

# BEFORE THE WORK BEGINS

**R**emodeling its homes has become one of America's favorite pastimes. Whether you're remodeling a kitchen or bathroom, or building a new addition, remodeling can be an enjoyable experience and a great way to increase the value of your single largest asset.

Before the first hammer is swung or first wall is moved, there are steps you can take to help assure your remodeling project is off to a good start. And all they require is a little time, some foresight and common sense.

## **PROPER PLANNING IS IMPORTANT**

Every remodeling job starts as a thought or an idea. "For your project to become a reality, you need to clearly define the scope of the work you want to accomplish," says Mark Scott, CR, Mark IV Builders, Inc., in Bethesda, Md. "It's important to think it through from start to finish. Careful planning of your project will allow you to update your home, increase the value of your investment, and customize your living space to meet your needs," he says.

Look over your project carefully. What improvements would you like to make? Are repairs needed? Do you want an additional room, a modern kitchen, a refurbished bathroom, or a sunroom? Don't forget to consider future needs in your plans.

## **CHOOSE A COURSE OF ACTION**

Once you have a basic plan in place, you need to determine which construction alternative is the best approach for achieving your objective. Depending on your needs and the size and complexity of your remodeling project, there are several different options for you to consider before finalizing your plans.

Do-It-Yourself—DIY projects can be fun and rewarding if you're prepared and have the proper skills. Before starting any project, however, be sure to honestly assess what is involved and what your limitations are. Creating



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added problems and not having the expertise to finish a project once it has been started are two pitfalls commonly encountered by do-it-yourselfers.

The Professional Remodeler—If you lack the proper do-it-yourself skills, most remodeling projects are best handled by an experienced remodeling professional—architect, general contractor or design/build contractor—whose knowledge of design, materials and methods comes from years of experience.

A good place to find a qualified professional is through a professional trade association such as the Metro DC Chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). A directory of our members can be found on page 52.

## PAY ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS

Whether you're adding a room or converting an existing space, give special thought to details. The type of lighting required, current and future storage needs, and special appliances and luxury items such as whirlpools or fireplaces are just a few items to consider.

If you plan on using a particular brand of product, like a certain manufacturer's windows, make note of it at this time.

"These details, although they may seem minor at first, will impact the design, function and budget of your finished project," says Kevin Wolohan, vice president, Windsor Design-Build, Inc., in Rockville, Md. "More importantly, they enable your home improve-

ment to better meet your needs and your lifestyle."

## DETERMINE A PROJECT BUDGET

Establish a firm budget for your remodeling project. You don't want to end up short on cash and not be able to finish your project, nor do you want to end up deep in debt.

"Work with your contractor to get the most for your hard-earned dollar," advises Bob Gallagher of Sun Design Remodeling Specialists, Inc., in Burke, Va. "He or she should know how much you are willing to invest in the remodeling project and can help you stay within that budget."

It's a good idea to keep 10 percent of your budget in reserve for any



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unexpected expenses. Unforeseen costs will inevitably arise and you don't want to be unprepared. The reserve will also protect you should there be a sudden increase in the cost of materials or value added features not in the original plan.

## FINANCING YOUR REMODELING PROJECT

There are various financing options available to homeowners who are remodeling. The most popular is the equity line of credit, which bases the loan amount on the equity in your home.

Another popular option is a Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loan specifically for home improvements. These loans are available through many banks and lending institutions.

A professional remodeling contractor is familiar with many of the financing options available, and can often help you arrange the financing you need.

## CREATING A REALISTIC TIMELINE

Timing is critical when planning a home improvement project. Be sure to select a start date and approximate finish date

that best suits you and your contractor's schedules.

Be realistic. "If you are remodeling your kitchen and jobs similar in scope typically take six weeks to complete, don't expect yours to be done in three," advises Gallagher. "And make sure to factor material (cabinets, fixtures, etc.) delivery times into your schedule."

Before work begins, ask your contractor what inconveniences may occur and plan for them. Take into account any vacations or special events so that you and/or your remodeler can plan



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accordingly. Proper timing of your job can go a long way towards reducing stress levels and making your project run smoothly.

## PUT IT IN WRITING

“A well-written contract is essential,” Scott stresses. “It should include a comprehensive description of the project, a payment schedule, a timetable, and the types of products that will be used. The responsibilities of the contractor and any subcontractors should also be described in detail,” he adds.

“A contract should also list provisions for warranties, changes in procedures, and, in case a conflict arises, alternative dispute resolution clauses,” adds Wolohan.

Never give away your rights as a consumer by signing a contract you haven't reviewed thoroughly. If you are unclear about exactly what the contract involves, don't sign it until your questions and concerns have been addressed. And always be sure to keep a copy of the final document for your records.

Once the ink is dry, you're ready to begin. You and your remodeling professional are ready to embark on a journey that will turn the remodeling plans you've been dreaming about into reality.

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### **Sources for this article:**

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# SELECTING THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR FOR YOUR REMODELING PROJECT

**C**hoosing the right contractor is the most important decision you can make to assure the success of your next remodeling project. If you want a smooth remodeling process and spectacular results, you must find a contractor that is right for your specific project.

Finding the right contractor doesn't have to be difficult, but homeowners do need to do their homework. It is important to take your time, conduct a thorough search and ask the right ques-

tions. Here are some tips for making sure you get the right contractor for your next remodeling project.

## **BASIC MUST HAVE REQUIREMENTS**

Look for a contractor who has an established business. A business that has been around for a period of time will have a track record of success that you can review.

"Check to be sure the contractor you hire is properly licensed," advises Bruce Wentworth, AIA and owner of Wentworth,

Inc., in Chevy Chase, Md. "A firm without the appropriate license and/or insurance coverage doesn't pass the most basic of competency tests."

It's also a good idea to check with the Department of Consumer Affairs or local Better Business Bureau to make sure there are not numerous complaints against a contractor you are considering.

## **PROFESSIONAL TRADE ORGANIZATIONS**

Professional trade organizations like the National Association for the Remodeling Industry (NARI) are great sources for finding high-quality contractors.

"NARI is an excellent place to look for qualified remodeling contractors," says Trish Schroeder, co-owner of Schroeder Design/Build in Fairfax, Va. "The local NARI Website—[www.narimetrodc.org](http://www.narimetrodc.org)—is a great tool."

NARI members are committed to not only doing quality work, but to observing ethical business practices and advancing their profession. NARI keeps its members abreast of the latest information concerning new building techniques, products and materials.

## **QUALIFIED REFERRALS**

One of the best ways for a homeowner to find a qualified remodeler is via a "word-of-mouth" referral. According to NARI, nearly 75% of all remodeling jobs handled by contractors started out as referrals.

"Family, friends, neighbors and co-workers are all excellent sources for referrals," Schroeder says. "The best referrals usually come from someone you know."

There are two aspects to every good referral: it should come from a previously satisfied customer of the contractor; and you want to be referred to a contractor who does the type of work you want done.

"If you are planning a kitchen remodel and your neighbors just had their home's exterior remodeled, their contractor might not be the right one for your job," Wentworth says. "You want to hire someone who has experience remodeling kitchens and brings those special skills to your project."



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: SCHROEDER DESIGN BUILD ©2005 BEN YACO

# SELECTING THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR FOR YOUR REMODELING PROJECT

Here's a list of questions to help you establish a contractor's qualifications and reputation, and to help you find the right person for your remodeling job.

- *How long have you been in business?*
- *Who will be assigned as a project supervisor for the job?*
- *What is the time frame for starting the project?*
- *How do you handle this type of job?*
- *Do you have employees or do you use subcontractors?*
- *Do you regularly use these subcontractors?*
- *Is your company a full-service or specialty contractor?*
- *Do you have design services available?*
- *Does your company carry workers compensation and liability insurance?*
- *Do any of your employees hold trade certifications?*
- *How many projects like mine have you completed in the past year?*
- *May I have a list of references for projects you've completed which are similar to mine?*
- *Will we need a permit for this project?*

## SURFING THE NET

The Internet has opened up a whole new way for customers to shop for goods and services, and the remodeling industry is no exception. Many homeowners use the Web to locate remodeling contractors and review entire portfolios of their work from the comfort of their living room. And more and more contractors view a well-designed Website as a critical marketing tool.

"In addition to showing finished jobs on our Website, we also try to educate potential customers about the remodeling process," says Chris Hambrecht, design sales manager for Windsor Design-Build, Inc., in Rockville, Md. "We lay out what our working process is so they know what to expect during a remodeling project."

## CHECK REFERENCES

Once you've narrowed your search and believe you've located the right contrac-

tor, ask for a list of references. More importantly, follow up and call them.

As a general rule, ask for several references that come from jobs the contractor has completed in the last year. Before you sign the construction contract, follow up on them. Here are a few questions to ask previous customers:

- *Could you communicate well with the remodeler?*
- *Were you pleased with the quality of work?*
- *Were you satisfied with the way your contractor conducted business?*
- *Did the work crew show up on time?*
- *Was your project completed on schedule?*
- *Was your project completed within the specified budget?*
- *Were there a lot of change orders that greatly increased the cost of your remodel?*
- *Did the contractor stay in touch throughout the project?*
- *Was the jobsite kept neat?*
- *How was the contractor on follow-up?*
- *Did you have any problems with call backs?*
- *Would you use the contractor again without hesitation?*

"I encourage homeowners who are considering hiring us to talk with customers for whom we've done work," stresses Hambrecht. "And to stop by and see those projects whenever possible," he adds.

Most contractors are more than happy to show you their work. If not in person, visit the contractor's Website or ask to see the firm's portfolio.

"A good portfolio can tell you a lot about a contractor's capabilities and experiences," Wentworth says. "It's a great way to get to know the contractor's area of expertise and design style."

## ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

Wentworth, Schroeder and Hambrecht agree that hiring a contractor with whom you are comfortable and feel you can trust are the most important factors in the success of a remodeling job. They believe the key to having a great relationship with your contractor is the ability to communicate.

The better you can communicate, the better your remodeling job will go. You have to be able to share ideas, ask questions and even disagree once in a while if you want the best project possible.

"When interviewing the contractor, ask yourself if he or she is someone you would



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: CASE DESIGN/REMODELING, INC.

# SELECTING THE RIGHT CONTRACTOR FOR YOUR REMODELING PROJECT

be comfortable working with,” Hambrecht says. “After all, a typical remodeling project can take anywhere from three to six months, or more, and you’ll be around that contractor every day.”

“You need to feel like you can trust your contractor and that he or she will take care of your needs,” Wentworth

adds. “You’ll know after the first couple of meetings if you can work with a particular contractor or not. So trust your feelings.”

If you have any doubt about being able to trust a remodeler, there is no reason to have them on the job. Do not hire a contractor with whom you are uncomfortable.

## SELECTING A PREFERRED SUPPLIER VERSUS COMPETITIVE BIDDING

It is perfectly fine to select a contractor of choice without taking bids. If you’ve done your due diligence, called the referrals, looked at finished work, and you have concluded a particular contractor is right for your job, don’t be afraid to hire that firm.

If you ask for two or three bids, make sure contractors are bidding on the same scope of work. You want all parties bidding on the job as you want it done and with the same quality of materials.

“Beware of any bid that’s significantly lower than the others you get,” Schroeder warns. “An extremely low bidder may be trying to ‘buy’ your business and make it up in change orders later.”

“A reputable contractor who has been in business for any amount of time has employee salaries and benefits, equipment and other overhead to cover,” she says. “He or she is going to ask for a fair price in return for a hard day’s work.”

If you have not done your homework, whether you bid the job or not, there is a good chance you will regret your choice. Price is one of many categories a homeowner should consider, but experience, capability and quality are others that make up a successful project.

### Sources for this article:

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## RED FLAGS TO AVOID

- Contractors who sell door to door. Poorly done advertising or websites may indicate a firm that will not be around for long.
- Job proposals and estimates short on details.
- Vague or incomplete answers to your questions, or refusal to answer certain questions.
- Numerous complaints at the Consumer Affairs Office or Better Business Bureau.
- Contractors without references.
- Inability to produce licenses and certificates of insurance.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: SCHROEDER DESIGN BUILD ©2005 BEN YACO

# COMBINING OLD AND NEW IDEAS TO PRESERVE HISTORY WHILE ENHANCING LIVABILITY OF AN 1880s STRUCTURE



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: LANDIS CONSTRUCTION CORPORATION, ©HADLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

**G**eorgia Avenue in Olney, Md., was just a dirt road in 1880, when the farmhouse now owned by Peter and Sue Kopperman was built. The road linked Washington, D.C. with markets to the north, and the house was one of many such structures along the way.

Today, however, the newly refurbished Kopperman home is an Olney landmark – perhaps even a bona fide historical treasure. Bright yellow with white trim and a wood shake roof, the house looks almost as it did over a century ago.

The Koppermans had grand plans for the house when they bought it in 2002. They wanted to use the front of the house as an antique shop – specifically Swedish antiques, their specialty. And they wanted to renovate the rear of the house for their living quarters.

“We knew immediately it was the right house for us,” says Sue Kopperman, co-owner of Klaradal Antiques. “We wanted to replicate the feel of a Swedish country house – which is very open and airy. This house was perfect.”

Still, there was an enormous amount of work to be done. To accommodate the home’s dual purpose, both the upper and lower floor plans had to be reworked. The couple needed an updated kitchen and a second bathroom upstairs – as well as a handicap-accessible bathroom downstairs. The house also needed new wiring throughout.

To help them accomplish this transformation, the Koppermans turned to Landis Construction Corporation, a District-based design/build firm headed by brothers Chris and Ethan Landis. The project garnered the firm national recognition: the 2003 Chrysalis Award for Best Design/Build Project, Commercial Historic Renovation. It also had the Koppermans open for business the day after Thanksgiving.

“The period detailing was really secondary to the structural work on the project,” says architect Chris Landis, AIA.

# COMBINING OLD AND NEW IDEAS TO PRESERVE HISTORY WHILE ENHANCING LIVABILITY OF AN 1880s STRUCTURE

“There had been two additions – a kitchen at the side of the house, and a large, poorly-constructed section to the rear. The trick was to make it all seem original.”

Attacking the problem of traffic patterns, Landis started by moving the first-floor bathroom – which previously one had to walk around to get to the rear section of the house. The new bathroom is located adjacent to the kitchen, and also handicap-accessible for customers. The result is a straight passageway from the front door to the family room in back.

Streamlining was also accomplished on the second floor, once the decrepit upstairs bathroom was removed. In its place, two facilities – a master bathroom and a guest bathroom – were created. The guest bathroom is mainly for visitors to an upstairs showroom in the front of the house. The master bathroom is for the bedrooms in the rear.

“In the trade, we call this ‘rationalizing’ the floor plan,” says Chris Landis, “Not to imply that the original builders were irrational. It’s just that houses are often built in stages by different owners. It’s a common issue in remodeling in older houses like this one.”

Indeed, hardwood floors serve as a link between past and present. The old (front)

part of the house had them; the rear section was covered in worn carpeting – which Landis promptly replaced with new oak flooring. Once the original floors were refinished, the difference between old and new could hardly be detected.

The same can be said of the trim work. Landis custom-milled all new trim for the rear section to match the original trim used on the front of the home. They then replaced the addition’s vinyl windows and storms with Pella “architectural series” center-divided sashes.

“The Pella windows have a great R-rating and they have the perfect ‘period’ look,” says Landis. “They help unify the whole house.” Period “correctness” was also greatly enhanced once Landis replaced the existing asphalt shingles with wood shake. And the yellow paint? “It’s the traditional color for two-story Swedish country houses,” says Sue Kopperman. “One story houses are red.”

**Source for this article:**

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# SMART USE OF SPACE MAKES KITCHEN HUB OF HOME



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF: WASH CONSTRUCTION, INC. © HADLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

**F**or Nicole Armstrong and John Nicholas, their kitchen is the hub of their home. It's a place where they cook, work, entertain and where their children play. So when they started to outgrow the existing kitchen in their 1950s-vintage rambler in Fairfax, Va., they knew it was time to remodel.

## DRIVING THE DECISION TO REMODEL

"My husband John is in a wheel chair," Nicole says, "and the galley-shaped kitchen in our home just wasn't working for us. He's an independent, active guy and it was frustrating for us to work together in the kitchen," she says. "It would be 'excuse me, I need to get to the trash can,' or 'excuse me, I need to get to the stove,' and we were always in each other's way," she says.

Nicole and John also entertain frequently and the existing kitchen bottled up traffic between the front door and a large family room. The pathway was so narrow that no one would make it out of the kitchen and it became a choke point that prevented guests from enjoying the rest of the home.

"We always felt the kitchen needed some work to be more usable, but we weren't sure exactly what we wanted," Nicole says. "Our architect is a college friend of John's and one night he said why not enlarge the kitchen out to the patio and, when we thought about it, it really opened up the possibilities."

"From there, most of the design ideas were mine, but that really got me started," Nicole says. Eventually, the remodel became part addition, part renovation and encompassed 1700 square feet, including a spacious entryway and new bedrooms for their kids. The new



kitchen itself would encompass 400 square feet.

Nicole and John then brought on Nash Construction, Inc., to verify their design ideas and to handle what would eventually become a complex addition/interior renovation.

“The home has been added onto three different times, creating three different planes,” says Sean de Launay, project designer/estimator. “The addition hits all three levels, so bringing it all together was a challenge.”

#### WARM COLORS AND OLD WORLD ELEGANCE

Because the kitchen is the first room you see when you walk in the front door, it was important to create a pleasing design. Your eye is immediately drawn to a large decorative tile backsplash over a gas cooktop. Made from tumbled marble, it is surrounded by a custom wood mantle piece that makes it the focal point around which the rest of the room is built.

“I got the idea for the mantle piece from a cabinetry catalog, but the more I delved into it, the more I realized it was a custom piece the manufacturer didn’t provide,” says Nicole. “Nash actually built it for me. It was just one of the many ways they helped bring my ideas to life.”

Another was the design and installation of a nine-foot “tray” ceiling with up-lighting and crown molding. While the design could have accommodated a cathedral ceiling, Nicole felt a high ceiling would feel too cold. She saw a tray ceiling on a remodeling television program and decided it would enhance the room and help maintain the warm look she was trying to create.

“I really wanted a feeling of old-world elegance so we selected granite countertops, granite floor tiles and wooden cabinets in rich, neutral colors,” Nicole says. “The more vibrant colors come from the wall tiles, so if I want a different look down the road, I only need to change the walls,” she adds.

Finally, radiant heat in the floors keep the space cozy, even when the weather turns cooler.

#### A WORKING KITCHEN

The kitchen features a gas cooktop beneath the mantle that was designed with nothing beneath, so it is very easy for John to use. It is just one of many parts of the design that are wheel chair friendly.

A long perpendicular counter houses the sink, again built without anything beneath it. A peninsula on the backside of the sink is a foot deeper



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# SMART USE OF SPACE MAKES KITCHEN HUB OF HOME



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than the depth of the cabinets and creates a place for all of the children's crafts and games. Behind that area is a craft table where they can spread out and play.

The center island features a large work area with plenty of cabinet space beneath it. It features a drop down counter where John, who works in the computer field, can plug-in his laptop and work if he chooses.

The wall opposite the cooktop houses double ovens and a wall of cabinets that form a pantry, a built-in china cabinet with buffet counter and a built-in desk.

"I'm a fan of using every bit of wall space," Nicole says. "We have nice dining room but there's no room for a buffet and I needed some place to store my good china. The idea for this wall of cabinets came about and it really works out well."

## MAKING THE MOST OF A SPACE

"I studied every square inch of space for months trying to decide the best way to use the space I had," Nicole says. "It was to the point that we have spots for three garbage cans so that wherever you're working in the kitchen you have access to one," she chuckles. "We also have Internet access in the island where my husband uses his computer. Functionally, the kitchen is just an awesome space."

The results speak for themselves. Now, the kitchen is a hub of activity where the entire family can work and play together.

## FAST-TRACK COMPLETION

Beginning last August, the project was completed in 120 days—in time for Nicole and Peter to host Thanksgiving.

"The people at Nash Construction really made it all possible," Nicole says. "They responded like no one else and their work was consistently fabulous."

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