



On September 2008 Sergio Chavvaria of HQW Architects, Newton, NJ, shared his views on some key topics of interest to owners.

Trends toward 'Green'

Sergio sees major changes from even 5 or so years ago. He thinks sustainability is now mainstream. The USGBC has been doing a good job driving the LEED standards.

A few years ago the first reaction may have been concern over 'cost'. If the client has a longer term ownership perspective, they will see returns on decisions in favor of energy savings. Five to ten year payback is not an unreasonable expectation.

Sergio sees a clear difference between the perspective of speculative developers and owners – including institutions like schools – who have an ownership life-cycle perspective that takes ongoing operation of the building into account.

Contractors understand the concepts and are looking for more vendors and product choices that support sustainability and energy saving.

Advice on Selecting Contractors

Most owners seek the architect's advice, but sometimes they bring preselected choices to the table. Sergio's firm invites in firms they are already familiar with, by having worked with them on prior projects or by reputation.

They look for financial stability and longevity in the industry. It's also important, Sergio says, to consider or invite in contractors who've proven themselves on similar project scopes. If they don't already have direct history with a firm, of course, they do a thorough reference check to assure trustworthiness.

It's important to make sure that the contractor is not a one man show. The whole team, from the office to the site needs to be taken into account.

Successful Launch of New Projects

Sergio says he really believes in listening to the client. He starts by "respecting their vision" since by the time clients come to him they've already thought a lot about their project. He referred to the Trinity House project in this vein. The client had a strong vision to save the building and to repurpose it to a new use. He grew to really respect this as he dug into the building's history. He also has the same sense of satisfaction about the pool house he was able to restore in Newton. While researching how the building was originally built can be a challenge in a restoration or renovation, the final product can also be worth it. Both of these buildings are now a point of pride, and preserving a building with some history and making it energy efficient is another way to be 'green.'

The schedule is central and as he puts it, "timelines and milestones need to be respected from day one." The other principle he emphasized is the need for "open communication throughout the project." He believes that any "stumbling blocks should be tabled as soon as possible" so that the schedule can be adjusted and the final deadline can still be honored.

"The finest structures we build are relationships"



architect interviews

He says that there has to be trust and collaboration among the 3 parties – architect, owner and contractor. The ultimate beneficiary is “value to the owner.”

Ways that Projects Get into Trouble

Sergio shared that there are some areas you should watch out for to be sure that timelines and budgets don't get out of control. For example, selecting finishing details can be overwhelming, so he likes to provide “professional guidance”. Another aspect he likes to be vigilant about is ordering and selecting products early. Of course, with a slower economy, the pressure on prices isn't as great for the moment, but generally costs can go up a lot from planning to completion. Also, a project can be held up by delayed deliveries of products in temporary scarcity. Availability for long lead or popular items can also force a project into making new choices. These all may impact the owner's bottom line – through prices and project delays. Excellent project planning and control can avoid the downside impact of these things on schedules or budgets.

Sergio says that an error some owners may make is not to divulge the true budget early. This certainly affects the design and its an important input and saves a lot of time later when the estimates come in.

Sergio also shared another important caution. He said, “If you cut corners you'll have to live with it for life, and you'll forget why you made the compromises.” He tries to guide his clients to make the right choices they can live with.

Keys to Ongoing Success

Here are key items on Sergio's checklist:

1. Being candid
2. Keeping the owner involved in every step of the process
3. Collaboration among all parties
4. Clarity of roles
5. Architect staying involved throughout

Successfully Closing Out Project

Sergio shares his perspective about how to end a project successfully. As he puts it, “So as not to drag out the end, pay attention to the details throughout.” His advice is to give the same effort when you're at 5% or 95% complete. He thinks that contractors need to be vigilant against mistakenly getting distracted and shifting their attention to new business.

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