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SO, CAN YOU REALLY TRUST A BUILDER?

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So, can you really trust a builder?

25 Mar 2013



JANE PRICE-STEPHENS, INTERIOR DESIGNER

We are supposedly over half way through our build... and, as far as I can tell, the builders still seem to be demolishing stuff rather than building stuff... it does give considerable cause for concern when you see your home crumbling down around you, more so when you are living in a cramped one-bedroom flat within the building site (with a very large dog and a very large cat), separated by just a few bits of hoarding and some expanding foam from all the noise and the dust... but, after nine weeks of this challenging existence we have finally capitulated and moved out. We are homeless. It's a very strange feeling.

Anyway, back to the build. Now, according to our builder we have been a week ahead of schedule to this point, so I was unbelievably frustrated to see no real work or progress on site last week (with the exception of the removal of a picket fence, which to be frank, was so rotten I could have done it myself). As a consequence of this and our desire to get the build finished somewhere remotely close to the date we have in our plans and contract, we called an emergency meeting with our builder to 'express our concerns' (that is very diplomatic positioning and does not accurately reflect the colourful language that my husband used during this 'discussion').

Now for those that don't know, in a previous life I worked in the city as a strategy consultant and, as a result of this, I am professionally trained as a project manager (as is my husband, but I'm better at it...). We both reviewed the project schedule and could see that after the past week of very little activity we were now in fact getting close to being one week behind schedule (so we effectively lost two weeks in the blink of an eye). Now that may not sound like a lot (and in the grand scale of things, it isn't), but when you are begging, borrowing and stealing sofas and spare rooms from very good friends and family, the last thing on earth we want is for the build to run way over and we end up totally outstaying our welcome everywhere... we're nice people, but everyone has their limits...



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JANE PRICE-STEPHENS,
 INTERIOR DESIGNER

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During the meeting we pointed out to the builder/project manager that we were behind schedule, to which his very interesting response was; 'no we're not, have you seen the latest schedule?' Now I appreciate that there has to be flexibility in project planning and that in the real world of a build (where you may not discover a problem until you pull down a wall), plans do change and reprioritisation is always necessary. However, you can't simply move major elements of the build outlined within the project plan back and continue to say you are either on or ahead of schedule! My husband and I joked (in a very serious way) that if that was the case, he could quite easily have kept moving all the incomplete activities out until eventually they would all be sitting in the last week of the project – at which point, we would then have been told that we were behind schedule and that the house wasn't going to be delivered. So, following our heated discussion on the basics of project planning and management, we now have a very clear agreement with the builder that items in the project plan cannot move and if they do it is by exception and joint agreement. It's worth agreeing this upfront if you are embarking upon a build...

Now, I don't want to teach my builder 'how to suck eggs', but the foundations of a successful project are dependent on it being delivered on time, within budget and to a level of quality that the client is satisfied with. I just pray that our builder isn't just full of promises and will deliver a project we are happy with, within the agreed timescales and to the fixed price that we agreed (with very few 'additional'). I keep coming back to the image below, because it is just so relevant to what I do and it's a useful way of describing the different fundamental elements of any project to my clients...



(Image from oneresult.co.uk)

In last month's blog I set out how all projects are and should be constrained (and aggressively managed) by a set timeline, budget and resources. As a result, it is of utmost importance that the project process is constantly being driven towards completion with regular updates, meetings and follow-ups with the builder. Given that we have now moved out of the building site and are remote from day-to-day activities, it is even more important that our regular site meetings and reviews take place... and critical to the success of these meetings is structure, open communication between all parties and that it is a forum where everyone, including the builder, can voice their opinions and concerns. Again, it is important to agree project governance with the builder up front and make sure that you stick to it for the duration of the build.

I suppose I should apologise and say thank you for sticking this one out -

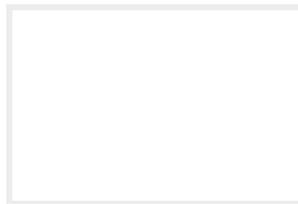
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this blog has been a bit of a cathartic rant... (but hopefully the project management tips will help someone about to embark upon a build).

Jane Price-Stephens runs her own interior design business, to find out more

visit: www.janepricestephens.com, <http://janepricestephens.blogspot.com>, follow Jane on Twitter [@jpricestephens](https://twitter.com/jpricestephens) or call 07970 547433.



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