

Have a plan before you start to remodel

Written by Jeb Breithaupt
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The biggest mistake homeowners make when they start a big remodeling project: They don't plan ahead.

Many of my clients come to me to solve problems they either discovered or created when they jumped feet first into a project like a kitchen or bathroom renovation, tearing out toilets and cabinets and flooring before they have considered how each step of the process will affect the next.

Maybe they ordered a whirlpool tub and extra shower sprays without considering that their existing plumbing and electricity weren't designed to handle the extra load. Or they tore out their decades-old bathtub without realizing how likely it was that the floor underneath would be rotting away and need reinforcing before the new shower could go in.

It's only natural to get excited about how gorgeous your new bathroom or kitchen will look when it's finished. But even the handiest homeowners are unlikely to anticipate all of the work that goes on behind the walls and under the floor during a remodeling project.

So spend some time planning your remodeling project before you start. It will go so much smoother if you do.

Before you hammer your first nail when you're renovating, redecorating, repairing or expanding your home:

1. Consult with some professional contractors, even if you hope to do most of the work yourself. Ask a plumber and an electrician to visit your home and advise you about any unseen corrections you might need to make before you can start replacing fixtures and upgrading appliances. Consult with a general contractor about your project so you'll understand its true scope.

It's highly likely that you will decide to hire a general contractor to do at least part of the job once you know everything that's involved.

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A good general contractor will serve as a project manager and will find and hire subcontractors like plumbers, fabricators and installers--so you don't have to. A professional will get the proper city permits for the work, and honor all building codes.

2. During that consultation, the general contractor can help you decide whether you need to work with an architect, designer or decorator before you start choosing finishes, colors and styles. If your project involves tearing down walls, cutting out spaces for new closets, or moving counters, sinks and stoves, or if it touches the structure of your home in any way, you need an architect or engineer.

If you're having trouble figuring out how to reorganize a room so the space functions better, consider working with a designer. If you just need decorating advice—like help selecting draperies, paint colors and coordinating fabrics—you might want to consult with an interior decorator who specializes in surface decoration.

A good general contractor will have relationships with those kinds of professionals and can put you in touch with them.

3. Consider how much, if any, of the work you really want to and are able to do yourself, and which part you want to leave to the professionals. Keep your general contractor advised of that decision so you'll know if your part of the work will impede something he needs to do.

4. Remodel with purpose. Do you need to make room for a baby or an older parent or to get the house in shape for resale? Or are you just tired of your old décor? Before spending a bundle on cosmetic changes to keep up with design trends, direct your investment toward necessary upgrades and repairs to the roof, appliances or safety features that will make your home more comfortable and help you avoid emergency spending, which can be more expensive than a well-planned renovation.

5. Set a comfortable budget, and let your contractor know what it is. Without that piece of information, he/she won't know which kinds of materials to include in your estimate. Later, you could be disappointed to learn that you can't afford the granite countertops or stainless steel appliances your designer chose for you. With a budget up front, the pros can help you find equally impressive items that you can comfortably pay for.

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