

"Let's get ready to reno"



Mark Cooper

The key to any great work is preparation. Renovating a home is real proof.

From what I've seen, homeowners can get ready to get the most from their renovation investment by doing a little homework, understanding something about the process and staying involved along the way.

Know what you want

Identifying your goals is the starting point. Add more space? Increase value? Reconfigure to fit your family as it changes? Be sure your urge to build is channeled into what is going to truly benefit you -- now and into the future.



And the better you know and can describe your preferences, the more likely that's what you'll end up with. I recommend pictures. Buy a handful of "Best Homes" and "Kitchen and Bath" magazines from the drug store. Tear out the pages with illustrations of things you like and make notes on them with markers. That way you don't have to say, "I want the kitchen cabinet thingies that have three curves and a do-hickey... in a white that's a little closer to light ivory than to bone." You can just point to a picture.

If you're planning to add a deck or redo the exterior of your house, a camera and a little bit of driving will let you capture ideas about the look you want to see at your place. It's a great excuse to cruise Whistler for the latest and greatest design ideas.

Above all, especially for any major construction or structural changes, get a designer -- someone whose work you admire and who is recommended by your builder. With your files of clippings and pictures, you'll be ready to communicate your exact needs and collaborate on creating your dream home.

Know what to expect

I asked my crew what surprises homeowners. Daniel Maher, our foreman, had no doubt: "The dust."

As soon as you cut through drywall and plaster, even if it's just in one room and even if you put tarps around it, a fine dust will start to settle around the house. Everywhere. Solutions we advise include taping drawers shut and sealing sensitive electronic equipment in bags.

Neighbours are another issue... you can't seal them in bags. The best you can do is inform them in advance. If you're planning exterior work, it's going to look ugly until it's complete. And there will be noise that could start as early as 7 a.m. and go through to 7 p.m. (If you've set a contract price for the job, the contractor won't be focused on keeping quiet while your neighbours try to sleep in or have dinner. If you're paying on a cost-plus basis, there's more flexibility.)

Prepare for slow progress followed by sudden changes. To alter a roof structure, for example, the pieces that reinforce the walls have to be stabilized while you wonder why the old roof isn't being dismantled. Renovation requires things new home construction doesn't: demolition and debris removal, tie-ins with the existing structure and aligning elevations. And you can never know what's behind old walls until you open them up.

Expect to make some choices and purchases early. It's not unusual to wait eight weeks to have kitchen cabinets built and delivered, even longer in the summer. Add a few weeks in advance to develop the best design. It's also easier and less expensive to decide -- before dry walling starts -- about the kinds of fixtures you're using and exactly where they're going to go. You don't want to put up a wall or ceiling and then have to re-open it to install the backing for fixtures.

For plumbing fixtures, make your decisions before framing begins. Showers and taps have to be supported by 2 x 4s, so the last-minute addition of the overhead shower rain head and steam generator you just saw in a magazine will mean removing layers of waterproof ceiling and reframing the structure behind it.

Take into account that lighting and plumbing fixtures, even appliances, may take several weeks to be delivered.

Vinyl and wood windows are usually made to order, which takes six to eight weeks. If your design calls for non-standard sizes, consider modifying it to use standard window widths. If you don't, you'll be reminded every time you shop for blinds or other window treatments and have to pay extra and wait for a special order.

If you have your heart set on a particular tile pattern, buy it sooner. A big office or condo project could come along and scoop up the entire supply and force you to wait a couple of months for new stock. Similarly with granite or quartz countertops: I go with clients to the wholesalers and select the exact piece, since the next shipment will be from another cut of the quarry and will have a different fleck and swirl patterns.



Many older homes have hardwood floors hiding under the carpet which may look great when refinished. If not, and you're installing new ones, the boards should come out of the wholesaler's controlled environment and spend a week in your home getting acclimatized to the humidity of your home. The boards are then less likely to shrink or expand after they've been fitted and nailed into place.

Expect the unexpected

While it's good to buy countertop stone early, the pro's wait until the cabinetry is complete before cutting the countertop to fit exactly. Daniel tells me about a high-end kitchen island he was building when the plumber announced that the position of the floor joists would require the fittings to be two inches off from the plan. (I learned some interesting new French words when Dan told me this story.) But he could make the cabinets look fine, and since the top hadn't yet been cut and milled, there was no problem resizing it.

Not all surprises are bad news. Sometimes, there are opportunities. Recently, while enlarging a deck as part of a major reno, I saw how a small change in the design would allow the homeowner the option of creating a room underneath sometime in the future. Done!

If you decide to take on the general contractor role yourself, do as much homework as you can to avoid having the inevitable unforeseen issues turn into a reno nightmare.

When hiring a contractor who does major renovations, be aware that we're all "type A" personalities. We have to be hard-driven and enjoy dealing with surprises just to stay in the business; those who can't resolve concerns don't last long. But to get the best when selecting a general contractor, try to find one who can not only tell you about ways he's solved problems, but also appears happiest talking about the all problems he has prevented by careful preparation.

Know what you want, know what to expect and expect the unexpected. And work with a builder who's as passionate about your project as you are. That's the best way to ensure you'll be excited and happy when your renovation takes shape and the all the pieces come together.

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