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Contract Administration: The Different Solution

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Clients of my design firm, Walzworkinc., frequently say that they choose to work with us because they have the sense that we will arrive at a different solution. I will approach the subject of contract administration from that perspective of the different solution. You may get the sense from textbooks and other professionals, big firms perhaps, that contract administration is all about steps in a rigid process; it is professionalized. But is it really professional to have a design phase followed by a separate document phase, and then a bidding phase, and then the administration of the contract? Or is it simply neater? Is better design produced under a rigid format, where activities are compartmentalized and separate? Take note: designers have a bad reputation in the world. Behind their backs the world has noticed their overly tidy demeanor: the matchy-matchy clothes, perfect hair, and the desire to control and contain life, rather than support it. I think professionalism in its formulaic procedures detaches relationships by putting the lid on interaction, and discourages creativity by encouraging us to serve up yet again what we know, rewarmed.

We are careful at Walzworkinc. to explain to our clients, and everyone involved with our projects, that to achieve the best design we can, we leave many decisions unresolved after the completion of the design phase. True, construction documents and specifications are binding and legal, but this does not mean they can't be descriptive of open, flexible ideas. They can speak of intent, goals, and concepts, like a flexible map. The construction documents are the route a design will travel in order to arrive at a completion. Yet we have found that the phase of contract administration can be another creative phase where ideas come together in a refining of themes, relationships, and visual dialogues. True, the designer is the representative of the client during contract administration and what is supposed to be going on during this period of time is construction, but there is not a designer alive