

RENOVATION PROJECTS

A little planning goes a long way

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From day one you've wanted to redo the kitchen, add a family room, or even level the property and start all over. Now that you are finally financially and emotionally prepared to do a project, how do you begin? Often it starts with a call to a contractor to find out how much the project will cost. Unless it's a very small project, the contractor will tell you that without plans, she can't give you a figure. Next step, call a licensed architect. The contractor can often recommend one.

Some people do a short telephone interview asking the architect if he's done similar projects, how fees are established, his availability, and whether there is a charge for the initial visit. Others simply tell the architect they need help and ask if he can come at once.

A lot of information must be conveyed in this first visit. It's always best to meet with the couple. Sometimes couples are not in sync with each other regarding their needs, how much they're willing to spend, and even worse, one may be resistant to doing the job at all. Some architects refuse jobs when there's this kind of tension.

Now is the time to give the architect your wish list. If your wish list is larger than your bankroll, you can also talk about designing the whole project but constructing it in phases. The architect will usually make limited suggestions and comments about your project.

You should ask if she visits the site during construction and is he available for consultation and meetings.

Issues around money are usually discussed towards the end of the interview. You, the client, will ask about fees. There are generally four ways to charge: flat fee, percentage of construction, hourly and by the square foot. The last is more commonly used in commercial construction. A dance of avoidance often occurs at this time. The owner avoids telling the architect how much she can spend for fear the he'll raise his fee and the architect avoids committing to how much the project will cost for fear of under calculating the expense. At some point the owner should reveal her budget so that the architect can keep the project from getting too expensive.

Remember, the architect is sizing up the potential client as much as the client is sizing up the architect. At the end of the interview the architect should have a good sense of the project and the client. The client should come away feeling that the architect



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has listened and understands her needs and concerns. There is an intimacy to residential architecture, so feeling comfortable with the architect is important. At the end of the interview you should come away with a feeling of confidence.

If the architect is interested in your job and you are interested in the architect, the next step is for the architect to put together a proposal. Some architects use the proposal as a contract and others will do a more formal AIA contract. Whether it's a letter of proposal or a formal contract, in most residential projects there is usually no reason to hire a lawyer to review either one.

Next comes the hiring of the contractor. There are two options: hire the contractor, electrician, plumber, and other trades yourself and pay them individually or have the contractor act as a GC (general contractor) and do all the hiring. I always advise people to work with a GC. When you do the hiring you are taking responsibility for supervising the project. For a fee, a GC will do all of that for you.

As with the architect, ask people you trust for recommendations and ask the architect as well. Make sure the contractor you hire primarily does residential work. The level of care may differ and commercial contractors are not used to working with homeowners. If you're able, try to see projects they've done. Look at the workmanship. If there are cracking or gaps where the crown molding meets at the corner, it shows that the mitering wasn't done correctly. Wherever there is tile, floor or wall, check gaps between the tiles to see if they're



even and straight. Look at doors and windows to make sure they're level. If you want to make sure the walls are even and smooth, come at night with a flashlight, if the homeowner permits. If the flashlight casts a shadow on the wall, it means the walls are not smooth. Keep in mind when doing renovations, no one can see through walls or under floors. There is often an unwelcome surprise, like an old unused water pipe in the wall where the stove goes. Budget an extra 10 percent for just such surprises.

Ask about the contractor's work habits. Is he there every day? Does he put in a full day? Does he check or supervise the subs' work? Has the house been properly prepared for construction? Rooms protected from dust and outdoor plantings covered? Are penetrations to the house adequately sealed against the elements? Does he keep the work space neat and clean

up each night? If, for whatever reasons, changes have to be made during construction, is he accommodating or does he try to convince you that everything is OK? At completion, does he come back to finish the punch list? As with the architect, make sure that you're comfortable with the contractor; you'll be spending a lot of time with him.

While you're deciding about the contractor the architect should be at working on the drawings. When the drawings are complete, but before the contractor can start work, the drawings have to be filed with the local building department. The building department is there to make sure work is being done properly and by licensed professionals. Its mission is to protect and health and safety of the public. Most homeowners see the building department inspectors as obstructionists to be out-foxed. Not a good idea. The building department has something you need — the building permit without which construction cannot proceed. You want them to fast-track your permit, so you go to the building department insisting upon a quick approval. Rarely does this tactic work and the only thing you accomplish is to annoy the clerk or building inspector. My advice is the golden rule: Them that got the gold makes the rules.

Construction is almost complete. You're ready to get back into your home or start to use the new kitchen. But you look around and see small items that need to be done or redone: a crooked tile, missing drawer pulls, trim that isn't straight. The kinds of mistakes that, if not corrected by the contractor, will never get done. These items make up the punch list. The owners often withhold final payment until the punch list is completed.

Bravo! The project is over. It's beautiful. The architect, the contractor, and the subs were a delight. It came out just as you imagined. It was even finished earlier than promised and for less money.

While you're thrilled with the results, something doesn't feel right. Some people experience separation blues. The excitement of the project unfolding, anticipation of seeing something new each day, and your relationship with the workers has now ended abruptly. The symptoms don't last long. But the only sure cure is to start another project. ☺