

Remodeling: A Bittersweet Reality

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You wake one day and find yourself living in a 1950's split level Colonial that could be the poster home for "The Wonder Years." Or you have just purchased a Hollin Hills contemporary, are considered stylish in your clique, and just can't imagine what will happen to your status if your friends find you living with sky blue lavatories and harvest gold appliances. Here are some straightforward facts to put your mind in the proper perspective as you consider your impending remodel.

In 1999, the average cost to remodel a 200 square foot kitchen in the DC metro area was \$28,000! Surprised by that number? Most consumers are. The good news is that those major changes will gain you an average return on investment (ROI) of nearly 102 % in our region. Not only are most remodeling projects great investments with paybacks that include higher resale value of your home, but they also create tax write offs, and possible reduction of PMI's on your mortgage. Most importantly, your style of living will drastically improve and you will become the envy of your neighbors. But, before you decide the improvements are worth the cost, consider the following.

A certain amount of apprehension is to be expected as you plan for your upcoming remodel. You've heard horror stories from your friends and neighbors about rude or delinquent contractors, late or mysterious deliveries, failed inspections, or projects that never ended. Yes, the stories are probably true and the entire renovation industry has some serious public relations problems to deal with. Here is the ugly truth. When a contractor tells you that the project will take about two weeks, you can be assured they don't mean 14 days in a row. Sure, they may personally spend only two weeks in your home, but what they often conveniently forget to tell you is that a project such as a kitchen remodel is much, much more involved than a simple bump out or enclosing a porch. These larger, but technically simple jobs can probably be handled by a crew of two licensed contractors. But for a technically challenging project such as adding a master bath or extending a kitchen, a contractor or designer may have to schedule or contract with concrete specialists, engineers, framers, roofers, siding installers, window and door specialists, flooring installers, electricians, plumbers, drywallers, painters, building inspectors and delivery personnel. A delay by any of these workers, and your job delays become a row of Dominoes falling. Rule #1 is "don't blame the messenger." A current tongue in cheek commercial for "Very Fine" fruit juices shows a stereotypical low waisted contractor giving his pitch to a wide eyed couple. His spiel goes something like this, "first we will demolish your home, but don't worry, we'll get the stuff out of your driveway by

the end of summer. We might show up the following day to look at the plumbing situation, but we like to be done by noon to beat the traffic. Hope you folks are early risers. If the cabinets show up when we expect, we might could get 'em in by Friday. By the way, did you get a permit yet? If ya didn't, no problem, we do everything by code anyways. Oh, by the way, our annual fishing trip is coming up, sure hope that you're not in a hurry, cause countertops alone could take 6 weeks. Can I use your bathroom? We ask for 50% up front, 25% when the products show up, and the balance when we're finished. Do you have a pen?"

Sound familiar? No matter how hard we try or how much experience we have, rarely does a job go smoothly or without stress. More likely, you will feel like a golfer on the sixth hole in a lightening storm---you know you're going to be shocked, but don't know when. So it behooves both the client, the designer, and the contractor to go into the project with anticipation of problems. We live in a not-so-perfect world, and with a little understanding and consideration on everyones part, a project such as a kitchen remodel can have a joyful end. Here are a few things that we have learned that can make the entire process less painful. Always insist on a formal estimate and a formal and complete Contract. If the contractor signs his name with an X, start looking for another contractor. Never hover over the contractors shoulder. If the fish weren't biting last night, he can be mean spirited. If you are re doing a kitchen, set up a mock kitchen elsewhere in the home away from the work area (you don't want to have to share your refrigerator with the flooring guys pickled herring and breaktime six pack). Have them move your old refrigerator to this temporary location, and make sure it is near a sink for clean ups. Use only paper products for the interim of the job! Eat out often. Never say to the laborers, "hey, ya working hard or hardly working?" When something doesn't happen as scheduled, always begin the conversation with a smile. Anger is not appropriate on a jobsite where pneumatic nail guns are present. And you definitely don't want to find the empties from that six pack stuffed in your toilet drain line three months from now.

Now that you have your major remodel in perspective, do one more thing. Turn to your husband or wife, give them a kiss, and repeat your vows once more before you sign the contract. And when the job is complete, go to your contractors, shake their hands, thank them for weathering the storms, and remember, projects are never finished until you die.