

From the moment you decide to build, a natural question is, "When can we move in?" Understandably you are anxious to see dirt moved and walls erected. That move-in date can't come too soon. However, in the initial stages of the project, the delivery date is a moving target because of factors beyond a builder's control.

Weather is one obvious factor. Also, before construction can begin, your builder has several important tasks to accomplish that involve outside people and entities, for example—

- Most residential construction requires a building permit. The process varies and can take a few minutes to many weeks depending on local practices and workload.
- If you make structural changes to the plans, the engineering for the home may need revision. This revision can take from several days to several weeks, and it must be completed prior to applying for a building permit.
- If your home will be in a covenant-protected community (one with a homeowner's association), your house plans may need to be approved by the association's design review committee. These groups generally meet only once a month.

Your builder recognizes that timing is critical to planning your move. Although a guaranteed date is unrealistic in the early stages of construction, the builder can provide regular updates.

As your home nears completion, the builder can provide a firm delivery date (usually 30 to 60 days before the closing). Meanwhile, be flexible and avoid making arrangements that might cause you worry if the move-in date changes.

- Methods and materials vary from region to region and change over time. When you are familiar with one method, you naturally question a different one. That doubt does not make the new method wrong. Ask questions until you are comfortable.

SAFETY

Everyone involved in building your home should keep safety in mind at all times. This practice is common sense. To make it more common, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets regulations for residential construction.

To avoid violations and fines, your builder may require that you be accompanied by company personnel when you visit your home construction site or that you sign in at the sales center when you are on the site. At various phases of construction, your builder may require you to wear a hard hat. Whatever your builder's policies, keep the following points in mind at all times:

- Always look in the direction you are walking.
- Stay clear of large, noisy equipment and power tools. Assume the operator does not see or hear you.
- Be aware of someone working above you. Construction personnel working on the roof may not hear you arrive.
- Avoid handling or attempting to use any tools, equipment, or ladders you see on site.

You may meet many characters on the construction site. Overall, you will find a pragmatic group of people committed to doing a good job. You should also expect mud, trash, material scraps, lunch wrappers, gravel, more mud, blowing sand and dust, mystery parts, and vehicles of every shape and size.

From time to time this diverse cast of characters may all seem to leave the stage simultaneously. At several points during the construction of every home nothing appears to be happening. Several factors cause this phenomenon:



CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE

Once the physical work begins, you will find an understanding of construction scheduling basics helpful. The builder creates the construction schedule based on experience and input from the trades. Some portions of the work must occur in sequence and some trades work best alone in the home. Having the electrician and the plumber in the home at the same time prolongs their work because they get in each other's way.

Depending on how much construction is occurring in the region, trade contractors need varying lengths of lead time or notice before working on your home. Lead times change constantly. Your builder orders materials so that deliveries occur at the correct time. You can help by completing your selections as early as possible and following your builder's guidelines for changes.

Your builder is involved with your home on a daily basis. He or she frequently checks the work at the site, updates the schedule, answers questions from the trade contractors, and checks on material deliveries. When the builder asks you to clarify details, you need to respond quickly to prevent delays.

Both your satisfaction with the home and the builder's reputation rely on this close attention. Technical standards (such as building codes) and specific requirements (such as blueprints, specifications, and change orders) provide detailed criteria for these inspections.

- Until the home is closed in, precipitation, high winds, or low temperatures can stop all work. Exterior work is always subject to weather conditions.
- Sometimes a trade completes its work ahead of schedule. The next trade has an assigned time that your builder cannot change on short notice. Sometimes a trade contractor arrives late because work at another site took longer than expected.
- One late trade can lead the builder to reschedule several others. Because of that rescheduling, your home may lose its place in line with one of the affected trade contractors.
- At several points during construction, progress stops until the work up to that point passes required building department inspections. Items noted by inspectors must usually be corrected before work can continue. Few homes go through construction without an inspector citing something.
- Materials may not arrive on time. The arrival of back-ordered or custom-made items is especially unpredictable. Sometimes shipments arrive incomplete or damaged.
- Some portions of the work move quickly while other more-detailed tasks move slowly. Work may be progressing quite well even though you don't see much change.

If these scheduling delays cause you concern, remember that your builder works with these circumstances every day. All existing homes were subject to the same factors.

QUALITY

Many builders have developed formal inspection procedures. Building inspectors, warranty insurance companies, FHA, VA, or your lender may also inspect the home. However, no matter how strong the commitment of the builder and all the other inspectors, the desire for a high-quality home will be strongest for you, the eventual owner.

No matter what the price of your home, you may reach a point where your standards exceed everyone else's. Or you may not have the technical knowledge to judge the quality of every stage of the work and wonder if it is done well. Trust and information are vital to your peace of mind at such times. For perspective on this important subject, keep these points in mind:

- Building codes make no distinctions based on price. Code books do not include one set of regulations for homes up to \$200,000 and another for those over \$200,000. Codes require that all homes meet the same level of safety.

The building department that issues the permit usually also inspects the work as it progresses. Construction on the home cannot continue until it passes the required inspections at various stages of completion.

SITE VISITS

Some builders schedule meetings with you at several points during construction. You meet at the site, discuss questions, and update the target delivery date. These visits might occur every week or two or upon completion of certain phases of work.

Scheduled meetings may not satisfy your desire to see your home. Your builder may set guidelines for days and times when other visits are welcome. Your safety, satisfaction, and the smooth flow of work are the builder's prime concerns.

In most contracts with a builder, buyers agree not to interfere with work in progress. If you have a question, get in touch with your builder. Don't give instructions directly to trade contractors who may only know about one portion of the plan. If you are working with a small firm, you may be told to speak directly with your builder. With large companies, the builder's salesperson is likely to serve as your liaison.

For any issue you should consider whether it can wait until the next routine conversation with the builder or whether you should contact your builder immediately. For instance, if you order a pink bathtub and see a blue one delivered, your builder and the plumber will both appreciate your calling attention to the error right away. However, try to resist pointing out items the builder will address in the normal sequence of construction.

If you are in doubt about how urgent your concern is, play it safe and contact the salesperson or builder. Put serious questions or extensive lists in writing and keep a copy. Putting your concerns in writing reduces the possibility that they will be forgotten or miscommunicated. Also keep the following points in mind once you have notified the builder of a concern:

- Your concern may involve a detail the builder already has noticed or appreciates your pointing out. Still, correction may not occur immediately.
- Work may simply be incomplete; an early stage can look wrong to you but be exactly right when finished.

- Codes make no attempt to set standards for aesthetics. Many steps in construction allow the builder and the buyers to exercise their discretion. Performance in such areas is based on experience, pride of workmanship, and the ever present-budget.
- Price differences often show most notably in size and features. The more expensive the home, usually the larger and more complex the design. The list of features in a \$597,000 home is longer than that of a home costing \$113,000. For instance, the master bath of the former has a jetted tub with a brass faucet. Tile walls, including hand-painted accent tiles, surround the tub. Beside the tub is a spacious walk-in shower, enclosed by clear glass panels in gold-tone frames. The cabinets have raised-panel doors with brass knobs and provide lots of storage space.
- The master bath in the second home includes a fiberglass tub with a chrome faucet. Tile surrounds this tub also. The buyers select from eight colors, none of which include hand-painted accents. A shower rod comes standard, but space limitations prohibit a walk-in shower. A single cabinet beneath the vanity offers some storage space. Its unadorned doors have no hardware.

Although different in appearance and price, the plumbing to both tubs must work without leaking. Neither tub should have chips or gouges. The tile in both baths must meet the same standards. In time, grout and caulking in both baths will need maintenance by the homeowners. The cabinet doors should all operate smoothly and be level. They will all show variations in the way the wood took the stain.

Building a home is part science, part art, and part plain hard work. As one of the last handmade products available to us, each home is unique in the same way that an oil painting by a landscape artist is unique. The artist can stand in the same place and paint the same panorama using identical colors and the same size canvas as for a previous work. Yet in the end, every painting has a personality distinctly its own.

