

Bridging Documents: Project Delivery for Today's Marketplace

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SUMMARY

As today's marketplace becomes more competitive and prices continue to rise, bridging documents is one method to control cost and time on construction projects. Bridging documents, different from bridging, is a method of project delivery that includes the architect and construction team early on, often in the land acquisition phase.

MAXIMIZE QUALITY, TIME, AND SAVINGS

Many of you have heard the old saying, "Quality, time, cost: Pick any two." In the past it has been very difficult to achieve all three of these key project components.

However, that's beginning to change with the use of bridging documents, a method by which an owner establishes the level of quality desired, compresses the time required, and achieves the absolute lowest cost of construction.

Although bridging is a fairly well-established project delivery approach, the elements of what I'm calling bridging documents include competitive acquisition of a site and other soft-cost services. To understand how this works, let's first review the most familiar construction processes, starting with the tried-and-true method of creating design documents, putting the project out to bid, and choosing a contractor based on lowest price.

This method, often called design-bid-build, has been very successful on smaller projects and those with a tight budget. Additional weeks are needed to complete these three distinct steps in a sequential order, however, and this means additional time and sometimes additional costs to the owner. The time can be shortened by fast-tracking the construction process, but this brings additional risk. Generally, cost and quality are maximized with this method, and the architect serves as an agent of the owner.

During the past 20 years, design-build has become a popular choice among owners who seek one-stop shopping and minimum time to project completion. Normally, an owner chooses the design-build contractor—who sometimes has an architect on

staff—based on some guesstimate of cost. Time is of the essence, so the project is often started while the design is under way. As the project progresses, the final cost is often affected by changes in scope, final material selections, and unforeseen conditions. Very seldom is the initial cost estimate achieved, and often the quality of the project suffers without an independent architect or other agent looking out for the owner's interest. The architect provided by the design-build team reports to the contractor and is not an agent of the owner. Essentially, time is saved at the expense of cost and, at times, quality.

A variation of design-build is to engage a contractor as construction manager (CM), fixing a fee either as a lump sum or a percentage of construction costs. The CM acts as the owner's agent and competitively bids all major portions of the work, while completing smaller pieces of work with his or her own troops. Prior to starting work, design documents are needed and this adds time to the schedule. By bringing a CM to the team early and in an agency relationship with the owner, that expertise can be used early and often to reduce costs and make the construction process more efficient. Usually the architect works closely with the owner in an agency relationship, as does the CM.

BRIDGING DOCUMENTS: COMPETITION AND QUALITY CONTROL

Unlike the above-mentioned project-delivery techniques, a bridging documents approach encourages competition in all aspects of the design and construction process. Developed in California about eight years ago, this method has proven to be one of the most efficient and cost-effective of all known project-delivery techniques. What makes it special? It is the ability to engage the contractor and the contractor's bank, consultants, and real estate agent in a highly competitive but quality-oriented process. And the ability to get a final product that is exceptionally cost-effective, quality-controlled, and yet quickly built.

Best suited for large projects where the region, but not the site, has been established, bridging documents allow an owner to assure tough

competition on not only the cost of construction, including profit, but also the interest rate, capitalization rate (risk), cost of the land, and all other soft costs, including consultants' fees. The real variable in any construction project is the cost of the money and the cost of the land. The cost of construction, including overhead and profit, is an important ingredient but of little consequence relative to interest rates and land costs. No other process allows an owner (or lessee in the case of build to suit) to bring competition to each aspect of the building process. Even if the site is pre-selected, significant savings can be had in the other aspects of this process.

How is it carried out? First, an owner engages the services of an architect/engineer team experienced in bridging documents to act as his or her agent and produce a set of abbreviated construction documents.

These bridging documents are usually from 6 to 12 sheets of drawings combined with a 30–40-page specification containing explicit requirements for the size of the site, parking, infrastructure, the shape and height of the building (including what it might look like), and a description of all components that go into the building.

These drawings are not meant for construction but only to give each bidder a clear understanding of what the owner requires in this project. A request for proposals is sent out to a select number of national and local developer/contractor teams asking for a response stated in total cost of construction (or lease rate per year), time to complete, cost of the land, and a breakdown of all costs. Pre-bid meetings are held with all bidders in one room to answer any questions and to stress the importance of quality and time. From the responses, a qualified team is selected, and areas of additional cost savings are explored together.

After approval and signed contracts, the selected contractor then identifies the architect/engineer team and is free to start work immediately on the site—clearing, demolition, filling, cutting, and foundations.

This jumpstarts the work and allows the project to be fast-tracked to its conclusion. Of course, the owner retains the architect who developed the bridging documents to act as his or her agent and monitor the work to be sure that it is built in accordance with the plans and specifications. Any requests for additional charges—and there will be some due to the highly competitive process—can be carefully evaluated by the owner's architect and denied or approved. Having the architect who developed the bridging documents at the owner's side is a key factor in controlling costs.

Although this process takes time initially to produce the bridging documents, the rewards of the lowest possible cost on all aspects of the process combined with the ability to fast track the construction process are sure winners. The added benefit of the ability to establish and control the level of quality thus produces a sure thing for any owner.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic

- 10.01.01 Briefing on Alternative Service Delivery Methods
- 10.02.02 Strategies for Negotiating Fees
- 10.02.03 Tell Clients About Factors that Affect Your Fees

For More Information on This Topic

See chapter 12 in *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 14th edition, for other project delivery methods. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending an e-mail to bookstore@aia.org



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