25 Things to Know before Starting a Remodeling Project

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Several years ago, the staff at This Old House conducted a survey of crew, readers, and contractors to create this list of inspired advice for remodelers.

1. Assume nothing. Don’t assume your budget will cover what you planned; set aside a “buffer” of at least 20% over your budget to cover unforeseen needs and have that money ready and available. Don’t assume workers won’t damage other areas of the house as they traipse through; anticipate and protect your floors with corrugated kraftboard or plywood, remove paintings and fragile items from harm’s way. Hammering has been known to vibrate paintings off a shared wall. Don’t assume that what the box says is what you ordered; always open the box and inspect the contents before you sign for it. Don’t assume the worker will “just know” what to do. Be available as issues come up, or anticipate them and communicate your wishes to your contractors or a designee.

2. Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean you can ignore it. Good framing, plumbing and electrical are invisible; a poorly framed wall will eventually flex and lead to cracked drywall, water leaks, and rot down the line. It’s tempting to shortcut on the bones of the remodel and invest more on the interior surfaces that are highly visible, but those cosmetic items can always be upgraded later. Poor workmanship inside the walls, on the other hand, is forever, and will result in you removing your beautiful improvements to repair.

3. Make changes that respect the architecture and style of your house. If you want to “stretch” the boundaries of the architecture, do it with things that aren’t expensive and permanent, like light fixtures and furniture, rather than on the structural elements of the house. This will help you at resale.

4. Live in the house for a while before you make changes. Learn how the sun moves through the rooms and how you use them. This will inform every decision from where you hang your art to whether you need to remodel at all or just buy a more adaptable piece of furniture.

5. Be willing to wait for a good contractor. If a contractor isn’t busy, don’t be afraid to ask why. Likewise, don’t jump at the lowest bid; make sure you are comparing apples and apples and that the quality is truly comparable.

6. Listen to your architect or designer. Professionals can help you define what you are looking for in a project, so you may discover that you only need a bathroom remodel and not an entirely new master suite. Architects and designers can also provide the plans and detailed construction drawings from which contractors can competitively bid, helping you establish a realistic budget and materials list. Often people decide after the architect’s initial work to “go it alone”, but, without an active and experienced supervisor to oversee the project, they find themselves over-budget and experiencing construction stalls and delays. Hold down costs instead by doing your homework in advance of your first meeting with the architect or designer: visit showrooms, clip magazine photos, and gather your thoughts. Then you can use your “design funds” to cover the kind of supervision that insures the smooth execution of your project.

7. Blueprints may not be enough to help you visualize the finished project. Some designers and architects have access to 3D software that can help you imagine the finished space, but if you need to see it in “real life”, don’t be afraid to use blue painter’s tape to chalk out the layout on the floor or even on the driveway. Like parallel parking a car, moving large objects in three dimensional spaces is different than it appears on paper.

8. Make the big decisions early. Know your long term plan for the entire house before you embark on any remodeling so that you don’t end up backtracking and undoing your new work. For example, if you are going to remodel the upstairs bathroom in the future and will need access to the downstairs plumbing, include any needed upgrades to that plumbing while you have the walls open so you don’t have to cut into your newly finished work to access it. Or worse, you might discover that what you’ve done downstairs will prevent your remodel entirely. Look at your house as a whole, then phase the projects in appropriately.

9. Insulate more, not less. In addition to the benefits of insulating the exterior walls and attic to save on heating and cooling costs, “extra” insulation can reduce noise (especially between floors) and save on hot water bills (if you insulate the pipes).

10. Buy an HVAC system that is sized appropriately for your house. Bigger isn’t better; it makes the system cycle on and off too frequently, which wastes energy and wears out parts. Find a contractor that sells you the most efficient unit for your specific needs.

11. Be realistic about your abilities and availability. A general contractor or construction overseer brings his dedicated time, contact list, and knowledge of the building process to the job. Your worth per hour at your regular job will probably more than offset what you might potentially save by trying to be your own general contractor. Factor in potential frustrations from missed communications and scheduling snafus, and you may find that being your own contractor will in fact cost you more in the long run.

12. Enthusiasm can get you in trouble. Before you cut loose with the demolition tools, think about not only what may be IN the wall but what’s on the other side, adjacent to it, and below it. Be prepared for the unforeseen.

13. For major remodels where heavy equipment will be needed, call in a landscaper to anticipate damage to plantings and act to mitigate or avert it. You may need to prepare by transplanting small trees and plantings to a holding area, where they will be protected from passing machinery.

14. Work from the outside of the house in. If you have issues with the exterior, make the house watertight and solid FIRST before working on the interior, so that your remodeled interiors aren’t damaged by leaks.

15. Don’t make the final payment until the punch list of final details is complete. Be sure your contract spells out what’s to be completed at each stage of the contract, with its matching payment. You should also confirm with suppliers to make sure they have been paid by the contractor to prevent mechanic’s liens from being applied to your property.

16. Be prepared to handle the additional costs of dealing with out of plumb walls and sloping floors. Addressing these issues in advance of the finish work will reduce the frustrations of trying to fit squared pieces, like tubs, into misshapen holes.

17. Don’t add to your costs and delays by asking your contractor “While you’re at it, could you fix . . . .?” To be fair to the contractor(s), every task you add to his workload should come with a price tag and a time frame. Figure out the ENTIRE scope of your project before you contract so that your contractor can plan and use his time effectively. There will always be problems that arise that may require a change order, but any non-essential fixes should either be anticipated or done later.

18. Document your project. While you have your walls open, document where the pipes, wires, and studs are with photos or drawings. These notes may save a future remodeler some headaches or help you hang that 200 pound mirror.

19. Pay attention to the details. Specify the paint quality as well as the color, specify the grout color and the style of moldings and baseboard. Specify the locations and color of electrical outlets and switches so that they improve the convenience of your home (as long as they comply with code). Make sure the cabinet depths will accommodate what you plan to store there, and allow for clearances at the top and bottom for items that are stored vertically.

20. Shortcuts and knockoffs are usually a mistake. If you can’t afford the product you want, don’t buy a poor quality substitute that will fail in a short time. Installation labor is the same whether you are installing poor or high quality. Invest in a good quality product that will meet your needs and you can be satisfied with, or save up for what you really want if you know that you’ll never be happy with anything but your ideal.

21. Watch the clock. Don’t start an electrical or plumbing project late in the day, potentially leaving you without power or water through the night. Likewise, if you need specialized parts, don’t start a major project on the weekend when specialty stores may be closed entirely or closed early.

22. Don’t sacrifice your family relationships to the project. Ultimately, it’s a thing, and people should matter more. If you decide to do a DIY project with your partner, start with a small one to see how your work styles complement each other (or not) and divide labor accordingly. Don’t put unnecessary pressure on your relationship by trying to complete a project right before a party, wedding or other major deadline. Decide on a realistic deadline for the project and communicate with each other to mitigate the stresses of living out of boxes and amidst the dust and clutter. As with anything, communication is critical.

23. Never be afraid to ask a question. If something looks “funny” or you just want to know how or why something works, ask. Sometimes a question can reveal a misunderstanding and correct it before the error is “permanent” or expensive to change.

24. Box or pack your things before the contractors start and plan for how you’ll live while they are there. Have a yard sale to get rid of unwanted items and donate the rest. Do the entire demo at once if you at all possible so you can clear the dust once and be done. Designate a “refuge” zone that stays clean and untouched; for kitchen and bath remodels, keep your critical items organized and put away in a designated area so everyone in the family can find them. Organize your freezer with pre-prepared meals and your calendar so you collect on those barbecue dinners your friends owe you.

25. Surprises aren’t all bad. Sometimes you find hardwood floors under 40 year old wall to wall carpeting. Or oak paneling under 5 layers of wallpaper. Be open, be thoughtful, and remember to breathe.

Some other tips:

Be picky about accepting offers of help. Know your friends’ limitations.

Never start a major project in the rainy season.

Allow for an additional week or two beyond the quoted ETA for incoming parts and schedule the work accordingly.

Add 25% to the time you’ve allowed to complete the project.

Never remodel all your bathrooms at the same time!

Don’t rush or work in the dark. The time you save will not be worth the mistakes you make or risk.

Be careful of your pets. Dogs and cats can be injured eating or playing with construction materials. They can also be extremely stressed by strangers in their house and by the noise and commotion. Provide for them and for your contractors so no one suffers any ill consequences.