

# A SEVEN-STEP PLANNING GUIDE FOR Building a New Home





# A SEVEN-STEP PLANNING GUIDE FOR Building a New Home

---

*We shape our buildings,  
thereafter they shape us.*

– Winston Churchill

---

When it comes to life's big decisions, building a new home ranks up there with choosing a life partner and starting a family.

Designing and building a new home can be an exciting and rewarding process—after all, the homes in which we live have a dramatic impact on our lives. But because the process can also be challenging, time-consuming and expensive, it's not to be undertaken lightly.

We've prepared this guide as an introduction to seven key steps to planning a new home.

1. DEFINE YOUR GOALS
2. OBTAIN THE BUILDING LOT
3. KNOW YOUR BUDGET
4. EXPLORE DESIGN OPTIONS
5. NARROW THE SPECIFICATIONS
6. DETERMINE THE SCHEDULE
7. CHOOSE THE BUILDER



# STEP 1.

## DEFINE YOUR GOALS



The reasons to build a new home are many and varied, but we all have goals and priorities that should be woven into the planning of the project. For some people the top priority might be a healthy home, for others, a home that is very energy efficient - even Net Zero. An effective planning process will result in a home design and specifications that balance the various competing priorities.

The goals that typically apply to the construction of a high performance home include:

**PREDICTABILITY-** Construction projects are notoriously unpredictable. Unity's streamlined process and off-site construction methods help to minimize surprises.

**MINIMAL STRESS-** Standardized work flows, good communication and flexibility within the team can minimize stress.

**HEALTH-** Healthy homes are built with non-toxic materials and provide occupants with a continuous supply of fresh air.

**ENERGY EFFICIENCY-** Low heating and cooling requirements mean reduced operating costs and minimal energy use. Most homes that achieve Net Zero Energy performance start with energy efficiency.

**DURABILITY AND ADAPTABILITY-** A home is a long-term investment. It should be built to last, easy to maintain, and simple to adapt to changing needs over time.

**SUSTAINABILITY-** Related goals often include minimizing waste during construction, carefully sourcing all materials, and building for optimal energy efficiency.

**SECURITY-** Secure homes provide environments that are comfortable, quiet and calm. A well-built home can be a refuge from the busyness of our lives.

## STEP 2.

# OBTAIN THE BUILDING LOT



In order to build a home you have to have a place to put it - and in fact, the building lot typically influences the design of the home and the budget available for construction. There's no point in spending so much for the lot that you cannot afford to build the home that you'd like.

Questions to consider when searching for an ideal building lot include:

- Are there particular amenities such as town centers or recreational opportunities that you would like to be near?
- Are utilities—including power, water and septic—readily available?
- How critical to you is the size of the property?
- How much are you able and willing to spend for the lot?
- Does the site have characteristics such as wetlands, ledge or steep grades that could add to the difficulty and expense of building on it?
- What will the land be like to live on throughout all four seasons?



While Unity is not typically able to send a representative to help evaluate lots under consideration, we can typically provide helpful comments based on a survey, photos and other information about the site.

## STEP 3. KNOW YOUR BUDGET

When planning for the construction of a home, it's critical to have a good understanding of the budget. Clarifying the amount of money available might involve discussions with potential lenders about financing a portion of the project.

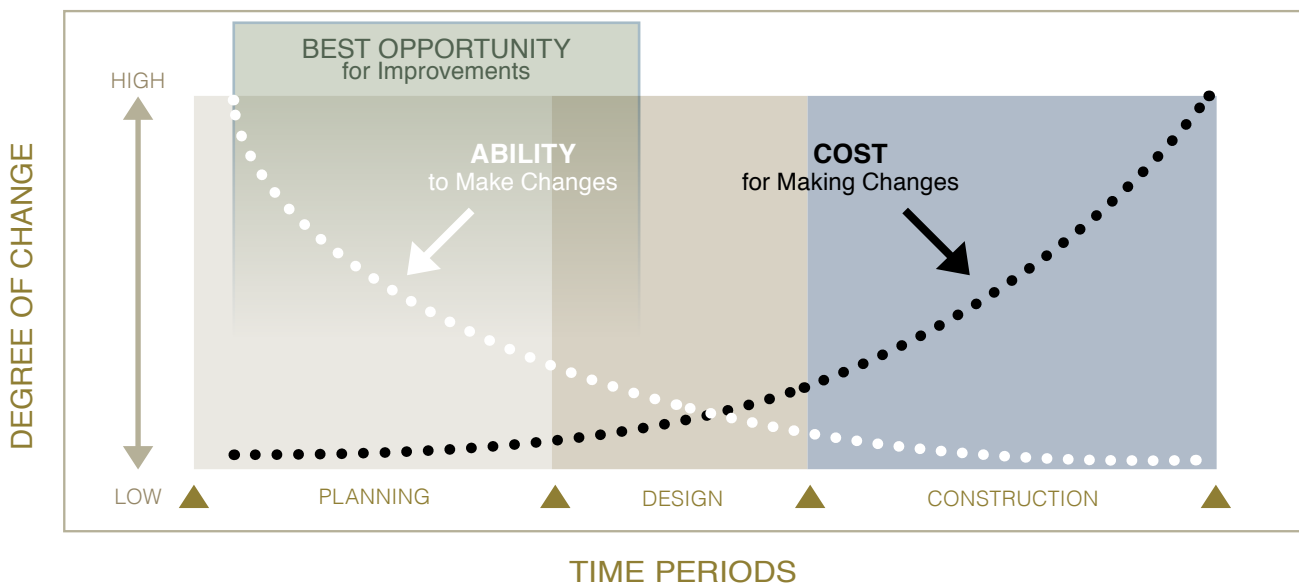
The preliminary budget should include a contingency factor, because costs tend to go up rather than down. Working with a company that provides a fixed price contract for the construction of the home can be an excellent way to control costs.

The budget should also allow for all of the expenses that are not included in the construction of the home itself - design and engineering, permitting, site work, utilities, landscaping, furnishings, etc.

How can you know how much to budget for the home if it hasn't yet been designed and you haven't decided on the finishes and fixtures? We recommend taking a multifaceted approach to determining a preliminary budget. Information to consider includes:

- the size of the home
- the level of quality and performance desired
- construction costs for comparable projects
- input from local construction professionals, including cost-per-square foot guidelines for custom homes

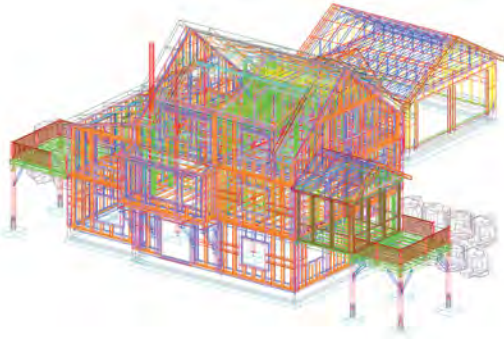
The preliminary budget should inform the design, the size and the specifications of the home. Involving a construction professional such as a contractor or a design-builder in the planning phases can help to ensure that the house design and the budget remain aligned.





## STEP 4.

## EXPLORE DESIGN OPTIONS



The design of a home starts with determining how the home will be used—often called the “design program.” The design is also informed by the building site, your personal preferences, and, of course, the budget.

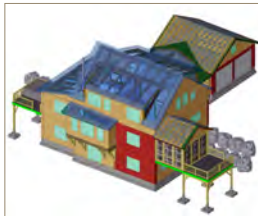
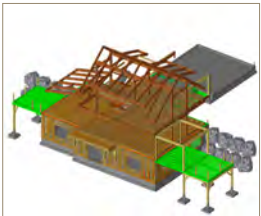
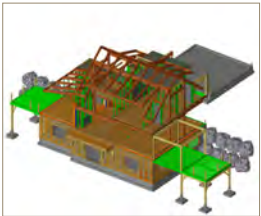
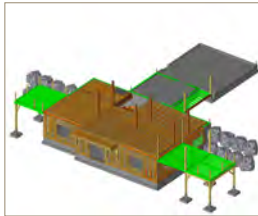
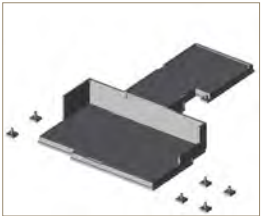
The following lists contain attributes and factors that typically influence the design of the home:

#### THE “DESIGN PROGRAM”:

- The number of bedrooms and bathrooms
- The location of the master bedroom (often on the first floor)
- Spaces with particular functions such as a home office, a music room, a generous mudroom for transitioning from outdoor activities
- Preferences for storage areas such as pantries and walk-in closets
- Accessibility considerations for aging in place

#### SITE CONDITIONS:

- A preferred path for the driveway can dictate the location of the garage and the primary entrance to the home
- A site that slopes significantly often suggests some form of a walk-out basement, in which daylight and even exterior access can be provided for the ground floor level
- The primary living spaces should be oriented to maximize the amount of natural light
- Views can be optimized through the placement of windows, decks and porches



# STEP 4.

## EXPLORE DESIGN OPTIONS



### AESTHETIC PREFERENCES:

- Will the home be traditional, contemporary or some other style?
- Does the design need to fit into (or at least not clash with) other homes in the area?
- Do you prefer a home that hunkers down into the landscape, or one that stands up and declares its presence boldly?

While anyone planning a new home will typically spend time looking at home plans online, other resources such as books and magazines, home tours and professional designers can help to narrow the design focus.

Stock home plans available for purchase online can be an easy and inexpensive option for obtaining construction drawings, but modifying them to fit a particular site, program and budget can be challenging. The services provided by architects are typically at the other end of the spectrum of cost and time, but the outcome is usually a house that fits the owner's needs well. Design-build companies may offer a design system or modifiable plans aimed at balancing the competing priorities of customization and cost.

Regardless of the design path you take, we strongly recommend that it include periodic cost estimates for construction. If not, you may end with a design that you've paid good money for, but cannot afford to build.

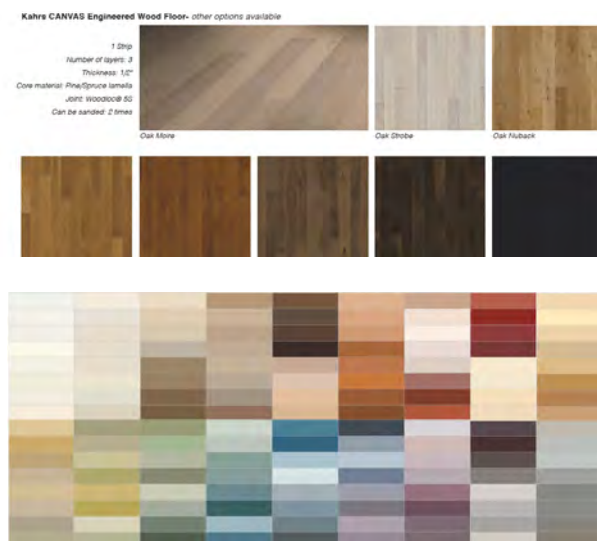
# STEP 5. | NARROW THE SPECIFICATIONS

The specifications for a home describe the various systems, materials, finishes and fixtures that are built into the home. While some of the specifications are dictated by building codes, and others are standard for particular construction systems, many of the specification decisions will be made by the homeowner during the course of design and construction.

As with the design of the home, the specifications should be informed by the project goals. Personal preference and cost will also play an important role in these decisions.

Since you will likely be faced with hundreds if not thousands of choices in planning and building the home, having a sense of what you like and don't like can ease the process. Online tools such as Pinterest and Houzz can help to track your preferences.

Often the designer and/or builder with whom you are working will have a process to facilitate decision-making about specifications. The selection process often starts with online research, and ends up with product samples or viewing actual homes.



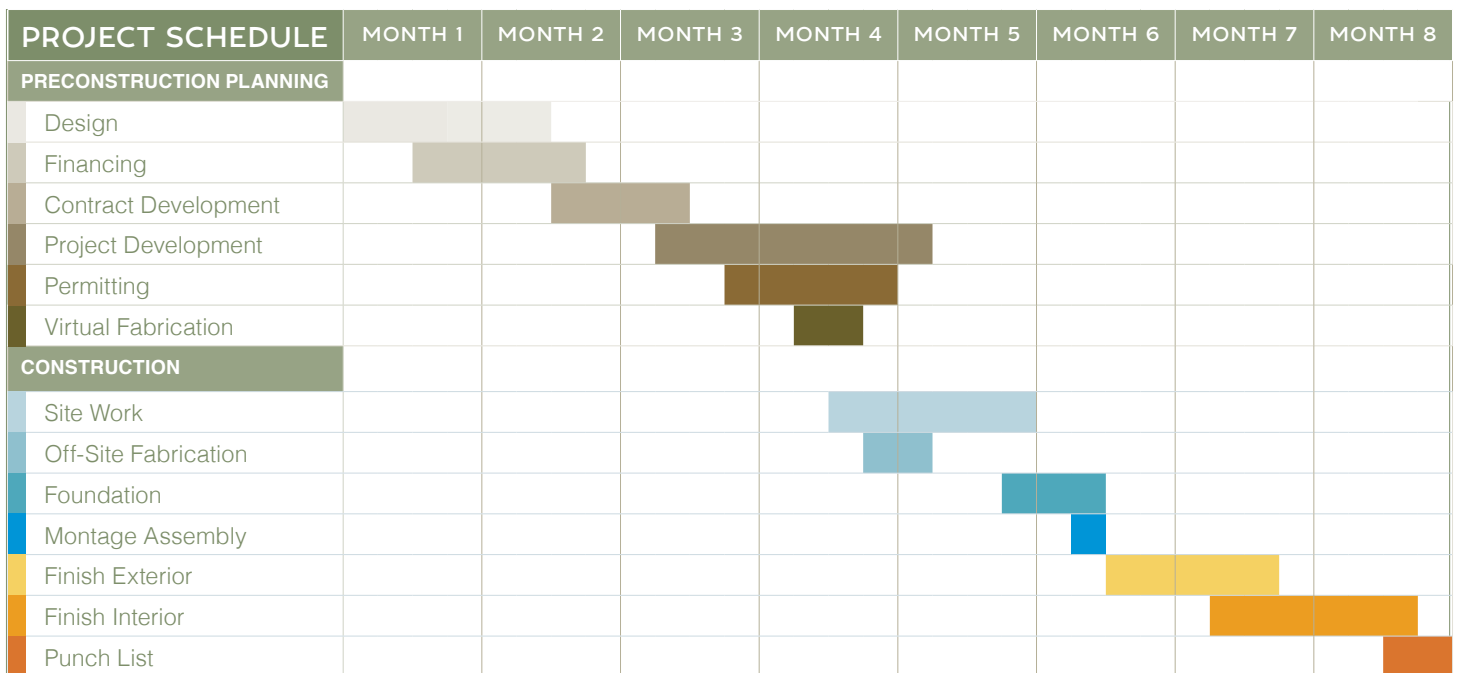


# STEP 6. DETERMINE THE SCHEDULE

As with the budget, having clear schedule priorities for the project can help to make the process more efficient.

We typically think of the project schedule as having two main phases: Preconstruction Planning, during which the design, specifications and cost of the home are determined; and Construction, when the home is actually built.

Below is a general overview of a building schedule for a project using off-site fabrication methods. This chart illustrates both the sequence and how long project components can take. Not all projects or builders will adhere to a schedule like this, especially if there are significant design changes and modifications.



The construction professionals with whom you work in the Preconstruction phase should be able to provide helpful information about the overall project schedule. Conscientious builders will typically provide a detailed schedule for the Construction phase.

If the project schedule is tight or otherwise constrained, that will likely result in higher costs. Utilizing off-site construction methods can help to accelerate the project schedule, potentially saving on financing costs.

# STEP 7.

## CHOOSE THE BUILDER



Choosing the builder for your project—or a design-build company—is one of the most important determinants of the project’s success.

Builders vary broadly in experience, knowledge, skills and capabilities. In addition to checking references and seeing examples of completed work, we recommend that you consider these important questions when evaluating potential builders for your home:

- Does the builder have an established track record of building homes like the one you want?
- Does the builder have experience in building homes that align with your goals, such as high-performance, energy-efficiency and health?
- How does the builder handle the “selections” process, during which specifications are finalized?
- What systems does the builder have in place for estimating and managing costs? Will the project be done on a fixed cost basis, or “cost plus”?
- How will the builder ensure that the project schedule is established and maintained?
- What work will the builder’s own employees do, and what work will be subcontracted out?
- How long have key members of the builder’s team been working together?
- How is site supervision handled? How often will the builder or site super be on site?
- Who will be the primary contact person with the client? Does the builder have a specific protocol (i.e. weekly meetings) for communicating with the client?
- Can the builder provide references for other clients who have built similar homes?

# STEP 7.

## CHOOSE THE BUILDER



While these and other questions can provide insight into how the builder works, perhaps the most important criterion for choosing a local builder is the personal chemistry between you and the builder: do you feel comfortable with the builder, does communication flow easily, and do your values seem to be aligned?

---

At the start of this document, we mentioned that deciding to build a new home is one of life's big decisions. We hope that this document will help you to be well informed as you embark on the journey.

If you'd like to learn more about Unity's design-build process and how we work with homeowners, please visit us at [unityhomes.com](https://unityhomes.com).



A Better Way to Build

(603) 756-3600

[unityhomes.com](https://unityhomes.com)