

What to look for when remodeling a kitchen

The kitchen is the heart of the home. It's where the family congregates and is often Ground Zero for homework and bill-paying. It's also where individuals play host to parties and feed the crowds.

With so many uses, the kitchen sees its share of action and is often one of the rooms in the house that can use remodel to stay updated as trends change through the years. Also, as any real estate agent worth his or her salt will tell you, remodeling your kitchen can be a sound financial investment -- adding a good deal of value to your home should you ever choose to sell.

Considering the kitchen is one of the most widely used rooms of the house, choosing to remodel it is a large undertaking and one that can cause a good deal of upheaval in your life. So consider these tips before beginning.

Determine a Budget

Kitchen remodels are expensive, there's no getting around that fact. Remodeling an average-size kitchen (10' by 10') can cost anywhere from

\$5,000 for minimal changes to the high double-digits for extensive and top-of-the-line renovations.

One of the priciest parts of a kitchen renovation is the cabinetry, followed by high-end appliances. If your cabinets are in sound shape, consider giving them a face lift instead of a complete tear-out and redo. If appliances will be a budget-breaker, consider lower-priced models. As long as all appliances are of the same finish and look cohesive, it will be fine.

Consider what homes in your area are selling for and their average value. You don't want to make improvements that exceed the value of homes in your neighborhood, which could be to your disadvantage if you sell later on.

Plan Out Your Design

Functionality should be as much a part of your kitchen as beauty. Think about how you work in the kitchen and which drawers or cabinets will be of most use. Most designers recommend a triangular arrangement of the stove, sink and refrigerator, so you're working

efficiently and don't have to cross obstacles to get from one to the other. If you frequently entertain from your kitchen and like the hands-on approach, perhaps a center island with separate prep sink would fit the bill.

Remember to work with the scale of the room. While a design you saw in a home decorating magazine may be beautiful, it doesn't mean that commercial stove and refrigerator will fit in your space.

Research Contractors

Horror stories of individuals being left high and dry by contractors are all too common. However, a very good majority of contractors are reliable and honest, you simply have to do your research to hire the right one.

You can call the Better Business Bureau to check up on a contractor, and asking for references before any money is exchanged with the contractor is an absolute must as well. Make sure that the contractor also has insurance and workman's comp to cover injuries for him, his staff, and any subcontractors

he hires out work to.

A contractor will become your right-hand man during the remodeling, so you want to have a good rapport with him and make sure he's listening to your suggestions and wishes.

Part of the hiring process involves getting estimates from the contractors you're considering. Try for three or four estimates and compare them to see which is the best value.

Get Your Hands Dirty

The term "sweat equity" floats around with home improvement projects. This is a concept of doing some work yourself to be paid off in the long run. Handling some of the labor-intensive tasks, such as demolishing old cabinets or tearing out tile that will be replaced can shave off a good percentage off of your bill. While supplies are expensive, it's the contractor's labor charge that may be the highest number you see on your contract. So anything you can do to cut down his hours on the job -- from prepping a space to sweeping up after the work -- will save you cash.

Questions & Answers

about home improvement and repair

By Alan J. Heavens

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Q: I live on the first floor of a garden condo. Some years ago, the unit above was left unheated in winter, causing the pipes to burst and causing much damage. Everything was repaired, but ever since I have had trouble with my ceilings. Whatever I use to repair them, after a time, cracking starts. I was told that dampness obviously remains, yet some of my rooms are perfect.

Is there any method that can be used to get rid of the dampness before I try something else? I have tried popcorn, and now have acrylic. I am considering using styrene panels, but there must be some way to get rid of the dampness.

A: That's if residual dampness is causing the problem, which I find hard to believe, especially after all these years. You didn't say, but I assume the ceilings are plaster. Whether plaster or drywall, dampness would manifest itself by creating rust stains on the ceiling. You didn't say if that was the case.

I assume that when the ceilings were repaired, they were opened up to give air a chance to circulate and the joists and spaces a chance to dry completely. If you're concerned that there is moisture in the space above the ceiling, that's easily tested with a moisture meter that you can purchase on the Internet inexpensively. These are like the ones used by professionals engaged in mold remediation, or who clean up water damage after fires or flooding.

The cracks you get could be evidence of settling. I don't know how old your condo is, but often the lumber used in floor joists might not have been completely dry when used. The water damage delayed the drying for a while, and the

cracks might have appeared when the joists did dry. I've seen the same thing happen in new construction if the wood is a little green. When it dries, drywall nails pop. If the building is old and the plaster is, too, know that old plaster tends to develop stress cracks over the years, especially as it pulls away from the lath.

You don't want to add weight to the ceiling if this is what is beginning to happen because the problem will be accelerated. Popcorn finishes are not as light as popcorn. I'd find out the real cause of the problem before proceeding.

Q: Does the molding between a wall and ceiling have to be diagonal? I found casing molding that I like, but it would need to be installed flush.

A: I'm not sure what you mean, but I assume that you're talking about crown molding, which is designed to be installed that way. I've installed molding over the years whatever way it looked good to me. The big problem, especially in older houses, is getting the molding to fit properly.

Q: Just finished installing new wood laminate flooring in my basement over concrete. I used plastic for a moisture barrier. The day after I finished the installation, my sump pump stopped working, and I had a half-inch of water on top of the new flooring. I immediately replaced the sump pump, vacuumed the excess water, and started running dehumidifiers.

There are no signs of buckling yet. I'm also wondering about potential mold damage. The basement floor had been painted and sealed about six years ago.

A: If you took care of the water issue quickly, there may be no further problems. It's only when we let things go that such problems arise. I'd keep an eye on it, but otherwise, just enjoy the space.