

The Architect

Once upon a time there was an architect. He really was the best! It didn't seem to matter whether it was an enormous impressive project or an apparently insignificant little scheme; his attention to detail was second to none and the finished designs were always beautifully balanced. In every aspect was an amazing harmony between functional simplicity and breathtaking magnificence. His work was of the highest quality, technically and artistically, and yet it seemed that the simplest mind could appreciate at least some aspect of it.

He decided to produce one great building that would crown all his work. When this one went on view everyone would be able to see the full range of his expertise and ability and it would be a really satisfying building to be in. The inhabitants would be able to enjoy a wealth of provision for them but would still be able to relax and feel at home there.

As this was to be the fullest expression of his creative ability, the architect gave long consideration to his plans. He decided to enter into a close partnership with his son, who was an accomplished architect in his own right. He was confident that his son would put everything into this project and he was not disappointed. The son made the unusual decision to put in the whole foundation of the house before going out to tender and he poured all his life into getting that foundation properly established. Like his father, he made sure that every item that could be needed was provided.

They both thought that it would be very appropriate, although against usual practice, for the son to act as Clerk

of Works as well. His experience apprenticed to a general carpenter meant that not only was he able to work to a precise specification but also that the contractors would respect his experience and relate to him easily.

The form of building contract they devised was unusual in the extreme. They decided on a very precise specification for the stones - they had to come from their own quarry of unique stone. Although all the stone there was the same sort, it was veined in such a way that no two stones were exactly the same. Each of the stones was to fit very closely with the next and the mortar was exactly specified to bond them very firmly together.

By contrast, the other terms of the contract were nothing like so precise. The plans were certainly very accurate and covered every part of the massive building in the minutest detail, but several contractors were expected to work on the site at the same time, wherever the architect reckoned that their particular ability would be best put to use. There was no precise specification for the method of construction, just as long as all the parts of the house were constructed strictly in accordance with the master plans and the exact bonding of all the stones was ensured.

Once the contract was let, a few builders started work, mostly together in one corner, and gradually others joined in and started to build in other parts. Most of these were those who had served a good apprenticeship with one of the other gangs and were capable of setting out on their own and tackling a different part. It seemed to be going well and the building was growing fast, but there was still a long way to go.

As the walls began to rise from the foundations, each building gang decided on its own type of scaffolding, whatever seemed to fit their need at the time and according to price and preference. Some had the very latest system, very "high tech" with many new features. Others used no scaffolding at all, but balanced precariously on ladders and the walls as they were building. Of course there was every possible combination in between the two extremes, but the architect was not worried; the building was being built and the specification was being followed precisely.

As time went by, the original gangs of builders retired and other workers joined the different gangs and followed the usual methods of building which each gang used. The building continued to grow and the architect was pleased to see consistent progress amongst all the many different building methods. All too soon, however, a disturbing development arose. Various members of the gangs became more concerned with the method of building than with the building itself. The proper use of scaffolding and other equipment began to be more important than the specification of the building. The rate of actual building was drastically reduced as arguments arose about the correct methods to be adopted.

You might have thought that those whose methods were very basic, with very little use of special equipment, would have escaped the arguments and just got on with the work. Some of them did, as did some from almost every gang, but unfortunately they were about as adamant and argumentative about NOT having any scaffolding as the others were about their particular brand. Work ground to a virtual halt.

The expected completion date came and went. The original gang of builders had hoped to see the building completed in their working lives - they were really looking forward to the grand opening ceremony when the architect would take over the completed building. Years later, retired from active building, they were heartbroken to see this wonderful house still incomplete. Worse than that, anyone could see that the building site had turned into a competitive exhibition of building methods. It was hard to see much of the actual building; it had become a demonstration ground for building methods and equipment.

Any builders who actually became involved in quarrying stone and bringing it to the site were not only regarded as being very unusual. They also faced the most horrendous obstruction from the building gangs when they tried to fit the stones into their correct places with the necessary bonding mortar. Each gang wanted their method to be used and obstructed any building unless it complied with their ideas.

The architect and his son were devastated. They tried to communicate with the builders to emphasise the supreme importance of getting on with the building but very few seemed to pay any attention. The last I heard was that, although some building is going ahead, the situation has not changed much. The architect is still looking for any builders who will follow the specification.

Dave Taylor 1992