

# Choosing A Builder

*To select a builder, begin by thinking about yourself. What kind of customer are you? If you purchased or built other home, recall which aspects of those experiences you enjoyed most-and least. What would you like to repeat? Avoid?*

## **PRODUCTION BUILDERS**

Production builders are organized for high-volume construction, usually in subdivisions where they own the lots. If you want one of their homes, you must select a site in the subdivision. Production builders offer a collection of floor plans, usually with a choice of exterior designs, or elevations. You can view the homes offered by touring models. Buyers can personalize the floor plans of their choice with selections of such items as floor coverings, countertops, and cabinets.

Adding features from a list of popular options can further personalize the home. Options might include air-conditioning, upgraded appliances, or a covered patio. Today most production builders also accept requests for minor custom plan changes, such as enlarging a closet or adding a window. Altering structural elements requires re-engineering and resubmission of plans to the local jurisdictions building department. Consequently production builders usually permit few structural changes.

Through repetition, the builder has worked any “bugs” out of floor plans. The total time to build is usually shorter because construction personnel are familiar with the plan. Suppliers stock regularly used items, so material delays are less likely and high-volume work offers an advantage in scheduling trade contractors.

The builder’s established floor plans and approved collection of colors and materials may not include the combination you had in mind. Other purchasers’ homes will have your floor plan and elevation. Although production builders plan product mix and monitor exterior colors, two similar homes can end up near each other.

## **COST PER SQUARE FOOT**

Accurate pricing requires detailed information specifications and input from suppliers and trade contractors. Done properly, the process takes days to weeks. Buyers who do not understand the complexity of this process and the importance of clearly written, detailed specifications sometimes compare floor plans based on cost per square foot. For instance, buyers comparing two homes that each include 4 bedrooms and 3 baths might find one is built for \$81 a square foot and the other for \$92. However, the apparently more expensive home might include a level of quality, features, and materials justifying the higher cost-items the buyers truly want. Study the details of materials, and features included in the square footage you are buying and select

your home and builder based on comprehensive information.

## **FINDING YOUR BUILDER**

Your search begins by discovering who is building in the area where you want to live. Start with a preliminary list of candidates from a variety of sources.

>Local chapters of the National Association of Home Builders can provide names of companies who are members. Many of the local associations have custom builder councils or Certified Master Builder programs.

>Scan advertising in newspapers, including regional publications. You may hear ads on radio or television. Increasing numbers of builders advertise on the internet also. The National Association of Home Builders has a Website that you can access at [www.nahb.com](http://www.nahb.com)

>Some of the best builders rely on referrals and do not advertise. Talk to friends, relatives, and the folks at work who have recently built homes about their builders.

>Area real estate agents, familiar with new home construction, can offer builders' names and insights into quality and customer satisfaction.

>Drive around. Directional and entry signs will call your attention to communities in which construction is active.

>Many jurisdictions require builder licensing although specific requirements vary widely. To learn what requirements builders must meet to become and stay licensed, phone the builder licensing board.

## **GETTING TO KNOW YOUR BUILDER**

Now comes the important task of narrowing your list of potential builders. Look closely at each builder's finished work and work in progress. Your home will receive the same attention to detail.

Think about quality. Your definition of quality is unlikely to match anyone else's exactly. Identify the specific characteristics you equate with quality. Consider aesthetics, function, maintenance needs, and environmental impact.

**MODELS.** Look carefully, then return to those you like and look again. Sit in each room, stand in every corner. Sit on the floor and look up. Listen to sounds that carry through the home. Notice how doors and windows fit. Notice wood trim installation, and paint and stain coverage. Examine the exterior. The quality you are looking at is the quality the builder will deliver.

**OCCUPIED HOMES.** Custom builders are less likely to have model homes. They can often arrange appointments for you to view and occupied home their company built.

**HOMES UNDER CONSTRUCTION.** Even builders who have model homes seldom offer a sample of each floor plan, but you may be able to tour homes under construction to experience a life-size example. Seeing homes at the frame, mechanical, insulation, and drywall stages offers an opportunity to see the quality inside the walls.

## **MEET THE BUILDER**

Ask about the things that are important to you. Ask to meet the person who would be in charge of building your home. Think of this meeting as interviewing the company. Look at floor plans and talk about the home you want. How well does this company listen? Are the builder's suggestions and comments helpful and relevant? Are your questions answered clearly and completely? Remember that your relationship with the builder will continue through the warranty period, so choose someone with whom you will be comfortable for the long term.

## **ASK FOR AN OVERVIEW**

Many builders today provide a homeowner manual that guides buyers through the process and serves as a reference after move-in. Does the company schedule a preconstruction conference to review everything before starting construction? Are you invited at routine points to tour your home and have the builder's undivided attention to discuss questions? What is the policy on change orders?

## **READ THE DOCUMENTS**

Review the contract, warranty, and warranty standards. Note the amount of detail provided. This same attention to detail usually follows through the construction of the home. How does the company determine a delivery date? Many factors outside of the builder's control can cause delays. Builders who promise a firm date too early often disappoint their buyers; but every builder can have a system for keeping you informed of the targeted delivery date.

## **REFERENCES**

Ads and signs alert you to the fact that a builder exists; they do not establish how the company treats its customers. For the answer to that important question, talk to the customers themselves.

**HOMEOWNERS.** Talk to previous buyers. Visit communities on a Saturday morning and talk to people who are washing their cars, walking their dogs, or shoveling snow. "I'm considering having \_\_\_\_ build my home. Can I ask you a few questions about your home and how the company is to work with?" Talk to at least five people and visit several areas if possible.

**BUILDING DEPARTMENTS AND CONSUMER PROTECTION ENTITIES.** Building inspectors or departments are unlikely to provide you with much information unless you have a close friend who works there with whom you can chat. Similarly, entities such as the Better Business Bureau can only share information other customers have taken the time to report. They do not recommend or evaluate. Although if you hear that 87 complaints are on file, caution is in order, remember that lack of negative reports is not a guarantee.

*Many factors must come together for you to be comfortable with your builder—design, quality, price, scheduling and of course location. Throughout your exploration, comparing one detail after the next, you keep coming back to the same builder. Phone calls are returned promptly, questions are answered completely, information is forthright and clear. Suggestions about the home you want to make sense, and the price is in line with your budget. Your efforts have paid off; you have found your builder.*

