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How To Avoid Renovation Mistakes

No one wants to make mistakes that can be avoided especially when it comes to your home improvement project. Your home is the one of the most important investments you will ever make. The wrong decisions can affect your home's value and your family's quality of life. Don't take any chances. Take advantage of this useful guide, with our compliments and then when you are ready get started give us a call to put our experience to work for you today.

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How To Avoid Renovation Mistakes

Over the years, I have seen a lot of renovation mistakes homeowners have made and for the most part those mistakes were avoidable, but costly. People can spend thousands of dollars more than they need, not get what they want, and then what they end up with doesn't really add value to their homes or the quality of their lives. With the right information, homeowners can avoid those mistakes and save thousands of dollars. The bottom line is your home is the most important investment you will ever make. Make sure you spend your renovation dollars wisely.

So what are the most common mistakes that people make when working through a renovation project? They are many and very in scale regarding their ramifications but they really fall into four general categories:

1. Under Achieving Renovations
2. Unrealistic Expectations
3. Unintended Consequences
4. Unqualified Contractors

The first mistake is the “Under Achieving Renovation”. Simply put, you can spend tens of thousands of dollars, maybe more, and you don't reach the goals you dreamed up for your project. How do you avoid that mistake? The answer is to work with a qualified design professional to help you plan your project. Any remodeling project can benefit from the input of a design professional, whether it's a kitchen remodel, a master bedroom addition or a whole house transformation. No project is too big or too small.

We've all walked past a poorly designed renovation and asked ourselves, “Why did they do that?” There's something inside us that's drawn to beauty, whether it's the sun rising over the mountains or a well designed home. We all know beauty when we see it. We may not all be able to create it, but we know it when we see it. Likewise, we also know what doesn't look good. An addition or renovation shouldn't look like an oversized hat on a bad hair day. Your renovation should add value to your home, add to your quality of life, and either look like it always should have been there or give character where there was none before.

Can you afford to work with a design professional? That depends on the professional. My philosophy is that if you value design, I value working with you. You can get as much or as little help as you need to achieve your remodeling goals. I've started with many clients with a one time design consultation. Sometimes I continue to work hourly, allowing them to direct how much time they would like me to spend. After working with homeowners for over 20 years, I've learned that a one-size-fits-all approach isn't what people want. So, I provide a graduated scale of services to meet individual homeowner's needs and budget. Now that we've established that your project can benefit from a design professional and you most likely can afford that service, the question is: what kind of 'design professional' should I work with? There are a number of directions you can take. You can work with your friend Larry who has this really cool house design software package. Or you can work with a design-build firm, a designer, or an architect. Now, I hope you realize that your friend Larry with the cool software may be a really nice guy but he is not a design professional. Do you really want to rely on a friend with no design experience whatsoever to lead one of the most important investments you'll ever make?

The next option would be to work with a design-build firm. This may be a totally foreign term for some of you. A design-build firm is a construction company that either employs someone to design your project or they contract with an outside source to design it. There can be benefits to this approach. They can give you one point of contact and cost information during design so you know how much your renovation will cost you. Also, design-build firms will often provide design services for free. Well, you must be sold! But, everything has a price. You just may not be able to see the tag. You will pay for design, you just won't know how much because it will be rolled into the construction cost of your project. Another aspect of working with a design-build firm is that once you have a design, you're tied to that contractor. You can't take your design and run. So if you decide that's not the contractor for you, you have to leave your design behind and start all over again.

Now, what does that leave us with? A designer or an architect. Of course I have to say you should work with an architect, that's my business, but there are some very compelling reasons why it is advisable to work with an architect as opposed to a designer.

You need to understand that there are big differences between a designer and an architect. In the state of Minnesota, only those who have the appropriate five plus years of education and have completed a 3 year internship with a licensed architect and then have taken a week long exam and have passed with flying colors can be licensed as an architect. And only licensed architects are by law allowed to use the term architect in describing what they do or who they are. Not only are architects gifted in design, but they also understand structure, building methods, building codes and requirements, and are able to communicate a design to a contractor in a way that will help ensure what you and your architect have designed will actually become a reality.

On the other hand, anyone can call themselves a designer. There are no educational or training requirements to call yourself a designer. The only training some designers have is on the software program they use. Remember your friend Larry with that software program: a designer. Besides training and licensing, another notable difference is that a designer may not be able to offer you anything more in the form of ideas other than what you bring to the table. We once had a client who wanted to add a master bedroom suite and had decided that they would have to add on about 500 square feet to the back of their home to achieve this goal. Had they gone to a contractor, draftsman, or perhaps even a designer, that is exactly what they would have received. Luckily for them, they came to a homeshow and talked with us.

Working with an architect can actually save you money and give you a superior design. After meeting with them and seeing their home, we were able to come up with a solution that utilized the current space they had, thus reducing the amount they needed to spend. By working with me and maximizing the space they had, they saved about 30% on their construction costs, which was significantly more than what they spent on architectural fees. Just so you don't think I'm giving architects a pass, they do have some of their own issues to deal with. There are two schools of thought as far as architects are concerned. There are some architects who believe that they have the right and responsibility to tell you, the homeowner, how you should live in your home and the style that you should like. Hello! Is that elitist or what? Frankly, I don't want anyone telling me how to live or what I should like and I don't think you do either. We believe that attitude is arrogant. We believe you are the most important aspect of the design process and your home should reflect your personal style and tastes, not ours, and most of all, it should enhance the way you choose to live.

Bottom line: you are making one of the most important investments you will ever make. Do you really want to rely on someone who regurgitates your ideas and has very little, if any, training? How important is your home? Because, what you choose to do here will end up affecting the way you live every day.

So how do you avoid the mistake of spending too much and not getting what you want? Hire an architect to work with you to create a design that reflects your personal style and will enhance the way you choose to live.

Our second pitfall is having unrealistic expectations. Let's say you've avoided the first mistake, made the right decision, and you're working with an architect. Now you have in front of you a design that you absolutely love. So, you do the wise thing in this market and you ask several qualified contractors to bid your project. You get the bids back and they're no where close to what you can afford to spend. Now, you've spent a significant amount of money designing your home, completing the construction drawings and you can't afford to build it. You're worse off than when you started.

So how do you avoid this mistake? Do some research, find out what your type of project will cost, and set a budget you can live with. Because a design you love but can't afford will not improve your quality of life.

The first thing you need to do is estimate your construction cost by multiplying the square footage of your addition or renovation times the average construction square foot cost. Right now construction costs can be in the range of \$150 – \$250 / sq. f.t., with costs varying based on the type of renovation you're doing. Kitchen remodels tends to be at the higher end of the scale with bedroom and living room space being much cheaper.

The second step is to have a realtor estimate what your home's value would be after your addition or renovation to see how much you should spend. If you plan to live in your home for a significant amount of time, then this is less of an issue.

In fact, if you are finding it difficult to sell your home, renovating may be a better option than moving.

There are three spheres that constrain the design of any project. Your **budget, size, and quality of finish**. Each one will influence the design. If you have a ridged budget and your estimates come in higher than what you want to spend, you'll have to compromise in either of the other two spheres: reduce square footage or lower the quality of your finishes. An architect or designer has no control over the construction cost of your project. They can only work with the three spheres of influence to develop a project that will best fit your goals.

We have had some clients who have had a ridged budget, were unwilling to reduce square footage, and didn't want to skimp on the quality of finishes. It's like my daughter who is going to prom and looking for dresses. She wants this very stylish dress with sequins and beads but can only spend a certain amount of money. She can't have it both ways. Either she will have to spend more money or look at another style of dress.

So how do you avoid being disappointed by how much your project will cost? Set a realistic budget, know what sphere you are willing to compromise: your budget, square footage, or finishes, and communicate that to your architect.

The third most common mistake: unintended consequences. What does that mean? I think this example will make it clear. We had a homeowner that came to us after they added a two story space to their house. They had room available in their yard and added on to their house, but their problem was that they couldn't figure out how to get to their new addition from their current home! They had never planned for how the new space would integrate into their existing home. Now, they would have to redo much of what they'd just done, in order to make things work, spending more time and money to accomplish what they could have done in the first place with just a little professional help.

Another example of unintended consequences is having several projects you want to accomplish without the funds to achieve them all at once. Many people may want to renovate their kitchen but have future plans to add on a family room, master bedroom suite, or finish their basement. So, why not just do the kitchen and worry about the other projects later? Because, a lack of planning for the future today can lead to a problem tomorrow. I have had clients who are looking to expand their main level to create a new great room space, but they just renovated their kitchen the year before and unfortunately, the best place for the expansion would require them to take out many of the brand new cabinets they had just put in the year before. Frustrating. It costs enough to do renovation projects once, so it can be discouraging to have to pay for it again just because of poor planning.

The key to avoiding unintended consequences is to work with your architect to define your immediate, mid-range, and long term goals for your home. Then have your architect develop a master plan with each project phased in such a way to minimize the amount of rework that will be required. This way each phase of the project can be completed and enjoyed without tearing everything apart when you want to tackle the next phase. Design with the end in mind.

The final pitfall that many people not only walk into, but dive into head first, is choosing an unqualified contractor. Like an architect, choosing the right contractor is the key to a successful renovation project. How many of you have heard horror stories that have kept you from pulling the trigger on your project? How many times have you heard of a homeowner that had to hire a second contractor to fix the first contractor's mistakes? We've had clients whose contractors have gone away for weeks at a time and then come back to tell the homeowners that they don't have enough money to finish the job and could they get a loan?

Please, don't ever loan a contractor money to finish your job. You may even hear some sob story that one of their other clients hasn't paid and they used the money from your job to pay some other expenses. First of all, that is illegal. It is illegal for a contractor to use funds from one job to pay the expenses of another job. So don't buy into it. And if they are willing to do that, what else are they willing to do? You don't have to be afraid. While there may be many unscrupulous contractors, in our market, their numbers are dwindling, leaving well qualified, competent, and trust-worthy contractors best suited for your project needs.

So how do you find a qualified contractor? The first criteria is that he is licensed and insured. In this market there is no reason to hire a contractor who isn't. There are plenty of resources at your fingertips to check up on a contractor.

Check with the BBB and ask if the contractor has had any complaints filed against them. See if they're a member of the local builder association. Not all qualified contractors are members, but most members are qualified. Call the Minnesota Department of Commerce at 651-296-2488, or 1-800-657-3602. They can verify if the contractor has a license and if there are any actions or sanctions on their record. Ask for references from some of their clients who have completed your type of project. Realize that the contractor is only going to give you the names of people who were happy with his work, but you can still gain some insightful information if you ask the right questions.

Call the contractor's references and ask them these questions:

1. What type of project did they complete with this contractor and what was their budget?
2. How happy have they been with the quality of the work?
3. Did the contractor complete the project in a timely manner?
4. Did the contractor complete the project within his estimates?
5. Were there change orders that you thought should have been included in the original estimate?
6. Did the contractor keep the work site clean and secure each day?
7. Were the sub contractors timely, polite, and competent?

Secondly, find a contractor who is experienced in your type of project and working within your budget. You don't want to get a great kitchen remodeling contractor to add a second level addition to your home. You also don't want to have a one who builds beautiful million dollar homes complete your basement finish, either, unless you want a million dollar basement. You need to find a contractor that has experience with your type of project and whose average project size coincides with your budget.

If you've gone to the effort of working with an architect to design your home, it is best to work with a contractor who has experience building projects that have been designed by architects. **You want to make sure that the contractor can actually build what you and your architect have designed.**

To recap, the most common mistakes people make and how to avoid them:

1. **Under achieving renovations – Work with a qualified architect.**
2. **Unrealistic expectations – Create a realistic construction budget and determine what sphere you are willing to compromise.**
3. **Unexpected Consequences – Develop a master plan with phased projects.**
4. **Unqualified contractor – Interview, research, and match your contractor to your project needs.**

If you take these four principles and implement them, not only will you complete a renovation that improves your quality of life, you can save literally thousands of wasted construction dollars and walk pretty flawlessly through a process that will make your dreams for home come true.