



What Fit Looks Like

(Post 7 of 10 — From Aspiration to Alignment)

We were working with a client who had a clear set of priorities, one of which was to minimize off-gassing project-wide. He wanted to use mineral wool insulation instead of rigid foam in the walls, but its higher cost and lower R-value put pressure on the budget and code requirements. He understood the implications, but the decision wasn't easy. He vacillated, weighing his desire to preserve that choice against the compromises it would require. Eventually, he chose a foam insulation insert that met the budget and required R-value, knowing the foam would be fully encapsulated within the wall and never exposed to its occupants. What initially seemed like a straightforward priority (avoid off-gassing materials) became more complicated as we worked through its implications. Competing priorities create tension, but exploring that tension can give the project clearer direction.

We're wise to begin with what the client clearly values, then explore the decisions that honoring those priorities requires. Each decision affects other parts of the project, branching into new decisions about cost, complexity, sequencing, and execution. The further we move down those branches, the harder it can be to see their connection to the client's original priorities. We can't explore every consequence, but we need to go far enough that everyone understands the path we're choosing and its most significant impacts.

Sometimes design stalls because a decision exposes conflicting priorities. The client feels stuck because making one choice means giving up or changing something else they value. At times like this, it's important that the team slow down enough to explore why the decision is difficult. What is gained with each choice? What is lost? Does either choice introduce consequences we can't reasonably accept? Those questions clarify what matters most and give direction to the decisions that follow. When the team makes a decision without understanding what is at stake or which priorities are guiding it, they introduce risk into the project. Even thoughtful decisions can have downstream consequences that aren't obvious when they are made.

Fit develops when the client and team share a commitment to understanding what matters and what is at stake before making consequential decisions. The goal isn't to understand everything, but to understand enough to make informed choices that keep design moving. Fit extends beyond individual decisions. The scope has to fit the investment. The design team has to fit the project. The builder has to be capable of the work. Preconstruction gives the team a chance to test that fit while there is still time to ask: should the project proceed as imagined—with this team and this level of investment? If the answer is yes, the work moves forward. If the answer is no, the clarity is equally valuable. Adjusting the project, changing course, or choosing not to proceed at all can be the result of clarity, not an indication of failure.