

HOUSE & HOME

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Tackling Architecture With a Table Saw

Designers as the new construction crew.

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

THE seven members of MADE, a young architectural firm in Red Hook, Brooklyn, were sitting in their office working two weeks ago. The office is a makeshift metal shed inside a woodworking shop in a 19th-century brick warehouse. It looks more like a trailer parked on a job site than an architectural office.

"I mean, we got an office when we needed somewhere to put the table saw," said Ben Bischoff, 30, one of MADE's founding partners. Mr. Bischoff sat at a conference table with Oliver Freundlich, 30, and Brian Papa, 29, the firm's other two principals.

On the table were three Polish breakfast breads and a lifelike plastic Chihuahua and dachshund, both wearing modish attire. MADE is working on a boutique in New York for Trixie & Peanut, a pet-accessories business. MADE is also starting demolition shortly on a town house for Mr. Freundlich's brother, Bart Freundlich, a film director, and his fiancée, Julianne Moore, the actress. MADE, more than an architectural office, is



FINISHING WHAT THEY START Above, left, MADE renovating an Upper West Side apartment. Right, the final product. Top, the members of the firm outside their office and workshop in Brooklyn, from left, Sarah Strauss, Oliver Freundlich, Annie Barrett, Brian Papa, Jesse Robertson-Tait, John Nafziger and Ben Bischoff.

what its members call a design-build firm. In addition to providing design, MADE encourages clients to employ the firm as a general contractor. It also constructs aspects of the design in its own shop and installs them on the site.

For a would-be homeowner faced with the issue of whom to hire for a residential project — an architect, a contractor or a craftsman — design-build would seem the best of all worlds. But it is not a perfect universe.

Typically, an architect sells a design to a client, who invites bids from con-

tractors to build it. Design-build companies like MADE hope to realize their design as closely as possible, by executing it themselves. They also offer clients a kind of one-stop shopping that streamlines the realization attractively. By integrating the process and assuming responsibility for it from beginning to end, design-builders say that they eliminate confusion and contentiousness between architect and contractor, save time and money and deliver the design as designed.

But design-build also means putting

all of your eggs in one basket.

"Culpability," Mr. Freundlich said, defending the procedure. "The client can turn to one entity and find out what's going on."

Peter Moore Smith, a novelist and a creative director at BBDO, and his wife, Brigitte Roth Smith, hired the company to create a wall of storage and display in their loft near City Hall in Manhattan. Mr. Smith said of the appeal of design-build, "It's confidence that the finished product will look the

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way they say it's going to look — knowing there's something in it for them for it to look right."

In removing the two potentially factious parties from a project, you also remove what many consider the security of "checks and balances." Trust becomes tantamount to risk in choosing whom you work with.

Another client, an investment manager who for reasons of privacy asked not to be identified, said of an apartment that MADE completed for his family on the Upper West Side, "My judgment was that this was a group dedicated to getting it right." But he added, speaking of design-build, "If you made the wrong selection, it could turn out to be a disaster."

The client, who spent three years restoring a house in San Diego with an architect and a contractor, said that MADE's combined costs were largely comparable to a conventional arrangement. The company charges a design fee, as any architect would. In place of a fixed-price bid on the construction cost, MADE uses a "cost plus" contract. It charges its client for materials and bills by the hour for labor. It also adds a "profit and overhead" fee ranging from 15 to 20 percent, depending on the project. The fee is a percentage of the cost of materials and labor. MADE agrees with its



HANDS ON Above, members of MADE installing a wall of cabinetry at a loft in New York. They constructed the units at their workshop. Right, the finished project.



...my bill, as a security against money spent, if not time.

• The process can be more expensive if a designer operating as a builder takes longer to construct a project because of inexperience or an inability to soup playing with the design.

• It can also be less expensive. Discrepancies between the design and the feasibility of building it, which are inevitable, don't result in "change orders" — changes on the site that the client is charged for in addition to the agreed-upon bid — which are hidden costs in the contract. And because there is no impetus for the contractor to make a profit by shaving costs off a fixed price for materials or labor, there is a relative assurance of quality.

• Design-build companies are not new. The equation has been increasingly successful in the construction industry, particularly for large commercial development, as builders take the lead in securing projects by offering design services, too.

• But architects, frustrated by a partnership that often demoted the designer to the status of an employee who answered to the builder, are now seizing the initiative, investigating design-build as a more satisfactory — and satisfying — approach to their own profession.

• "It's the way the practice is moving, and it's the way clients are doing things," said Gregory Kessler, the director of the School of Architecture and Construction Management at Washington State University in Spokane. "I see architectural offices switching. In some respects, it gets back to the way architecture began, where architects were craftsmen. Students see it as a more reasonable way of getting their ideas built."

• Design-build became popular as a more "holistic" method of making architecture in the late 1960's, when the architect Charles W. Moore developed the Yale Building Project, a program at the Yale School of Archi-

ecture, where MADE's three principals met and worked together in the 90's. The ideals of design-build have survived as a kind of counterculture being reassessed by younger architects puzzled by their own irrelevance to certain domains like new home construction and frustrated by life in an economically challenged ivory tower of pure design.

An American Institute of Architects survey in 2000 reported that 30 percent of its members had been involved with design-build in some form, up from 10 percent in 1996.

Design-build has also been popular, and particularly appropriate, as a socially aware program involving architectural students with the housing needs of local communities, as in the grass-roots work of Samuel Mockbee, who was a professor at the Auburn University School of Architecture. Design and Construction in Alabama. Mr. Mockbee, a patron saint of the movement, proudly described his studio as "Redneck Talisman South."

Do you get better work by hiring architects to build? Or are you hiring the most overqualified construction workers in history, and paying them to gain the experience your average contractor has?

Paul Brouard, who has directed the Yale Building Project for 30 years, observed that design-build was changing, trading idealism for practicality and making itself a more viable alternative to traditional practice. "There is more involvement from the building trades," Mr. Brouard said. "The design-builders are saving the special craft of things for themselves and leaving the dog work to subcontractors." MADE employs subcontractors, for construction expertise as well as for basic labor-saving, presenting the client with three bids on each subcontract.

"It's evolving," said Mr. Papa of MADE. "We're realizing that our time is not best spent framing or



FROM LAPTOP TO POWER TOOL MADE's founding partners, from left, Brian Papa, Ben Bischoff and Oliver Freundlich, in their shop.

Sheetrocking, because there are people who can do it better, faster, cheaper than we can."

While the balance of having an architect and a contractor might help keep both in check, there are clients who see nothing but opportunity in the potential for problems between them.

Richard Belle, editor of Design-Build Dateline, the monthly newsletter of the Design-Build Institute of America, which has roughly 1,000 members, 22 percent of them designers, said of friction on a job between architects and contractors. "Owners thrive on these situations, in order to make changes." He characterized

The upsides and downsides of the design-build alternative.

the setups as "who shot Jane?" scenarios in which finger-pointing between professionals allowed clients to make last-minute changes without charge by playing the two parties against each other.

Despite the lure of full control and added profit, many architects interested in design-build don't want the headache or liability of construction.

Maribam Smith, a principal with Smith Dalia Architects in Atlanta, said he offered a modified version of design-build, which meant bringing construction professionals into the design early in the process. Smith Dalia has managed and built projects itself, which Mr. Smith said was a good way to get "quality work and control your costs," but he explained of the clients' attitude, "you've got to have confidence in a group of folks like that."

Jack Murphy, the owner of Lull-water Studio Architects, also in Atlanta, tried a one-year merger with a contractor as an experiment in an integrated design-build office, but discontinued it because his partner assumed, as is common in his industry, that construction would call the shots.

Speaking of his work method now, Mr. Murphy said: "We handpick our contractors. We look like we're a design-build firm, but we're not." He explained the advantage. "With two bosses, we come in as equals. We're big on collaboration, but we can bust each other's chops." In true design-build, Mr. Murphy observed, "if

you've got power, it becomes absolute power. The potential for anuse is there."

He added: "I'm not going to play general contractor. What happens when the construction side of your brain says, 'That costs too much?' As a designer, I don't rule anything out first. Design-builders may never see a truly great idea."

Others contest the value of the check and balance in a two-man system. "The adversarial relationship as a level of protection is, fictitious," said Angel Martinez, president of Martinez & Associates Architecture and Construction in Overland Park, Kan. Mr. Martinez is also the chairman of the design-build committee of the American Institute of Architects. Addressing a client's nervousness over a lack of recourse to a second authority, Mr. Martinez said, "What I tell them is that if something's wrong, I'll fix it."

At MADE, where a horseshoe of desk space rings the conference table like the counter at a diner, one has the sense, watching its members at work at late-model laptop computers, that it is a youthful company that believes you can put together buildings the way you do friendships — with an element of design and a lot of hands-on work. MADE, whose first year in business was last year, when its revenue was \$650,000, has billings this year of \$1.8 million. But that has not dispelled the atmosphere of dorm life — book cubbies crowded with motorcycle helmets, messenger bags and anoraks.

Jesse Robertson-Tait, MADE's newest employee, is not an architect. Mr. Robertson-Tait, 26, is a builder with a high school education. As a successful independent contractor, he is in effect becoming a build-designer. What were his thoughts on working at an architectural office with an Ivy League crew?

"I'll be taking a pay cut, it's true," he said.