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# How to survive a major remodel

*Some mistakes are definitely avoidable*

by **Kit Davey**

I am a major remodel survivor. The good news is that I ended up with a spacious and comfortable dining area, plus a light-filled home office. But even with a great deal of remodeling experience under my belt, I made avoidable mistakes and could have saved myself a lot of aggravation.



Here are some suggestions to help you in your remodel:

- Hire a licensed contractor. Interview, check the references of, and get written bids from at least three qualified contractors. Call the Contractor's State Licensing Board to make sure s/he is bonded (800-321-2752). The owner of the company I hired was a contractor in good standing, but I discovered several months into the job that none of the crew was licensed. Fortunately, the foreman had years of experience and the city approved all work.

- Have your contractor do the whole job. Don't do any of the subcontracting unless

you have extra time and patience. I thought I could save myself a bundle by hiring the painter, hardwood floor and tile installers and purchasing the appliances myself. I did save a little cash, but hiring and scheduling the various tradespeople was very time consuming. When something went wrong the finger got pointed at the other guy and I was responsible for fixing it. If the screws in the light fixtures (which I bought) were too long, I had to get in my car and go find ones that fit (Grrr!).

- Like and respect your contractor and the crew. This crowd will be in your face for the next four months, so it's important to be able to get along and to trust each other. During your initial information gathering, note whether the contractor responds to your calls within 24 hours and arrives punctually to appointments. Is s/he courteous, eager to do a good job for you and does s/he listen and respond honestly to your ideas and requests?

- Establish a firm start date. My start date kept getting pushed back, week after week. The demo crew finally arrived, unannounced, with their crow bars and sledge hammers, the day four guests arrived for a week-long stay.

- Request no smoking or radio playing on the

premises, or at least, no smoking inside and radio volume low enough so that your neighbors don't have to listen to the music as well.

- Make all your design decisions and finish choices before the work starts. A change during construction is much more expensive than changing the design on paper before building begins. As I saw my second floor being built I noticed that a window on the first floor was not lined up with the one above. I changed my original design and had the contractor line them up. The bill for the order arrived a month later, and I was shocked!

- Understand the change-order policy and follow it. Don't approve a change that you or the contractor have initiated unless you have received a written quote for its cost and have signed and approved it. If I had known how much my window placement change was going to cost beforehand I would never have moved it.

- Request a daily progress report. Have the contractor keep you abreast of delays, deliveries and weekend work. We returned one Sunday afternoon from a weekend away to find two men up on our roof and their wives and children in our garage having a little party!

- Inspect the work daily. It is satisfying to watch a structure being created before your eyes and to know that it is being built solidly and well (I particularly enjoyed my foreman's clever solutions to inadequacies in what he called "the funny papers"). By keeping an eye on progress I was able to stop mistakes from being made, to consult on design solutions when obstacles were uncovered and to assure that good workmanship was being built into the structure.

- Make your own punch list and insist all the work be completed before final payment. Your contractor may not notice a missing downspout, or a bent screen, or the lack of a doorknob as the job winds down. Insist that these details are completed before writing the final check. The last item on my list was "Remove company sign from front yard." I didn't review my punch list before I wrote the final payment, and guess what's still in my front yard? ■

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