



## PROFITING FROM DESIGN

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# The unbiddable master plan

**Q** This might be a silly question, but is there anything that you can do to stop your client from taking your design, making copies of it and then shopping it around to your competitors to try and get a lower price? Any advice would be greatly appreciated.

— Danny Wantague, Dreamscapes LLC, St. Paul, MN

**A** The short answer, Danny, is yes! However, it is my opinion that if clients pay you for a design, they own the plan and can do whatever they want with it. You've been paid for your design services.

With that said, there are things that you can do to provide professional design services and still make it difficult for a client to shop your plan.

Unlike the alternative process, where homeowners hire an independent landscape designer or landscape architect to create a detailed set of plans that will be sent out to bid, design/build contractors are responsible for both the design and build processes. This gives them a tremendous opportunity to not only create a practical and affordable design that their clients will love, but also do it in such a way that it gives them a real advantage against their competitors. Unfortunately, most design/build contractors fail to capitalize on this opportunity.

At Rutgers, I was formally trained to provide landscape architectural drawings that required an incredible amount of detail. These plans were specifically created to have landscape contractors competitively bid on them, providing the client with an "apples-to-apples" comparison. While many landscape contractors are extremely successful in the bid/build environment, the bidding process clearly favors

the homeowner when it comes to pricing.

One of the main reasons that landscape architectural offices usually charge more for their drawings than design/build firms is because of the incredible amount of time and energy needed to create all of the details necessary to obtain accurate and competitive bids. A set of drawings will typically include a layout plan, planting schedule, grading and drainage plan, dimension plan, utility plan, irrigation layout, lighting design and a variety of construction details.

If the project is large or incredibly detailed, there can be an entire page dedicated to descriptions and notes, explaining everything from seed mixes to material finishes.

This is not the case in landscape design/build. We do not, and should not, spend as much time detailing the drawings themselves. While our process requires detailed information as well, I always recommend including this information in the proposal and not the plan itself.

You see, Danny, the more detailed your plans are, the easier it is for clients to get their apples-to-apples comparisons. Again, while this works quite well for the client, all it does is make the design/build contractor a commodity, forcing him or her to lower prices.

By specifying every size, quantity and material selection in your plans, you are practically begging your client to call other companies to check your prices. It's crazy.

### Less work, more control

Think about it. Performing quantity take-offs (QTOs) and estimating labor hours can take an incredible amount of time. Why would you do all of the hard work and then create a drawing that makes it easy for your competitors to price it? If they want the work, let them do their own footwork. And the next time your client signs your proposal and says, "I can't believe it. I called five other companies and no one else would get back to me with a price," you can say, "Wow! I can't believe it, either. All they had to do was bid on the plan."

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**Profiting from Design** is a quarterly column from award-winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the president of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in *Profiting From Design*, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.