

Building BLOCKS

The Secrets of Successful Restaurant Construction

by John Klakamp

[EDITOR NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles designed to help you avoid common pitfalls in planning and building your new restaurant. Upcoming articles will address *Selecting the Right Team, Managing Change Orders, Pre-Lease and Pre-Construction Planning, Integrated Project Delivery, Negotiating Successful Contracts and Contract Administration.*]

Secret #1: Smart Planning is the Foundation of Building

What is the most common mistake of many restaurateurs when building a new restaurant? Waiting too long to bring the contractor in to the picture. Often, a restaurant owner will sign a lease, hire an architect and have plans drawn up before securing a contractor. As a result, the contractor views the design for the first time when invited to bid on the project, which is too late in the process. At what stage should the builder be involved?



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The Three Stages of Planning

Pre-Lease

In an ideal situation, you should bring in a contractor before you sign the lease for your space. The best and most experienced restaurant contractors can evaluate existing building conditions, review the landlord's work letter and proposed tenant improvement money and flag any potential concerns allowing you to negotiate a better agreement.

Pre-Construction

Even if you have already signed a lease, hiring a contractor, pre-construction, allows them to work with the architect before the plans are completed. This gives you the opportunity to secure conceptual budgeting, perform discovery and assemble all of the information the architect will need to design the project. By hiring your builder during these early phases, it allows him to be a part of every meeting and conversation, along with the architect; thus everyone is on the same page.

Design and Permitting

During this final stage of planning, the architect incorporates all of the information obtained in the pre-lease and pre-construction stages into a final design.

Typically a 75 percent complete set of drawings are submitted for permit a few weeks prior to the completion of the design.

No Hidden Surprises

Like other builders, my firm provides pre-lease and pre-construction services for a nominal fee that is waived, provided we build the project. In essence, this vitally important service is free to the restaurant owner. Hiring your contractor at the earliest possible stage can save valuable time, money and headaches.

Encore is currently providing pre-lease and pre-construction services to a gourmet pizza concept in Arlington, VA. As a result, we were able to identify and resolve a number of questions and concerns before the project started, including:

- Discovery that drain pans were needed under the existing plumbing lines
- Raised concerns that the landlord was proposing to provide only 1/3 of the necessary HVAC
- The lease did not include necessary space in the parking garage for the keg cooler
- Discovery of "Green" building guidelines
- Plumbing fixture fees were not included in the owner's budget
- There were no cleanout doors in the landlord-provided exhaust risers
- The location of the gas service was unknown

Because these issues were identified and addressed early on, the tenant was able to negotiate some additional concessions from the landlord and adjust his budget appropriately to allow for other additional expenses. Had we not been able to identify these issues, they would have come up during construction when the cost and schedule impact could be far greater.

Secret to Success

Building a successful restaurant is a result of good planning; it really is that simple. Projects today are increasingly sophisticated and complex. Therefore, it is critical to assemble a cohesive and experienced team that can reconcile the landlord's work agreement and requirements, existing conditions, code compliance, and materials, with your needs and vision. Assemble your team early and plan well for an enjoyable process of building your new restaurant.



John Klakamp has over 30 years experience in restaurant construction and is owner of Annapolis, Md.-based Encore Construction (www.encoreconstruction.net), a firm that specializes in providing pre-construction, construction and project management services to the restaurant industry.