives, track season starts, or whatever other deadlines may be in play.

Mike Phinney, architect, founder and principal at Phinney Design Group, acknowledges that architects have a bad reputation as being the members of project planning teams responsible for clients ending up overspending on projects and/or missing their targeted completion dates. He notes that some architects can be prone to “falling in love with their design” and following it beyond fiscal prudence. That said, he can point to a three million dollar project in which his company was involved with a deviation from anticipated cost of less than one per cent.

Additionally, he outlines a 4-checkpoint process that he employs to help ensure from very early on in a project that the client’s vision and wish list of included features for the project are realistically in tune with what the client has to spend. At the first stage of the project, he takes a list of wants that the client has expressed and figures the square footage that it will take to accommodate those features, along with a very

rough estimate of cost. He returns to the client with the question: “Is this reasonably within budget?” If not, he can work with the client to see how the wish list can be modified so that the square footage of the project comes within a reasonable margin of feasibility. It is clear that the client and the architect must listen carefully to each other to understand and balance vision versus reality.

Checkpoint 2 of Phinney’s process entails working out the schematics of the look and feel of the project with the materials desired, to establish whether the materials list meets budget requirements. Again, if not, the architect works with the client to find viable alternatives.

Checkpoint 3 occurs as the actual design and development of the project get underway. There’s enough understood of the scope of the process to begin the permitting process. Engineers, landscape architects, HVAC specialists, and general contractors are called on to provide their estimates. If this is a municipal project being put out for bid, the architect can provide a general description, along with possible ways to reduce construction costs. Once estimates or bids are received, the architect and any members who have now become part of the project team meet with the client to discuss how the likely costs presented line up with what the client can realistically spend.

Only after these figures have been made to match, can consideration be given to the fourth phase, pricing details of such aspects as floor coverings and aesthetic considerations. Depending on the particular project, the wait for permit approval is part of this stage and can be lengthy. This is the time when projects, as ready as they can be before construction actually begins, are pitched to boards or memberships for formal approval to proceed. Recommendations from any outside consultants are considered. The engineering team on a project is now dotting its “i”s and crossing its “t”s.

Phinney notes that the targeted completion date of a project is often adjusted at this point. While some projects are more relaxed in terms of the time allowable for completion, he acknowledges that there are some projects that entail weekly meetings to check on progress against a deadline and to see what can be done to hasten the process.

Beyond providing high-quality, detailed drawings, Phinney sees the role of the architect as being the client’s go-to person, ready to attend to issues as they arise and helping the client to make educated comparisons and decisions. He acknowledges that clients, both individual residential clients and the volunteer members of various boards, are more educated today than they once were about the planning process. Still, he sees the architect in a coordinating role among the rest of project team, making certain that clients understand the value of each phase, and the role of each participant in the project.

Additionally, he sees his role as one of cultivating mutual respect among project participants for the smooth delivery of the project on behalf of his clients.

Landscape architects Geff Redick and his wife, Karen, of Red Bud Development in Wilton, primarily handle residential and boutique commercial projects. Mike Ingersoll, principal of the LA Group in Saratoga, typically does large commercial, industrial and municipal projects. Both agree that being a good listener and communicator and being able to collaborate well with other team members are the keys to saving time and money.

Redick cited an example of a project where the client had requested that a patio be installed as part of a home construction project. The patio was planned to allow for optimal sun exposure. However, that particular placement would not allow for direct access to the patio from the house. Construction team members had to convey that situation effectively to determine that access to the patio was important to the client.

Ingersoll points out, too, the importance of the client being a good listener. While the experience level of the landscape architect is critical in understanding the earthmoving, infrastructure, and permitting aspects of a project, Ingersoll points out, “You’re only as good as your client.” The client needs to listen and ask questions to understand the project and the ways in which his participation and clear communication will help to bring the project in on time and on budget. “The genesis of the project,” says Ingersoll, “depends on the customer.”

Redick cites the importance of understanding exactly what the customer wants, and then getting out and walking the site to completely understand the site conditions, property lines, and whether there is exposed bedrock or clay or wetlands nearby. Experience in working in a particular neighborhood may provide him with information on conditions that he may encounter. Additionally, he needs to make himself aware of local codes and how they may affect the landscaping parameters, and then design toward them. He asserts that 90-95% of potential issues can be resolved in the planning stages of a project, making it easier to take care of little problems that are likely to arise later.

In the budgeting stage of a project, balancing client aesthetics with costs, Redick is careful to take into consideration any project aspects that could be accomplished by one contractor rather than two. “Being

smart in advance,” says Redick, “gives the client the ultimate project.”

Working as he does with larger projects, Mike Ingersoll’s job is complicated by his client typically being not just one person, but a whole board or a whole municipality. Because projects are bigger, there are more neighbors to potentially be affected by a project. It is a rare large project that is not subject to public review. (Ingersoll estimates having attended “several hundred” planning board meetings in his career.) Projects within a couple of miles of the Northway are subject to review by the state. If they approach or cross municipal boundaries, or are close to a county building, they’re subject to review by the county. Butterflies? Wetlands? Interspecies traffic? You’re subject to review under SEQRA, the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

Don’t forget all of Saratoga’s history. Better consult to see if your site is an Area of Sensitivity on the New York State Parks & Recreation historic sites map. Lately, Ingersoll reports, storm water permitting is becoming more stringent, driving projects more and more each year.

For downtown projects, what does city code have to say about the architectural components of a project? Considering greener architecture or energy sources? The neighborhood might applaud most of the greener features of your proposed building but give mixed reviews to your idea of multiple solar panels. Funding sources may have their own particular considerations to be addressed. Much of Ingersoll’s job entails preparing his clients to understand what potential issues might impact their selected project site, and what needs to be done to determine if project is buildable in their intended site. Without investigating all of these potential red flags before a plan is developed, the client risks having paid for planning a project that can’t happen on the intended site. Wise clients will not invest in a building before they know it can, in fact, be built, and Ingersoll’s job, before he ever sends out a crew with shovels, is to help them establish whether or not that is the case.

So, what about the general contractor, the man or woman who actually oversees the hands-on construction of the project? Frank Alessandrini, president of F. H. Alexander, Inc., which does new construction and renovation of commercial buildings, says that with all the pre-planning on the financial aspects of a project, he can expect to receive one lump sum, and he needs to make sure that amount will cover the entire project. The firm is currently working on renovation of a building formerly owned by International Paper in Corinth to create Hudson River Community Credit Union’s new operations center, and is also renovating PJ’s Barbecue on Route 9 in Saratoga for year-round operation.

F. H. Alexander, Inc. learned much about on-budget and on-time delivery in the company’s infancy as it cut its teeth on 83 Stewart’s Shops from Potsdam to Monticello. Given just 4 1/2 weeks to complete a shop before Stewart’s people were arriving to install counters, Alessandrini quickly made it clear to his crews that “a schedule is not just scrap paper.” He divided his builders into two crews, one to start a project, one to finish it. They were completing 12 to 14 shops a year. Alessandrini established a per-shop materials list and clear guidelines that the two truckloads of materials required to complete a shop must each be delivered to the site by 7 o’clock Monday morning. With a very few exceptions, the deliveries were always there on time. (Only once did Alessandrini find himself laying down floor tiles that his wife was handing him as a Stewart’s crew began countertop installation.)

Within his building crews, Alessandrini notes the importance of team members being capable of working well with others, who can communicate well, are organized and can keep the common goal of on-time completion of the project in sight. He points out that there are lots of people with technical skills, but that not all of them are good team players. As supervisor, Alessandrini notes the importance of progress meetings with crew, clients and subcontractors that serve to keep all informed, and provide opportunities for brainstorming and for fine-tuning the construction schedule to meet deadline. He acknowledges that there will be surprises, especially in doing renovations. He cited the Hudson River Community Credit Union project, where the subsurface rock was found to be lower than anticipated, calling for a redesign of the foundation. He stresses that one always needs a back-up plan for how to accommodate any glitches and still bring the project in on time.

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