The Ultimate Guide to Remodel Planning
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About This Book

Hi, I’m Sheen Fischer, President of Specialty Home Improvement, a design & build remodel firm here in sunny San Diego!

Being a contractor was something I always wanted to do. It was around 5th grade when one of my teachers had us write an essay on what we wanted to do when we grew up. Work for myself, with my hands, preferably outside was the gist of my essay.

Since then, I’ve dedicated myself to mastering my chosen profession and contributing to the industry. I’ve been active in trade organizations, including a six-year period as board member, Vice President, President and Chairman of the San Diego chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). As a company, we have certifications and awards galore. We’ve been involved in charitable renovations for some causes that still make me pause when I think of their impact. I’ve visited manufacturing plants, factories and showrooms across the country to broaden my knowledge base.

These things were all in the interest of being a better informed and experienced contractor so that I could better provide for my clients’ needs.

Then, one day, I had that slap your forehead moment when I realized that there was a knowledge gap that needed to be filled. I knew from my days meeting and associating with hundreds of contractors, suppliers, vendors, designers and others in the industry, the gap wasn’t intentional. Rather, it was a bit myopic. As in any technical industry, many that work in it tend to only see things from the inside out, not realizing that our clients and customers often don’t have any idea what the industry speak we spew really means.

Which led me to write this e-book – It’s meant to be a resource and planning guide for any homeowner to use in navigating the often serpentine waters of the remodel process. From how to hire a remodel contractor to what to expect from a designer, this book is chock full of information that everyone should know when planning a remodeling project.

You may also find that many of the topics in this book directly address the San Diego renovation market, where I live and do business, but in general, almost all the information here will have relevance to you no matter where you live.

I hope you enjoy this book, and, if you have any questions that I haven’t answered yet, feel free to drop me a line!
3 Things You Should Know About Your Remodel Project Before Doing Your First Google Search

It’s time. You’re ready to take the plunge and remodel your home. Now all you have to do is pull up your trusty Google search engine, type in a phrase like “San Diego home remodeling” and let the magic of the internet bring you your future contractor.

Except, **HOLY COW**, there are a lot of contractors in San Diego. How are you ever going to choose one? Where to even begin?

Let’s start by backing slowly away from the Google results without making any sudden movements. That’s it. Nice and easy. If you want to find the best contractor for your remodel, it helps to have an idea of what you want. So, before you start browsing all those listings, first make sure you:

1. **Know How Far You Want to Go**

   Sure, you may know that you want to remodel your kitchen but take a moment and think about exactly what you want the remodel to accomplish. Do you simply want to upgrade the cabinets and countertops, put on a new coat of paint and install a few recessed can lights, or are you gleefully envisioning a gutted room, tearing out of walls, changing the layout and generally a complete overhaul?

   Keep in mind that contractors, like any other professional, are NOT one-size-fits-all. Knowing the level of construction (and destruction) you want to achieve will help you identify the right types of remodeling contractor in your area and, even more importantly, help you set your budget for the project.

2. **Know How Much You Want to Spend**

   Before you ever put your cursor into the Google search box or pick up the phone to call a remodeler, you should have a number in your mind or at least a range of what you’re willing to spend. Remodeling a home is one of those unique projects that can easily spiral out of control if you haven’t taken the time to set a limit on costs. Having at least an approximate notion of your budget will also help you through the interview and bidding phase of the project by allowing you to give all your potential remodel professionals an opportunity to bid on the same level. Think of it like this...if you want to buy an Audi, you don’t go to a Chevy lot, or vice versa.
3. Know How Much Time and Effort You Have to Dedicate to Your Remodel

Do you want a remodel contractor that provides you a full service, turn-key remodel experience, or do you want to spend a lot of time doing things like shopping for fixtures, granite, cabinets, etc.? This may be one of the most important things to consider prior to starting your renovation.

No matter what, your remodel is going to require some time and energy on your part. You’ll need to research and interview contractors, make design decisions, work around the tradesmen and crews in your home and communicate regularly with your remodeler or project manager.

Above and beyond this, you can choose a full-service design-build remodeling contractor that will handle all aspects of your renovation, or you can roll up your sleeves and be a major part of your remodel. Depending on your contractor, there may also be options that mingle the two extremes.

Remember, the more information you bring to the table at the start of your remodel project, the faster and easier the initial consultation, design process, finish selections, and budgeting phase will be once you select your contractor. If you know what you want, you won’t waste your time on the phone or in meetings with contractors who can’t meet your goals, your budget or your timeframe.
Planning a Remodel...

The same question often arises when I’m meeting with a new client about their remodel project...

“Which area of my house should I hire my contractor to do first?”

The Pro and Con Game...

Usually, my residential remodel clients will play the Pro and Con game when deciding which big remodel project to take on...

"On the one hand, if we do the kitchen first, we'll be able to replace our appliances, have that party island so everyone can gather around and be able to actually reach all the pots, pans and dishes..."

"On the other hand, if we renovate the bathroom first, we won't have to share a sink and we'll actually be able to take a shower without feeling like we're the assistant in a magician's disappearing person trick..."

And the truth is, that may be exactly what the final decision on your home remodeling project comes down to.

It’s Really All about You!

Having been a remodel contractor in San Diego for decades now, I've learned that true, CUSTOM remodeling is about what you, the client really wants. If it's a bathroom, kitchen or even a whole house remodel - each detail, right down to the color of the walls, placement of each tile and even the finish on the "little flushy handle" on your toilet should be whatever you want.

Find a remodel contractor you trust and let him guide you through the choices and myriad preference related items. Remember, a good contractor has executed hundreds, if not thousands, of projects. He will be able to steer you through the vast and complicated world of custom remodel!
Finding Just the Right Remodeling Contractor

How to go about finding just the right contractor to remodel your bathroom, renovate your kitchen or perform your whole house makeover may be one of the greatest mysteries the world has ever known. Let’s face it, all the websites look the same, the ads in the newspaper could be all talking about the same guy, and, well...who uses the Yellow Pages anymore, except as a booster seat?

Never fear, help is here. There are some very simple steps you can take to ensure that the guy you’re about to set loose with hammers, saws and all manner of power tools to work on your home (your HOME for goodness sake) is at least an honest person.

As with any search for a reliable service provider, start with a referral if possible. Ask your friends, family and neighbors if they have used a contractor. Secondary contractor locator options include Internet searches and noting ads on TV, the radio and in local home and garden magazines.

Regardless how you find your renovator, here are some ways to ensure they are legit.

Always Check References

Once you have a contractor or two in mind, ask them to provide you with references. And remember, just because a contractor hands you a list of references, doesn’t mean they are any good. Call the references! Find out about their overall experience with the contractor. Ask them about any issues they might have had during their project. Remember, issues during a renovation project are not necessarily a terrible thing. If there were any issues, find out how the contractor handled them. I’m a firm believer that you really find the true character of a person not when things are going peachy, but when things have gone a little bit sideways.

Check Business Watchdog Websites

Start with the Better Business Bureau. While a lot of companies, including contractors, may not have paid the fee to be a BBB member, a company with a fair amount of time in business and some track record should at least have a BBB rating. Additionally, member or not, the BBB will still list whether the contractor has had any complaints.

Also check with your local or state contractor licensing agency. In California, where my remodeling company is located, the Contractor’s State License Board is located at www.cslb.ca.gov. They have a “quick check” button right on the home page that allows you to...
enter the contractor’s name or license number and see their entire history. Additionally, the site lists the contractor’s past complaints, current license status and workers compensation insurance status.

Google the Contractor

Yep, I’m talking about good old Google stalking. You may be surprised by what you find if you just Google the contractor’s name. You might stumble across their Facebook page, reviews they may have written on other sites or products, reviews they’ve received from others or all kind of interesting tidbits, some of which may contribute to the overall picture of the person you’re thinking of hiring. Additionally, there are tons of review sites out there now, from Yelp to Angie’s List. See if your prospective contractor has a presence and, if he does, what others think about him.

I think character extends past the boundaries of a person’s business. The more you know of your remodel contractor’s character, the better decision you’ll be able to make as to whether he or she is the right fit for you, your home and your family.
How Important is the Trust Factor in Remodeling Your Home?

As in every relationship, the most important factor to consider when choosing your contractor is trust. And it is not just that the client should trust the contractor...the trust needs to be a two-way street.

Both the client and the remodel contractor should start forming the basis for a trusting relationship very early in the process of planning the project. By checking references and licensing, the client can ensure that they are working with a contractor that has a reputation of performing and completing his projects in a manner that meets with their expectations.

Many of the better remodeling contractors I know also take care to check out their potential clients. From Google search to websites like LinkedIn and Facebook, there is a wealth of information available now about the people who we will be doing business with.

Why is it important that this strong sense of trust be developed?

The Emotional Roller Coaster

Too often, while riding the emotional roller coaster that remodeling a home can be, if a firm basis of trust was not established, then the project can fall apart in the middle. Accusations of mis-deeds can fly from both sides as well as bad feelings fermented.

A remodeling project is tough enough when everyone is on the same page and getting along...walls torn down, pipes and cables hanging, holes in the floor and a crew showing up in the wee hours of the morning, every morning, to make more noise and dust. Without a firm sense of trust established, this can be a recipe for disaster.

Each day of a remodeling project can bring to light new, unanticipated issues that need to be discussed and figured out and this can only be achieved with a clear and stable line of communication.

Check out your San Diego remodeling contractor, make sure up front he (or she) is the right person for your project and try to remember that at 4:00 in the morning when you're lying in bed with questions swirling around in your head!
Understanding Your Contractor and His Business Model

When you begin to seriously consider a renovation on your home, you might be tempted to pick up the phone and start randomly calling contractors. This might not be the first thing you want to do. Instead, you’ll first want to think about what TYPE of remodeler will best suit your needs.

You see, we come in all assorted flavors and sizes. Let’s use a car analogy. Are you looking for performance, comfort or safety? Sleek and modern or throwback and nostalgic? Do you want speed or 50 mpg?

Generally, you will find three fairly distinct levels of renovator, and each of these levels has its pros and cons. It’s easiest to picture the contractor hierarchy as a pyramid.

At the Base of the Pyramid

Where most contractors start out, you have the guys that I refer to with great affection as “Joe Contractor”. Many consider these guys the gypsies of the remodel industry – “have truck, will travel.” These contractors, usually running their businesses from their truck, can range from very capable contractors running one or two-man operations to...let’s say, the shadier side of the remodel industry. It’s not such a bad place to be for the contractor or client. These guys have few, if any, employees; low, if any, overhead; a small, tight circle of contacts and influence; contracts containing just as much information as 15 minutes of finger pecking a smartphone keyboard allows; and a comfort zone just about as wide.

Joe Contractor is hands on and works hard, sometimes too hard to return calls or messages, and has an uphill battle to grow his business or provide a higher level of service to his clients. This can result in lower overall costs of a remodel project, with the difference being made up by more sweat equity invested by you, the client.

In the Middle of the Pyramid

This is where you’ll find what I call the “Professional Contractor” – the remodeler running a business. This guy can type, do math in his head, motivate his crews and support staff, problem solve on the fly, properly manage and oversee multiple functions and jobsites as needed. He understands the core concepts of leadership, customer service, attention to detail and meaningful communication to alleviate misunderstanding.
At this level, you can still expect personal service, but with a professional execution. The Professional Contractor can implement changes rapidly and efficiently because of his greater ability to manage, and his larger pool of resources and contacts usually translates into better overall results. He has a reputation to uphold and is known in the community, which means he’s likely to stand behind his work and directly address client concerns and questions.

The Professional Contractor makes a profit, but by doing so he can afford employ the best people, do more precise work and, most importantly, warranty his product. You will usually experience shorter project start times and more efficient production schedules with this type of contractor.

And at the Tip of the Pyramid...

Many in the remodel industry refer to the companies at the tip of the remodel pyramid as “The Machines”. There are usually a couple in every city and are most easily recognizable by their plentiful TV and radio campaigns. They have figured out that magic formula for marketing on a huge scale and “burning and churning” through remodel jobs like a John Deere tractor through a cornfield and can, at any given time, have 20 – 30 projects going at one time.

“The Machines” most definitely turn out beautiful projects, it’s how they got to where they are. Because of their higher overhead, they will usually have higher overall costs. They also have processes in place to help with their very hectic production schedules. Overall, clients dealing with “The Machines” may not experience an extremely personal experience as their huge production scheduling issues translate better to a “one size fits all” approach.

So, Which Type of Remodel Contractor is Best for Your Project?

That will depend on your budget, the specific needs of your project (i.e. is it a simple job that Joe Contractor can handle easily and cheaply or something more advanced that will require more than one guy?), and the level of professionalism you prefer.

As a “Professional Contractor” myself, you would correctly assume that I have a strong bias toward the medium-sized business described above that can give you the personal care of the small guy and the professionalism and quality results of the big guy, all for a fair price. But I started off as a “Joe” and know some of the “Machines” in our local remodel industry and wouldn’t hesitate to refer many of them. The decision as to whom might be the best fit for your project ultimately, is yours.
Design/Build vs. Traditional Contractor – Which Does Your Remodel Project Need?

In the planning phases of your residential or home remodeling project, you will need to figure out if you need an architect or a designer – or possibly both. The two are not created equally, so let’s start by looking at how they differ.

**Design/Build**

Design/Build Contracting is a fairly recent business model that started gaining traction about a decade ago. Traditionally, contractors always struggled the disparity and issues that arose when trying to coordinate architectural drawings, interior designs, structural calculations and all of the items that are integral to a project’s successful completion but were often produced by different people or firms working at different paces and with varying degrees of understanding of the project.

Many of today’s professional remodel contracting firms have adopted a design/build model in which they steer the project from the initial design all the way through completion. By being involved from the earliest stages of design, they can ensure that a project flows smoothly with all components considered from the beginning, often resulting in faster completion times, tighter budgets and a more beautiful and cohesive result.

**Traditional Contracting**

Traditional contractors follow the model that contractors have used for years. You, the client, provide the professional services, drawings, specifications and items needed for your renovation and the contractor builds it. This is still a great method for some of those smaller projects not needing much coordination or planning.

**Cost Differences**

Overall, design/build contractors offer integrated, professional services that generally decrease the overall cost of most projects that require professional plans, management and coordination, by reducing fees that would be paid to outside vendors and ensuring that the project has fewer delays and execution issues. Traditional contractors can seem cheaper than design/build contractors, but this is usually due to the minimal services they offer. They’re a great option on projects without a lot of specific, detailed demands.
The Top 10 Questions to Ask Your Potential Remodel Contractor

There’s something about finalizing your contractor selection that’s a bit liberating. It means you’ve found the right person for the job and it’s time to start getting some building done. Your contractor selection will have a huge impact on your project. He or she will determine the final cost of the remodel, hopefully work with you to save you money where possible, provide insight and ideas to achieve a better result, guide you through the details of the project and help you put your unique stamp on your home.

The process can be a little nerve wracking, and if you’re worried about asking the right questions or forgetting the questions you need to ask, let this chapter give you a head start. Below are the top ten questions you should ask a remodeling contractor during the initial consultation.

Questions are OKAY!

Don’t be embarrassed to ask these questions. In fact, if you have questions that are not on this list – add them. Remember, you are entering into a business relationship with your remodel contractor. By asking these questions, you are establishing the beginnings of a good relationship and a measure of trust with your renovator. While you may not have a ton of experience doing business at this level, trust me – he or she does, which means that he or she should be used to answering these questions. Any contractor that cannot answer these questions or acts surprised that you are asking them would rate a big red flag in my book.

1. Can You Provide Your References in Writing?

   Any contractor worth his or her salt should have a list of references at hand. If there is any sense that the contractor is not ready to willingly provide you these references, pay close attention to the rest of the answers he or she gives.

2. Can You Provide Proof of Your General Liability Insurance?

   In many areas, general liability insurance is not required for contractors – hard to believe, but true. However, just because it isn’t required doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea to hire a contractor who doesn’t carry it, no matter how good a reputation and references they may have. Let’s face it – accidents and unforeseen circumstances occur – that’s why they’re called accidents and unforeseen circumstances. By investing in liability
insurance, your potential contractor is taking that extra step to protect you and your home against these possible mishaps.

3. Can You Provide Proof of Your Worker’s Compensation Insurance?

Once again, this is another protection for you. Many contractors will try to skirt the worker’s compensation laws by claiming that everyone on your jobsite is a sub-contractor. If that is the case, ask for the insurance certificates to be provided by all sub-contractors as well. The bottom line is this – if a worker is injured while working on your home and is not covered by worker’s compensation insurance, you may end up being liable for that person’s medical care.

4. Can You Provide Your Timeline and Work Processes for Me?

Many of the professional contractors you work with will probably have this information available for you before you ask. You will want to know things like:

a. Who will be supervising my project?
b. What are the work hours and days of the week?
c. What is the length of the project from proposal to completion?
d. What are the milestones at which payments will be made? (You should have these defined in your home improvement contract)

5. If there are any Changes to My Project, How Will They be Handled?

This procedure should be addressed in your home improvement contract. All changes should be agreed upon in writing by both the remodel contractor and you, with the total dollar amount of the changes (whether additions or subtractions) clearly stated on the change order, as well as any revision in completion time of the project.

6. Do You Have Experience with My Type of Remodel Project?

Often, in economic downturns, many contractors take jobs outside of their areas of expertise to stay afloat. Contractors who generally specialize in commercial ground up building consider taking residential remodeling jobs just to keep the doors open, for instance. Satisfy yourself that the contractor you decide to hire is competent and well-experienced handling your type of project.

7. Will You Pull All Required Permits?

Pulling permits is required on many types of remodel projects by most municipalities. They need not be complicated or expensive on the majority of simple remodel projects. Many
kitchen, bath and entire home remodels that do not entail major structural changes can often get by with a “combo” or “miscellaneous” permit, which encompasses electrical/plumbing/HVAC/drywall inspections. While there is some cost and additional time required to accomplish these inspections, you will be able to rest assured that the work your contractor is performing follows all local building codes.

8. What is Your Workmanship Warranty?

Many states and municipalities may have statutes in place addressing minimum time limits for discovering and reporting defects in construction workmanship. Find out what these are and ensure that, at the least, your general contractor is aware and will honor these. However, your best remodel contractors will usually have the confidence in their work to give you a specific warranty.

9. Are You a Full Service General Contractor or Specialty Firm?

Ensure that your contractor is licensed to perform all the work that you are contracting for in your remodel. Sometimes, especially when business is slow, you will find specialty contractors like plumbers, electricians and even landscapers and roofers turning to general remodel to pay the bills. If this is the case and your remodeling project becomes problematic, you may have problems resolving the issues.

10. Do You Belong to Any Trade Organization?

Organizations like the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) demand high professional standards from their membership and provide contractors an opportunity to network with other professionals in their industry. Conscientious remodel contractors often seek out and belong to these types of professional organizations for continued education, staying current on industry trends and regulations and to add credibility to their businesses and reputations.
Budgeting for Your Home Improvement Project

A home renovation is a big and complicated project. Understandably, I get a lot of questions about the process from clients and prospective clients. The Holy Grail of answers that almost all clients seem to be seeking, however, is how to budget for a kitchen, bath, whole home or room addition remodel.

Why is it so hard to find good information on how to budget for a remodel? Perhaps it’s because contractors as a breed can seem so darned evasive, vague and non-committal when it comes to saying a “number” or price out loud.

The Bear Trap

From the perspective of the remodel contractor, stating a number out loud can almost feel like stepping into a steel-toothed bear trap. A verbal remodel estimate or “guesstimate” based on an incomplete job description could come back to haunt the contractor if the numbers don’t end up working out when the contractor puts pen to paper (the metaphor being that the bear trap snaps shut causing lots of profit bleeding and the possible need to give up the leg entirely). And, it’s a vicious cycle...since the remodel contractor is so vague on naming a price, the prospective client feels that they should be vague on revealing what their budget is.

It’s Time to Break the Cycle

As the client, know your budget and don’t be afraid to verbalize this number when discussing your project with your potential contractor. Don’t depend on the contractor to set it for you. It’s your money, your home, your renovation project. Start with a number you’re comfortable spending on your remodel, ensure that it’s reasonable and see if the contractor meet your budget.

Don’t just pull a number out of thin air. Do some research on the different finishes you want to add to your kitchen or bath renovation or room addition. Look at cabinets, plumbing fixtures and appliances. Make lists of the things you think you’ll need for your project.

Your remodel contractor should be able to help you with some of these resources. But always keep in mind that it’s in your best interest to bring a budget to your contractor and let him or her work within it.
To Share or not to Share Your Remodeling Budget

Whether or not to share your remodeling budget is a sticky subject, assuming you have set a firm budget (which you should have) by the time you are ready to request bids.

The first thought that most people have is that if they tell potential remodeling contractors their budget, the contractors will most likely find a way to use up every penny... and then some.

My opinion is this – project budgets can range from very low to very high, depending on the quality of fixtures, workmanship and detail requested by the client. Most good contractors know, within a certain range, how much they can complete a straightforward project for. If you don’t let them know what your budget expectations are, bids may come in all over the place, you run the risk of wasting your time with a contractor that is either way too low or way too high for your needs.

For this reason, it is wise for you to at least share a budget range with potential contractors. If, for instance, you are planning a guest bath renovation and know that you would like to spend a total of $25 - $35k for the entire project – those are the numbers you should share with your potential contractor.

The most common complaint I hear from potential clients is that they received bids that are all over the map. The first question I ask is whether they shared their budget up front. Without doing so, it is impossible to get appropriate bids from multiple companies.

Think about this - If you walk onto a car lot and simply say, “I want to buy a car” without sharing your budget with the salesperson, what keeps them from showing you the most expensive cars? Now, it may be that you can afford and want the most expensive car. If that’s the case, then you don’t want to waste your time looking at the cheapest.

Leave a little bit of your budget in reserve. Do a little shopping for fixtures, appliances and cabinets prior to meeting with potential remodelers. Understand your project and budget and make sure to give this information to potential contractors so they and provide accurate proposals. It will save you time, money and give you an opportunity to choose your contractor based on the scopes of work and the contractor’s reputation instead of deciding who to hire solely on the basis of price.
What Your Renovation Proposal Should Include

Now that you’ve met and discussed your renovation with your potential contractor, your custom proposal has arrived. What are some of the things that it should include?

In a Word – Everything.

Keep in mind that remodel contractors as a breed are often not great with pen, paper or keyboards. This can be a bit of a problem during the bidding phase, especially with some of the smaller companies whose desk is the center console of their work truck.

In my time as a contractor, I’ve spent countless hours sitting down with clients and comparing proposals for them. I’ve seen everything from whole house remodel estimates scribbled on a napkin to bids for room additions written on the back of a business card. I’ve even heard stories of contractors refusing to provide a written estimate until they have a signed contract.

Just say NO to all the above. In my opinion, a home improvement proposal should be no less detailed than the receipt you would get at a grocery store. While there is no necessity for it to be written in college essay form, every detail of the project should be clearly accounted for in writing.

Some of the details you should expect to see specified in a remodeling contract would be:

1. All areas of the house that will be worked on
2. All trades to be performed in each area
3. All specific operations to be performed within each trade
4. All materials to be utilized in the completion of the project and who’s buying them
5. Any fees or expenses outside of the actual labor and materials that will apply
6. Any specific exclusions from the scope of work for the project
7. An approximate timeline for the completion of the project
8. Who will be providing what materials
9. A total investment for your project
10. A payment schedule

Remember, as with any business transaction, whether it be buying tires or eating at a restaurant, it is reasonable to expect a detailed description of what you are being asked to pay for.
How Much Should I Pay for Remodel Design?

When most homeowners think about a remodeling project, they imagine guys knocking down walls, setting tile, putting up new cabinets and basically all the building aspects of the project. While the remodeling phase usually gets the most attention (mainly through the dust, noise and inconvenience it causes), many renovation projects can only begin after a design has been completed and approved.

Even Small Projects Require Design Decisions...

Even the smallest remodeling projects will require some “design” work. Whether it be picking out paint, tile or grout colors to deciding on the style of cabinet doors you would like, each of these decisions falls within the realm of design.

On larger projects, you may need to work directly to produce drawings, plans and other documents that will be the “vision” and baseline for the project.

Think Design/Build

Some medium to larger-sized remodel companies offer services such as producing drawings or assisting with your material selections. If possible, look for one of these companies, generally referred to as Design/Build Remodel firms. Having the design and construction professionals working on the same page from the very beginning of the project results in a faster, more organized and streamlined process.

If your chosen remodel contractor does not offer these services, you may need to choose a freelance designer and budget appropriately for outside services.

The best way to approach the task of budgeting for a designer is in terms of the overall remodel budget and what percentage of it should be allotted for design.

So, How Much?

The issue with designers (as well as remodel contractors, architects, bookkeepers, lawyers, mechanics and, heck, just about any service provider) is that the hourly rates and services offered are all as varied as the individuals offering them.

If one considers that designers are very much on the artistic side of the spectrum when it comes to remodel planning and execution, they are, by definition, not very duplicable. Therefore, your first and most important consideration should be whether you are working with the right designer for your renovation.
Exacerbating the issue is the fact that many designers are not great business people or time managers, which means that when they start charging by the hour, things can get very scary and very expensive in a hurry.

It’s a good idea to interview designers the same way as you would a contractor - with a budget in mind. I usually recommend setting the budget as a percentage of the overall construction budget for the remodel.

I would say that for a small remodel budget, allotting 3% - 6% of the overall budget to design would be enough. On a $30,000 bathroom remodel, for instance, $900 - $1,800 should be sufficient to cover the cost of a designer for simple items like paint color, tile design and maybe even specifying a style of fixture.

On a mid- to high-level remodeling project, 5% - 10% of the overall construction budget would be a fair amount to allot to design, as the design needs would be greater and would likely encompass more duties for the designer, such as finish specifications, shopping trips, etc... So, on a $150,000 room addition, $7,500 - $15,000 would be a reasonable budget for design.
Basic Appliance and Fixtures Package:

- Kitchen sink
- Garbage disposal
- Airgap (that silver thing behind your sink that no one know what it is...)
- Kitchen faucet
- Range
- Microwave
- Refrigerator
- Dishwasher
- Hood vent

Optional Items to Consider:

- Cabinet pulls or knobs
- Warming drawer decorative, under cabinet or over cabinet lighting
- Garbage compactor
- Wine or beverage refrigerator

The list is the easy part. Wait till you step into your hardware store and see how many different kinds of cabinet knobs there are to choose from (Hint: the answer is A LOT). Appliance options are almost limitless, and manufacturers are always introducing new finishes, and styles to stay ahead of the design curve.

Use this list as a jumping off point and then do a little window shopping. Getting familiar with some of the options and the associated price points will help you nail down some of the costs associated with your remodeling budget.

Better yet, work with your contractor and take advantage of his contacts and expertise!
The Bathroom Remodel Shopping List

Every remodel requires shopping. Depending on the specifics of your project, you may need to pick out new cabinets, flooring, countertops, handles, light fixtures, paint colors and more. For some, this is a wonderful and thrilling experience filled with endless possibilities. For others, shopping is a long and tedious chore. Whatever your outlook, the shopping has got to be done, so do your best to embrace it!

Even more so than kitchens, the available fixtures for bathrooms seem endless. The finishes and colors alone are almost too many to remember, and it seems like a new one is introduced every year. While there are some basic fixtures that need to be installed during a bathroom remodel, the budget can end up going wild if proper preparation and research is not performed beforehand.

Take your time before the remodel to study your options, develop your budget and find fixtures you like that are in your ideal price range. To help you out, here’s a list of basic bathroom fixtures you’ll likely need as part of your bathroom remodel and a secondary list of optional bathroom fixtures (the bells and whistles).

**Basic Bathroom Fixtures**

- Bathtub
- Lighting
- Medicine chest/medicine cabinet
- Mirrors
- Shower head
- Shower valve
- Toilet
- Towel bars
- Toilet paper holder
- Tub valve
- Vanity faucet(s)
- Vanity sink(s)

And here’s where it gets exciting...

**Optional Bathroom Fixtures**

- Body jets
- Electronic toilet seats

*Refining the Science of Remodeling. Perfecting the Art of Service.*
- Handheld shower head with hose and slide bar
- Multiple shower heads and diverters
- Rain shower head
- Remote control shower fixtures
- Robe hooks
- Steam shower (steam generator)
- Towel rings
- Wet speakers

Keep in mind that some municipalities where water conservation is a big consideration, multiple shower or tub fixtures may not be legal. Check with your local contractor or building department before buying these items.

If you’re starting to itch for a bathroom remodel, keep these lists close and get ready to put in some quality shopping time. Remember to always keep your budget firmly in mind before entering a large home improvement store or website.

And don’t forget to ask your contractor his opinion. If you’ve hired an experienced contractor who has built hundreds of custom bathrooms, he should be able to shed some light on how your choices and selections will impact your overall remodel project as well as recommend quality vendors and reps in the area who can help you best.

Happy Shopping!
5 Reasons Why People Don’t Get Building Permits

Let me just get this out of the way: Building and construction permits, not to mention the inspectors that enforce them, can be costly, time consuming and, overall, a huge pain in the butt for homeowners and remodeling contractors alike. We deal with permitting and planning departments all the time, and, as with any other bureaucratic process involving getting permission from the government to do something, the permit process is rarely smooth or enjoyable at all.

It’s not surprising that many homeowners (studies have shown over 75%) never get a permit to renovate their home, nor do they require their contractors to pull permits. Here are the top five reasons why:

1. Permits Not Required

   It may seem like permits are required for every home project, including setting up a plastic kiddie pool in the backyard. The truth is, however, that permits aren’t required for many kinds of remodeling projects, including certain kitchen and bathroom remodels that encompass a lengthy scope of work. For instance, if you are removing your kitchen countertops, cabinets and flooring, but are, for the most part, keeping your same kitchen layout, you may not require a permit. If the utilities are existing and not undergoing any major re-configuration and there is no new structural work, in many municipalities there is nothing to inspect. Items like cabinet and countertop installation, painting, flooring installation and other cosmetic trades do not show up on most inspection cards.

2. Expense

   Yes, permits cost money. There is a fee associated with pulling even a minor permit for an interior remodeling project. The fees increase depending on the scope of the project and the potential inspections needed. A permit for a room addition, for instance, will be much more expensive than a plumbing, electrical and drywall permit for a bathroom remodel. For those looking to save money on an expensive remodel, skipping the permit process and the associated costs can be very tempting.
3. Delays

Major remodels requiring architectural and engineering review by your municipality will take some time to get approved, usually around a month, sometimes longer. On top of that, certain trades and phases of construction will need to be inspected before the project can continue. These delays are usually less noticeable on a larger project like a room addition, but when your kitchen or bathroom is out of commission and time is lost due to waiting on an inspector to show up, it can put a dent in the projected completion time.

4. Inspectors

There are many good inspectors around who care about not just their job, but also the taxpaying homeowner who is helping to cover their salary. Good inspectors are concerned about the safety and adherence to appropriate building code during the project and for the convenience of the homeowner who is living in a house under construction. Unfortunately, there are some of the other kinds of inspectors, too. The kind who like to boss people around and take pleasure in thinking up new and inventive ways of inconveniencing contractors and homeowners alike. Some of the worst inspectors don’t really know their job yet can get away with throwing around unrealistic requirements because, well – they are the inspector, so there! One bad round with competence-challenged inspector will make any homeowner think twice before pulling a new permit.

5. Privacy

In America many homeowners feel that their home is their castle. They don’t want anybody poking around and telling them what to do with that castle, much less some inspector who could reject a request.

With so many legitimate reasons to abhor the permit process, are there any to justify the extra cost, time, and possible rejection that pulling a permit entails (besides that pesky legality issue)?

Actually, yes. In the next chapter, find out why – despite all the reasons listed in this article – you should have a building permit.
Why Your Remodel Project Should be Permitted

You’ve read about the Top 5 Reasons That Remodels Aren’t Permitted. Now, let’s talk about why you or your contractor should pull all the necessary permits for your remodel.

Really, there’s one main reason...

It’s the Law!

I can’t speak for every city, county or municipality, but in my experience, most local building codes require permits for certain types of remodeling work to be done.

Penalties for not permitting a project can range from fines to removing all unpermitted work done to the structure. Check with your local contractor or building department to see if your project needs to be permitted

Safety and Insurance

Another reason for permitting has to do with a combination of safety and insurance coverage. If your inspector or inspectors are good at their job, they may catch some code or safety violations early enough in your project so that they can be remedied without too much expense or delay. Items like structural, electrical and plumbing should be done so that they completely conform to the local building code. In fact, electrical and plumbing work is considered serious enough that some homeowner insurance policies will not cover losses that are caused by un-permitted work.

Checks and Balances

Also consider your permit as a type of checks and balances on your contractor. Once the permits are pulled, the contractor knows that his or her work will be inspected. Therefore, the contractor will at least strive to perform work so that it will pass the keen eye of a good inspector.

Overall, playing by the rules usually works out better than taking shortcuts. Sure, you might get away with it most of the time, but if/when you get caught, the punishment won’t be worth the potential benefit of not permitting. Can you imagine spending the time, effort and money on a kitchen remodel only to have a big chunk of the work torn down because it wasn’t permitted? Pull your permits, start your remodel off on the right foot and enjoy the resulting peace of mind.
What to Expect When the Inspector Arrives

So, we’ve pulled the permit for your project and work has commenced. We’re now calling for the first inspection – How exciting! Or, maybe, it might just get a little TOO exciting...

What the Inspector Says... Goes.

Inspectors are pretty much the final word as to what will be accepted and approved regarding any type of permitted construction project. Obviously, the more reasonable the inspector, the more likely that small, marginal items might not be called out for correction. Overall, most inspectors will be looking for obvious construction defects and safety issues at each phase of the project. Generally, the inspectors can tell when they walk on a jobsite whether or not the contractor is competent. The more competent the contractor appears, the more likely the inspector is going to accept the work at face value without questioning a lot of items.

Corrections

Code and compliance items that the inspector finds during inspections are called Corrections. These are items that the inspector will want to see resolved either before work can progress or before he signs off on final inspection. Unfortunately, corrections on many remodel projects are somewhat common, often due to previously existing conditions, and can slow down the progress on a project.

Previously Existing Conditions and Safety Items

Once an inspector has access to a property by virtue of the permit being pulled, he has the right to inspect everything on the property. If he notes any code or safety issues on the property, he can require them to be fixed and addressed at the owner’s cost. In a best case scenario, the inspector will confine his scope of inspection to the area being worked on, but often, inspectors will take a tour through the entire house looking for issues.

Most commonly, these days, in water restricted Southern California, we are seeing inspectors paying a lot of attention to energy conservation measures such as appropriate doors and windows and water conserving fixtures. However, there are a myriad of items that they will also write up as corrections if they are noticed including but not limited to fire alarms, electrical, plumbing and other safety issues.
How to Prepare for the Start of Your Remodel

The moment of truth has arrived. Your remodel contractor has given you a start date. What should you expect, and what do you need to do?

The best thing to do, obviously, is to directly ask your contractor how you can best prepare for the remodel. In lieu of their answer, however, there are some remodel preparation aspects that are universal.

Get Your Head in the Game

First and foremost, prepare yourself mentally. Remodeling your home is uncomfortable. Parts of your home will be out of commission or inaccessible during the renovation process. Your daily schedule will be disrupted by workers showing up early in the morning and sometimes working into the evening. Doors and windows will be left open all day...and...

Dust... in the wind, in your closet, in your cabinets... everywhere.

There will be dust – a lot of it.

Even if your contractor masks against the dust, it will find ways to seep through. Hanging plastic and taping up areas helps (which your remodeling contractor may do for you), but keep in mind that the dust travels in the air, on clothing, on shoes and can tend to get all over the place.

Even with careful containment, the workers will still have to enter and exit the workspace, carrying tools and building supplies. The dust will waft after them when they enter and exit. And the dust will stick to the masking materials as well. When the plastic is rolled up at the end of the day, even with the utmost care, the dust from the day’s work will get airborne.

Clean Sweep

Take the time to remove items from the immediate surrounding area of your remodel that you don’t want to get dusty. Also, remove fragile items or anything that might be close to the traffic paths going to and from the work areas. Even careful workers and contractors can have accidents, especially when carrying tools and construction supplies in and out of your home.

Remove everything in the immediate work area. Empty out cabinets (especially if they are being removed), take clothes from closets, and pull pretty much anything on any surface, including pictures, lamps, and furniture. Your contractor may have agreed to help you move
some of the heavier furniture items, if needed, but take the time to empty them out as well to lighten the load.

Create Storage Space

Ensure that there is ample area somewhere onsite for your contractor to store the construction materials and tools that he or she will be using during your remodel. It should be a secure area, safe from the elements and with limited access by children, pets and strangers.

Look After Your Four-Legged, Feathered and Scaly Family Members

Speaking of pets...of course they are family. Most experienced remodel contractors have spent some time in their careers chasing down the four-legged family members that have somehow escaped the house through an open door or window. I know from personal experience that there is no worse feeling, as a contractor, than knowing that the family pet has gotten out during a remodel.

Find a quiet, secure area like a laundry room or back bedroom away from the remodeled space to set up as your pet’s sanctuary during construction. Between the noise, the disruption and the dust, the farther away from the action you can get your pet, the happier it will be.

Don’t Forget About Those Other Family Members...

And for the two-legged family members that aren’t adults – some of the same rules apply. If there are school-aged children in the household that may be returning home before a parent arrives, make sure that both the contractor and the children are aware of what is going on each day. Giving the children instructions and a place to stay out of work areas can go a long way toward preventing accidents and possible damage to work performed during the day.

Taking these precautions before your home improvement project starts can help ensure an efficient, timely and cleaner completion of your dream remodel!
Under Construction – All the Questions You Forgot to Ask...

Dust is in the air... Hammers are banging, electric tools whirring away, your future dream space is shrouded in plastic, mysteriously murky and just out of reach...

But now you realize there are some questions you haven’t considered yet. Questions like:

- What if I want to change something that doesn’t look right?
- When should I make payments and for how much?
- I have a question. Who do I call?
- What is the process for understanding a change in the scope of my remodel, and how do we agree on a price?
- Will my contractor put the knobs and pulls on my cabinets for me?
- How come I don’t have any hot water at night?

Don’t Kick Yourself

Honestly, this list could fill a book all by itself. Of course, you don’t want to wait until construction begins to find out that your salesman is not your project manager or that your contractor has suddenly stopped taking your calls.

By taking the time to sit down and think of some of the questions you may have prior to construction beginning, you may be able to save yourself some heartache. Talking to friends, neighbors and family members who have been through the remodeling process before will help you see some potential issues that you might want to bring up with your contractor before you sign on the dotted line.

If you’re on the Internet a lot, look for some educational sites, blogs and chat rooms where others may be sharing some of their experiences. Remember, a remodel is a large investment. You want to make sure you’re fully comfortable with the entire process before signing off.

Circle Back to the Basics

Consider this article just a circle back to the basics... It’s okay to be cautious, in fact, consider it mandatory. Really.

Do your research and ask your contractor the hard questions early in the planning process so that you can feel comfortable during the construction phase of your remodel. I know a certain remodel contractor who believes that the hardest part of his job is ensuring his clients’
satisfaction through consistent, timely communication and real-time posting of project status through an online project management system is the most important element he brings to his clients’ projects.

Find that guy!

Or, at least do everything you can to get someone like him. I firmly believe that there are better remodel contractors running loose than the other kind. I hope the information you’ve read here goes a long way toward helping you leave the other kind behind...

And, keep checking back here. As I mentioned in the beginning of this book, as our library of educational articles expands, so will this book. Feel free to download it as many times as you like.

And don’t hesitate to give me a call directly if you have any questions.

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