

Renovation Survival Guide

Questions to ask before the walls come down

How do I determine whether to remodel or sell?

The age-old question—should I stay or should I go?—resonates strongly among homeowners itching for a change. The answer is largely based on another timeless adage: “location, location, location.” The location of your home and your comfort level in that locale are the strongest factors in the decision of whether to remodel or sell. Other things to consider: If you’re planning to add to your square footage, research your local government’s regulations and building codes. Can you bump out where you want to? How much land needs to be left undeveloped between you and your neighbor? Are you in a historic district? You should also always analyze the cost of remodeling versus moving, and check out housing prices in your neighborhood and other desirable locations.

What’s the difference between using an architect and a separate builder versus a single design-build firm?

In the first scenario, you’re working with two separate entities; in the second, you deal with one company, from soup to nuts. There are pros and cons to both. Architects can be involved in the project to varying degrees for different fees. Some will simply work with you on the design and then sign off. Be sure, as you go along, that your architect is designing a home that can be built for your budget. Other architects can be contracted to continue to oversee the work of a builder, ensuring your home is renovated as it was designed. In many cases, archi-

tecs will recommend builders with whom they often work.

With a design-build firm, the person designing your project may or may not be an architect; you should ask for credentials and review his or her design portfolio. The advantage of using a design-build firm is that all parties involved in the project are in constant communication, and there can be more fluidity throughout the process. The downside is that, if things don’t go well with the design phase, you may be stuck with the firm for the long haul. Ask for a two-part contract, one for the design phase and a second for the same firm to remodel your home if all goes well.

How can I find a reputable local builder or remodeler?

Word of mouth works beautifully, as any company’s best PR comes from referrals. You can also do some sleuthing: Drive around your community and look for homes under construction. Then check on the sites to see how often crews show up and whether they’re doing a quality job. When you’ve narrowed down a handful of prospects, it’s time to interview. Write out questions ahead of time, and stick to the same general script with all candidates so you can take notes to compare apples to apples. You also should check to ensure your candidates’ licenses are current. You can get additional information from such associations as the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, which has several local chapters. Visit the Web site www.nari.org.

What are important elements to include in the contract with my architect or builder?

A well-negotiated contract is the single most important factor that will cut down on contention and serve as the foundation for a great working relationship. Don’t be surprised if your firm presents you with a rather simple document—it’s your job to negotiate any and all missing details. If you think that something might come up later, put it in the contract. A contract can swell from three to 30 pages under the careful eye of a homeowner. Remember, once the contract is signed, anything not included is considered an “extra,” and extras always cost more. Be sure the contract includes a payment schedule you’re comfortable with, and a timeline of when various stages of work will be completed (keeping in mind reasonable delays).

Will I have to move out of my house?

That all depends on the breadth of the project and your tolerance level. Many situations will dictate the answer. If there’s no working plumbing or electricity, for example, you simply can’t stay. If the project is a bump-out off the family room, your daily life will not be terribly inconvenienced. The gray area of whether to hang around or move in with the in-laws is mostly driven by whether you and your family can reasonably live in a construction zone. If you do move out, be sure to stop by your home regularly during construction or have someone else manage the project.

—Cathy Applefeld Olson