

# Selecting the Best Builder

## INFORMATION SHEET



**So, you've spent months with your architect or building designer perfecting the design of your new home, extension or renovation. Finance is in place. Excited? It's time to start building. The question now is: Who will you employ as your builder? Here are 10 handy hints on how to find the best builder for your project:**

### 1. Find a specialist

Many builders are generalists turning their hand to anything – from a deck to a full house. Other builders specialise – units, brick veneer homes, off-plan homes, small extensions, kitchens, bathrooms and so on. At Blue Gum, we specialise in architecturally designed, custom-built, sustainable homes, extensions and renovations. We also have an interest in heritage work. The interesting stuff!

### 2. Recommendations

Personal recommendations can be very helpful – particularly from your architect or designer. They may well have worked with the builder and, at the very least, they are professionally qualified to judge whether a builder is up to the task. Be careful though, a builder who did a good job on your neighbour's kitchen might not be the best choice for your new solar-passive house. Find a specialist!

### 3. Size of Project

Find out whether your builder can fund a build of your size. This is important as the builder will have to finance the project between stage payments. Do they have a history of building similar-priced projects?

### 4. The Beauty Parade

Once you've identified four or five builders who have relevant experience, you will need to arrange the "beauty parade". You, or your architect, will need to contact the builders and send them a copy of the plans and specifications. It is then essential to ask them to meet you on-site before they quote. What you are trying to gauge is can you work with this person? Are they enthusiastic? Are they knowledgeable? Do they have questions? Do they present well? Do they listen? Do you like them? Don't forget, you're going to be stuck with them for six months!

### 5. Do You Want an Estimate?

You now have a choice: do you want estimates or quotes? An estimate is a non-binding "best guess". It will be based on past experiences of costs on similar projects. Estimates are useful if you are trying to ascertain whether your budget will cover the actual cost of the build. Unfortunately, estimates can change once a quote is requested. Unprincipled builders will estimate low then quote high when you're already

invested in them. Our advice, if you are using a builder to estimate, is to get multiple estimates and average them – and then ask for multiple fixed price quotes. An alternative is to employ a quantity surveyor.

### 6. Get Three Quotes

It sounds obvious but get three quotes. Please be aware though that good quotes take time to prepare – an average of six weeks for a custom-designed home. So, only get quotes from builders who have passed the "beauty parade". To prepare a detailed quote, a builder will have calculated his own material and labour costs. He will have received firm quotes from sub-contractors. A really good builder will also have got second or third quotes from alternatives. Ask them if they have. See our other info sheet on how to critique quotes.

### 7. Never Get One Quote

Builders love nothing better than knowing they are the sole bidder. You will be gouged.

### 8. Take Up Client References

Ask the builders quoting if it is possible for you to take up references from their last three clients – including their present client. This is important. It must be the last three. Speak to those clients. Do not accept a letter of recommendation alone. Was the builder easy to work with? Did they start and finish the job on time? Did they come in on budget or were there lots of "extras"? Did they do a quality job? Were variations\* reasonably priced? Did they involve the client? Were they consultative? If there were delays or budget over-runs, were they justified?

### 9. Visit Their Site

This is a great way to judge the type of a builder you will be employing. Is the site clean and tidy? Does it look safe? Are there lots of tradesmen happily working away or is it deserted? How well-equipped does the builder seem? Are they excited to show you interesting elements of the build? Do they take the time to guide you through the site? Do they introduce you to the foreman?

### 10. Who Will Be Managing the Site?

Some builders will not directly manage your site. They may well be juggling multiple sites, quotes and office issues. Ask who will be managing the site day-to-day. Most builders will have trusted foremen or site managers. They will allocate work, manage the trades, interpret plans, make decisions and interact with the client. Make sure you meet that person and that you judge them as you would the builder. Make sure they will be on-site for most of the build. One thing you do not want is a house built by unsupervised apprentices, labourers and newly qualified carpenters.

\*See the sheet on "Understanding the Contract" for details on variations.