



Before you start any renovation project

BY ADENE LUCAS

BEFORE STARTING ANY RENOVATION project, take the time to hire a qualified designer and contractor who work as a team. Well laid plans, and carefully thought out budgets, have a way of disappearing if the right person for the job is not hired. The contractor you hire should have the technical, business and personal skills to get the job done in a timely manner and within budget.

We have all heard and witnessed renovation disaster stories and Mike Holmes has even built a career on righting the wronged. No one wants to be in that situation and here is how to avoid it:

RESEARCH Anyone can come up with an advertisement and claim great results and have a glossy brochure to sell the look. I have seen countless "professional" jobs that look very amateur and border on unsafe. The best place to begin the process of selecting

a contractor is asking family, friends and co-workers if they have recently had work done on their home, and if so, were they happy with the process and end result? Even that is not always a guarantee that you will select the right company. A client I had got a referral from a co-worker for a bathroom renovation. She saw the work, met with the contractor, paid a huge deposit and in the end was left with a half-finished bathroom six months later. I was then brought in, and the entire bathroom had to be redone at double the cost. It was a very unfortunate situation for the client because she based her decision on a recommendation without doing the leg work to check out the contractor. Also check in with your local Better Business Bureau. They can tell you if there have been any conflicts in the past and if there was a resolution. Other sources are your local homebuilder or renovator associations which have strict membership requirements and standards to adhere to.

KEY QUESTIONS Now that you have a few names of potential contractors there are some key questions that need to be asked. Are they insured? Do they have public liability and property damage insurance? If so, make sure their policy is up to date. Do they have workers' compensation for their employees, and subcontractors that will be on site? These are really important questions because if a painter falls off a ladder and the contractor is uninsured, it is now your problem and you can be sued or a lien can be placed on your home. Ask to see jobs they have done that are similar to work you are having done. If it is a basement renovation for example, there is no sense seeing the latest kitchen done for a client. A good contractor and a happy client will be thrilled to show off great results. Ask the contractor if they are

PICTURED ABOVE

Newcastle Homes & Renovations - After, kitchen and living areas are opened up and spacious

licensed, how long they have been in business and what their area of speciality is.

Always request the business licence number and check it out with the municipal licensing bureau where you can confirm all the details provided to you. I am always suspicious of a restaurant that has a huge menu because they can't possibly be good at everything. Neither is a designer or contractor. If they specialize in bathroom renovations and you want an addition, those are two completely different projects. Just ask, don't worry about being offensive. Reputable contractors will not be offended because they have nothing to hide.

COMMUNICATION When interviewing potential contractors, you must be able to interact with them very well. These individuals will have access to your home, be in your life daily and must be able to understand your vision. It sounds simple, but really listen to your instinct. Does the contractor hear you, or are they pushing their own agenda? Do they respect your timeline and budget and lifestyle? Do they respond with concise answers, not vague estimates? Will they be on site or hand off the job to another employee? Are they your point person? This is a time to ask the tough questions and write down the responses. Some projects can be quite lengthy and things don't always go smoothly so it's best to be able to speak openly and candidly. This relationship, like any, requires mutual respect, honesty and a bit of diplomacy. You really need to treat the interview as a process for selecting the best candidate.

ESTIMATES Now that you have researched the contenders it's time to get estimates for the project. It's best to start with a drawing and a rough idea of materials being used. This is where a designer can really help the project by sourcing out all materials and or finishes to be used. For example, if built-in wall units are being quoted on, then the material needs to be specified. There would be a substantial cost difference between using MDF and wood. To have fair estimates, the quote needs to be detailed with materials, options and labour costs specified. Of course estimates are just that, be prepared for additional costs. Renovations may uncover hidden problems which require more labour and material that result in escalated costs. Once all estimates have been received, take the time to carefully review them and meet with the individual contractors to discuss any questions or concerns. Be wary of any contractor that has a very low bid. Many times, that bid is unrealistic and final costs at the end will be even higher than the highest estimate. Look for a fair price, receptive attitude, good suggestions, and a willingness to work with you. In the end, you need to choose the contractor you feel that will give you the best value for your money. Once that is decided, it's time to draw up a contract.



PICTURED ABOVE
Newcastle Homes & Renovations - Before, kitchen and living areas are roomed off and separated by walls.

CONTRACTS There are many forms of contracts but regardless of what is used there are certain particulars that need to be signed off. A contract is basically a written statement of work to be performed, materials to be used, warranties, project costs and start and finish dates. The contract needs to outline exactly what is the responsibility of the contractor. If there is something that you do not agree with, do not sign and have the contract re-written to both parties' satisfaction. The contract may seem like a formality at the time but without one you are putting yourself in a precarious position.

RED FLAGS As in any industry, there are always a few individuals that are not in business for the right reasons.

Here are just a few signs that should be concerning:

LARGE DEPOSIT 10 - 20% is an adequate deposit for the project to commence.

Anything more and an explanation should be heard first as well as documentation in the form of receipts.

CASH PAYMENTS Any legitimate contractor will want to keep a record of payment and have anything that is financially transparent.

NO PERMITS Starting the project without a permit just exposes you to all sorts of issues with the city. They can fine you, stop work on the project and even tear down the project. Discuss whose responsibility it is to take out the permit.

CANVASSING Any contractor who uses the line, that they were in the neighbourhood doing work is someone to be wary of. Chances are they are looking to make money and not too concerned with quality.

NO REFERENCE Using a photo album or a few pictures is not enough to sell a job. Get a list of clients and tour the homes if possible. Most clients' who survive a renovation are happy to show you the end result.

Having just gone through a major kitchen and bathroom renovation I can tell you that the preparation before the start of construction, is well worth the final result. ☐



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