



building in the round

If you're itching to unleash the true potential of your home, the new breed of 'Design and Build' firms can help. JACK BRAND explains all...

As regular readers will know, we've featured a huge variety of super-swish smarthomes over the years, kitted out in most cases with all the latest electronic gadgetry and interior design to die for. Those hankering for something similar at home can always supercharge their existing property by retrofitting it with some smarthome goodies such as an all-new living area or cinema room - which sounds great in theory, but the room conversions, structural alterations or the building of an extension that such projects frequently involve can require a formidable amount of work on the part of the homeowner.

It's often been the case that the owner of a property is the one who ends up having to 'project manage' these sorts of renovations, hiring builders to follow their instructions, or appointing an architect at additional cost to oversee the whole job. With the vast array of options now available when it comes to modern interior design and domestic technology, you're potentially looking at a long, involved and highly complex process with the ever-present threat of spiralling costs.

Everything under one roof

Enter a new breed of construction companies, which offer tailor-made 'end-to-end' solutions for anyone looking to renovate their property. What sets these 'Design and Build' practices apart is that they can help you avoid the problems which commonly crop up when assigning different aspects of the work to several parties - from the design, engineering, building and fitting-out stages to the final details.



By opting to have a single company represent you throughout the project, all responsibility for suitability and cost rests in one place. 'D&B' firms can 'cost engineer' your project from the outset, potentially saving you money, and will provide financial guidance in the event of any last-minute changes.

Other services they offer typically include producing plans and designs in consultation with the client and obtaining building permission, plus full construction and fit-out, right down to the final touches of the interior design. Practices catering more to the high-end might also include the acquisition of antiques or the commissioning of artworks.

So now you know what D&B firms are, let's look at a few general pointers you should observe when choosing the right one for your project - bearing in mind that they can vary hugely in terms of size and the type of work they carry out.

Cost-cutting your nose to spite your face?

First off, don't be tempted to opt for the cheapest, simply for the sake of saving a few pennies. The lowest price is the one most likely to increase over the course of the project. Instead, base your decision more on who you can see yourself working with over the next 12 - 18-months to achieve the house of your dreams.

When it comes to getting a quote, either do some research before your initial meeting or else



have a list of questions ready for the representative along the following lines:

- How long should a project of this size take?
- Can I live in the house while the work goes on?
- Are they members of a professional body such as the Federation of Master Builders? (fmb.org.uk) or an independent validator like the TrustMark Scheme (trustmark.org.uk/)?
- What form of contract do they use? Ask about standard contracts such as the JCT (Joint Contracts Tribunal) and be wary of contracts written by the company, as these are likely to be weighted in their favour.
- Can they demonstrate case studies of previous work or show you around any of their completed projects? If so, ensure you pay as much attention to the quality of the joinery and paintwork as the more obvious music and lighting systems.
- What insurance does the firm carry, and at what level of cover?
- Are they a Limited company, and will you be making cheques out to a company of the same name?

What you see should be what you get

Following initial discussions, the next step will be to obtain some estimates. The bottom line is obviously important, but remember that they'll only be guide estimates at this stage - look closely at what each company provides, and think carefully about what they're really offering.

A fully broken-down price will show that the firm have estimated based on the size of the property and the proposed work - a figure plucked out of the air is unlikely to be based on anything, just a 'scoping price' to gauge your interest.

Which elements of the work may be subject to change? If this isn't clear, call them and ask to go through the price.

How closely does the description of the work fit with your initial discussion?

Once you've whittled it down to two possible candidates, consider what draws you to one over the other and see if this is borne out in a final meeting. Ask them to explain what the steps they'll take in coming to a design agreement with you, and all being well, work will commence with both of you on the same page and them shouldering the lion's share of the work. Happy housebuilding...

