

Sheepdog Construction

Home Quality & Finish Grade Guide

A client meeting packet for comparing budget, square footage, finish level, and expectations.

**Square footage tells you how big a home is.
It does not tell you how well it is built.**

This guide helps clients understand what level of materials, craftsmanship, systems, and detail their budget supports before construction begins.

Use this guide to discuss:

- What grade of home or remodel the budget realistically supports.
- Which categories should be upgraded and which can be simplified.
- Whether the desired square footage is working against the desired quality level.
- How to avoid disappointment by aligning scope, finishes, and budget before work begins.

Planning note: The price-per-square-foot examples in this packet are broad preliminary ranges for discussion. They include contractor overhead, coordination, and profit, but they are not a quote. Final pricing depends on plans, site conditions, engineering, selections, schedule, and scope.

1. The Budget Triangle

Every project balances three major factors: **size, quality, and budget**. Most clients can strongly prioritize two, but the third must adjust.

Client Wants	What Usually Has to Adjust
Large home + fixed budget	Finish level, design complexity, or allowances must simplify.
High finish level + fixed budget	Square footage or scope often needs to shrink.
Large home + high finish level	Budget must increase.
Fast timeline + custom work	Planning quality, selections, labor, and management budget become more important.

A realistic project is not about choosing the cheapest path. It is about choosing intentionally: where to spend, where to simplify, and what not to compromise.

2. Bigger Is Not Always Better

Many clients begin by asking, “How much house can I get?” We also encourage clients to ask, “How good of a house can I build?”

A smaller home with better layout, storage, windows, insulation, cabinetry, and main-space finishes can feel more valuable than a larger home with too many compromises.

A smaller, better-built home can offer:

- Lower utility costs
 - Lower maintenance costs
 - Better daily function
 - Higher finish quality
- Better storage planning
 - Less wasted space
 - More budget for daily-use areas
 - A more custom feel

3. Planning Price Ranges

These ranges are meant to give clients a realistic starting point for conversation. They include contractor management, overhead, and profit. They do not replace a detailed estimate based on actual plans and selections.

Grade	Typical New Build Planning Range	What This Usually Means
D - Heavy Compromise	\$175-\$225/sf	Very simple scope, few selections, visible compromises. Only considered where the work can still be safe and proper.
C - Solid Practical	\$225-\$285/sf	Clean, functional, budget-conscious. Stock/basic finishes and simple details.
B - Custom Standard	\$285-\$365/sf	Above builder grade with durable finishes, good main spaces, and some upgrades.
B+ - Heirloom Custom	\$365-\$475/sf	Beautiful forever-home quality. Quality where it matters, custom touches, stronger finish package.
A - High Custom	\$475-\$650/sf	Very high-quality custom home with premium materials, stronger systems, and more custom detail.
A+ - Estate / Luxury Showcase	\$650-\$1,000+/sf	Rare materials, advanced systems, designer finishes, luxury technology, estate-level details.

What the new-build ranges generally include:

Normal construction labor and materials, contractor coordination, supervision, scheduling, overhead, and profit/commission. They assume a defined scope and reasonable site access.

What may not be included:

Land, financing, architectural/design fees, major engineering, unusual sitework, long utility runs, well/septic, driveway length, permitting surprises, owner-purchased appliances/furnishings, landscaping, pools, barns, detached buildings, and major change orders.

Remodeling and Additions

Remodel / Addition Type	Planning Range	Notes
Light cosmetic refresh	\$75-\$150/sf	Paint, flooring, fixtures, minor finish updates. Minimal structural or utility changes.
Standard remodel	\$150-\$250/sf	Kitchen/bath updates, finish upgrades, moderate trade work.
High-end remodel or addition	\$250-\$425+/sf	Custom details, structural changes, plumbing/electrical/HVAC moves, higher finish level.
Complex custom addition	\$425-\$650+/sf	Ties into existing home, foundation/roofline complexity, kitchens/baths, utility upgrades, custom exterior matching.

Remodeling can cost more per square foot than new construction because it often includes demolition, discovery, protection of existing finishes, tie-ins, repairs, unknown conditions, and working around an occupied or existing structure.

4. The Home Quality Grades

The grades below are not meant to judge the client. They are a simple language for discussing finish level, systems, craftsmanship, and budget. Most homes combine multiple grades by category.

A+ Grade - Estate / Luxury Showcase

Over-the-top, rare, highly engineered, millionaire-level.

Common features:

- Rare stone, imported tile, premium hardwoods
- Smart toilets, steam showers, heated floors, luxury plumbing
- High-tech HVAC, zoned ductwork, ERV or advanced air filtration
- Whole-house automation, security, audio, and lighting controls
- Designer appliances, panel-ready units, custom cabinetry throughout
- Specialty glass, steel, masonry, staircases, or timber details

Budget reality:

A+ is not the standard custom home category. It is for clients who want luxury systems, rare materials, specialty trades, and a budget that supports almost every category being elevated.

A Grade - High Custom

Very high quality custom, but not excessive.

Common features:

- Custom cabinetry in important areas
- Real wood or premium engineered flooring
- High-quality windows, doors, trim, and millwork
- Stone/quartz counters and upgraded bath finishes
- Better insulation, lighting plan, plumbing fixtures, and exterior details

Budget reality:

A-grade work usually requires a strong budget or a smaller footprint. It should feel refined and custom without requiring every room to be luxury-showcase level.

B+ Grade - Heirloom Custom

Beautiful, durable, timeless, intentionally built.

Common features:

- Quality cabinetry, with custom work in key spaces
- Durable flooring and attractive tile in important rooms
- Better fixtures where they matter most
- Clean carpentry, meaningful trim, good lighting choices
- A few handcrafted or signature details

Budget reality:

B+ is often the sweet spot: a real forever-home feel without luxury excess. This grade rewards smart square footage and thoughtful priorities.

4. The Home Quality Grades, continued

B Grade - Custom Standard

Good, clean, attractive, durable, above builder-grade.

Common features:

- Semi-custom cabinets
- Durable LVP, engineered wood, or tile
- Solid counters and upgraded fixtures in main rooms
- Simple but attractive trim and paint package
- Some upgraded details, but not throughout the whole home

Budget reality:

B-grade is a strong, respectable level for family homes. It should not be expected to have the detail or material level of A or B+ work.

C Grade - Solid Practical

Functional, clean, safe, budget-conscious.

Common features:

- Stock cabinets and basic counters
- LVP, laminate, carpet, or basic tile
- Standard fixtures and lighting
- Basic trim, doors, hardware, and paint
- Fiberglass tub/shower units or limited tile

Budget reality:

C-grade does not mean poor quality. It means standard materials and simple details are used to control cost.

D Grade - Heavy Compromise

Bare minimum, visible tradeoffs.

Common features:

- Cheapest acceptable materials
- Minimal trim and limited finish choices
- Very simple paint and finish work
- No custom details
- More good-enough decisions

Budget reality:

D-grade may solve a short-term need, but it is not ideal for clients expecting polish, custom beauty, durability, or strong resale appeal.

F Grade - Not Offered

Below our standard.

We do not offer unsafe shortcuts, improper structural work, skipped waterproofing, skipped prep, code issues, hidden problems, or work we would not want our name attached to.

5. Whole-House Grade vs. Category Grade

Most homes are not one grade in every category. A smart project may use stronger grades in the structure, kitchen, primary bath, windows, and main living spaces, while simplifying secondary spaces.

Example: A client may choose A-grade framing and waterproofing, a B+ kitchen, B bathrooms, C bedrooms, B exterior details, and C-grade laundry finishes. That is normal and often wise.

Category	Suggested Minimum	Upgrade When...
Foundation / structure	A or B+	The home is long-term, complex, or has special loads, porches, decks, or site conditions.
Framing	A or B+	Straight walls, rooflines, openings, and future finish quality matter.
Roofing	B+ or B	Longevity, insurance, storms, and appearance matter.
Windows & exterior doors	B+ or B	Comfort, utility bills, quietness, and curb appeal matter.
HVAC / comfort systems	B+ or B	The client cares about air quality, humidity, noise, zoning, or long-term comfort.
Kitchen	B+ or B	The kitchen is a daily-use and resale-critical space.
Primary bathroom	B+ or B	The client wants comfort, tile, waterproofing, and a polished feel.
Secondary bedrooms	C or B	Most clients can simplify here without harming the overall feel.
Trim & millwork	B+ or B	The client wants the home to feel custom.
Lighting	B+ or B	Main spaces need atmosphere, function, and good task lighting.
Porches / outdoor living	B+ or B	The client values gathering spaces and Southern outdoor living.

6. How to Handle a Budget Gap

A common issue in custom construction is when a client wants the look, size, and finish level of a more expensive home, but the available budget is lower.

For example, a client may want a home that appears to be a \$900,000 build, but the available budget is \$650,000. That does not mean the project is impossible. It means choices must be made.

Option	What It Means	Best When
Reduce square footage	Build a smaller home at a better grade.	The client cares more about quality, comfort, and longevity than maximum size.
Simplify the design	Reduce roofline complexity, corners, custom exterior details, and specialty features.	The client wants to keep the footprint but lower construction complexity.
Lower the finish grade	Use more practical materials and fewer custom details.	The client wants size first and accepts simpler finishes.
Phase the work	Build the essential house now and add extras later.	The client wants quality but cannot do every upgrade at once.
Increase the budget	Keep size, design, and finish expectations high.	The client does not want to compromise scope or quality.

**A \$650,000 budget can build a beautiful home.
But it may not build an A-grade version of a \$900,000 design.**

The solution may be smaller square footage, simpler design, phased upgrades, or a more practical finish package.

7. What Pushes Cost Up

The same square footage can price very differently depending on design, selections, site, and systems. These are common cost drivers clients should understand early.

- Complicated rooflines, dormers, valleys, and high pitches
- Lots of corners, bump-outs, porches, decks, and exterior transitions
- Large kitchens, multiple bathrooms, or moving plumbing/HVAC/electrical
- Custom cabinetry, built-ins, and specialty trim
- Large windows, premium windows, sliders, folding doors, or specialty exterior doors
- Tile showers, waterproofing details, heated floors, and wet rooms
- Stone, brick, masonry, plaster, handmade tile, or specialty finishes
- Long driveways, poor access, grading, drainage, retaining walls, septic/well issues
- Change orders after work begins
- Unclear selections, delayed decisions, or allowance items that are too low

8. What Can Control Cost Without Making the Home Feel Cheap

- Simplify rooflines and exterior shape
- Reduce wasted hallways and oversized rooms
- Keep bathrooms efficient and avoid unnecessary plumbing moves
- Upgrade main spaces and simplify secondary rooms
- Use one or two signature details instead of custom work everywhere
- Choose durable mid-grade materials instead of rare or trendy materials
- Keep window sizes and placements thoughtful but not excessive
- Make selections early to prevent delays and change orders
- Phase non-essential items such as outdoor kitchens, built-ins, or landscaping

9. Client Priority Worksheet

Use this section during the meeting to identify what matters most. The strongest projects have clear priorities before estimating begins.

My top priorities are:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Maximum square footage | ☐ Best resale value |
| ☐ Best long-term durability | ☐ Fast timeline |
| ☐ Beautiful kitchen | ☐ Storage and function |
| ☐ Beautiful primary bathroom | ☐ High-end finishes |
| ☐ Low maintenance | ☐ Simple practical design |
| ☐ Energy efficiency | ☐ Timeless style |
| ☐ Outdoor living space | ☐ Luxury features |
| ☐ Custom details | ☐ Family-friendly durability |
| ☐ Lowest upfront cost | ☐ Aging-in-place comfort |

Where would you rather invest?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Kitchen | ☐ Lighting |
| ☐ Primary bathroom | ☐ Plumbing fixtures |
| ☐ Flooring | ☐ Energy efficiency |
| ☐ Windows and doors | ☐ Outdoor living |
| ☐ Trim and millwork | ☐ Storage |
| ☐ Exterior siding | ☐ Garage |
| ☐ Porches | ☐ Landscaping |
| ☐ Built-ins | ☐ Specialty finishes |
| ☐ Tile | ☐ Smart home features |

Where are you willing to simplify?

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Secondary bedrooms | ☐ Specialty tile |
| ☐ Secondary bathrooms | ☐ Built-ins |
| ☐ Laundry room | ☐ Outdoor kitchen |
| ☐ Garage | ☐ Landscaping |
| ☐ Closets | ☐ Smart home features |
| ☐ Light fixtures in less-used rooms | ☐ Rare or luxury materials |
| ☐ Guest spaces | ☐ Extra square footage |
| ☐ Decorative trim | ☐ Complex rooflines |

10. Meeting Notes & Initial Grade Plan

Item	Notes
Desired total budget	
Desired square footage	
Target overall grade	A+ / A / B+ / B / C / D
Must-have upgrades	
Areas to simplify	
Possible phased items	
Main concern before estimating	

Our Minimum Standard

Even when a project is budget-conscious, certain things should not be compromised: safety, structural integrity, waterproofing, code compliance, basic durability, honest communication, proper prep, and workmanship we are willing to stand behind.

A project can be simple. A project can be practical. A project can be budget-conscious. But it should not be unsafe, dishonest, or poorly built.

Final Client Note

The purpose of this guide is clarity. A successful project is not always the biggest house possible. A successful project is a home that fits the client’s budget, lifestyle, values, and expectations. Sometimes that means building larger and simpler. Sometimes that means building smaller and better. The best homes are built when the client and builder are honest from the beginning about budget, quality, and expectations.

At Sheepdog Construction, we want to help you build a home you understand, a home you can afford, and a home we can proudly stand behind.

Internal pricing note: planning ranges reflect broad 2026 published regional/national construction cost references plus contractor overhead/profit assumptions. Use detailed project estimates for binding decisions.