

A large American flag hangs vertically in a museum setting. In the foreground, a dark, sleek aircraft wing is visible, extending from the right side of the frame. The background shows the interior of a large museum with a high ceiling and other aircraft on display.

# GENERAL CONTRACTOR APPROACHES TO THE DESIGN-BUILD PROCESS

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# INTRODUCTION

For a design team, knowing how a contractor approaches a design build project is important, not only for project success but also for developing a long-term relationship – repeat contracts won in partnership with the GC. The purpose of this paper is to provide basic insight into the strategy and thinking of these important partners, who are essential to realizing the benefits of the design-build approach.

## HOW THEY PICK THEIR DESIGNERS?

GCs are totally driven to select the designer who will make them the most competitive in the bidding process. They want to have long term relationships only with designers who will win jobs for them. If they are unsuccessful on some ventures and feel that another designer will make them more competitive they will move on to another designer. They obviously would like to have long term relations with all of their designers who have completed projects at various bases or with specific federal organizations, but it all comes down to who can and will help them win jobs.

Most GCs will strategically choose several designers that they work with, because they don't want their success to be dependent on the designs of just one provider. They are very interested to partner with a designer who has specific technical or unique project type experience that makes them the most viable team for the competition.

GCs vary on how much upfront planning they do on projects and it is important

to know which of them plan way ahead and try to team with a designer early on in the process. Those that don't have the marketing staff to research a project or the specific expertise required tend to get into the process at the last minute. If approached at the last minute, being honest and telling these GCs that we are already teamed with another GC is always the best policy. Knowing how your preferred GC does business is critical in the development of long term contractor partners.

## HOW THEY DIVIDE UP THE ENGINEERING REQUIREMENTS

GCs may have subcontractors with unique design build ability or long term relations with other engineers and these relationships generally bring much benefit to the DB process. For example, they may have an electrical subcontractor with the in-house engineering expertise to contribute to the project design.

It's important to understand what the GC needs in the way of design



Figure 1 DB Marine Corps Tiltrotor A/C maintenance hangar designed by TranSystems



support. Being willing to do a selective part of the design is better than wanting to do it all and ending up getting nothing. Most GCs have civil firms that they use in specific geographical areas, because these firms know the locale and how to get all the necessary permits. Having a strong relationship with a GC and understanding how they put together their teams is very helpful in understanding what they are looking for you, as the designer, to bring to the tables. The more you work with a GC the better you will understand how they operate and what is best for both parties.

## HOW THEY USE YOU DURING CONSTRUCTION

How a GC uses your expertise during the construction process is also important to know up front. If they expect you to go to most of the early project meetings, this will impact how much time you need to allow for the fee proposal. In addition, some GCs still don't realize that designers are in a different category than their major subcontractors. This can cause problems in invoicing and more importantly, in how you are treated and the role you play.

The bigger GCs are typically more sensitive to the differences and will treat the designers as more of a partner in the process than just another provider or supplier. This puts the designer in a better position to make a positive contribution in terms of on-going design innovation and cost savings.

## IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

Most GCs are very sensitive to the fact that whoever is the point of contact for the designer (generally the project manager (PM) or client



Figure 2 NAVFAC Atlantic NAVFAC Atlantic New Pier 11, Norfolk, VA A/C Carrier & other large ship berthing designed by TranSystems



Figure 3 Military Base Library, Shaw AFB designed by TranSystems

manager) must have a good working relationship with their PM. If these two counterparts don't get along then the contractor/designer relationship will be negatively affected. The PMs are generally the gate keepers for communications and submittals and therefore must constantly coordinate at a very effective level.


The designer must assign to these positions only individuals who are good

communicators and know how to build and maintain strong relationships. The larger GCs will have a Director of Marketing, a "Design Build Manager" or another person who always deals with the A&E community. This is a similar contact to the PM in that this person must be cultivated and kept in the loop to assure that the two organizations are communicating effectively.



## QUALITY CONTROL

The QA process is so important to the partnership that I recommend that the designer include appropriate GC employees in the review process. Some GCs will not want to participate in reviews, feeling that they are 100% the responsibility of the designer. The larger GCs will know the benefits that flow from having the best set of plans and specifications as possible.

Saving money in this area by avoiding misunderstandings and re-work is not only important for the project at hand, but will help win the loyalty of the GC. The more quickly you can gain a GC's trust by providing a good quality set of plans and specifications that are easy to understand and use in the field, the more mature – and successful – the relationship will become. 

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