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Tips On Getting The Most From A Kitchen or Bathroom Project

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Over the course of my design career, I have seen many varieties of remodel and new construction projects. However, one thing has remained constant throughout them all – they are resource intensive endeavors. To complete your project with few, if any regrets, you need to invest both your valuable money and your time. Here are a few tips on how to maximize your return on your investment.

1) Put your goals and objectives for the project in writing. This will benefit both you and any allied build/design professionals you may choose to work with. Goals may be large or small such as adding space, replacing tired finishes or appliances and/or improving the space for resale. Examples of common objectives include improving space utilization, personalizing the space, increasing natural light, improving energy efficiency and/or improving indoor air quality. It is important to make sure your goals do not contradict your objectives. When this happens the project can come to a standstill, until issues are resolved, thus adding to the cost of the project (as they say, time is money).

2) Set a palatable budget and try to stick to it. You know what your financial resources are and you know what you are comfortable spending, hence that is your budget number. However, keep in mind a general rule of thumb – try not to spend more than 15 percent of the market value of your home on a kitchen project and not more than five to ten percent on a master bathroom project. By setting a realistic budget, you, your designer or your builder can put together a rational materials list that not only fits your needs but also your budget. Without a budget, you are likely to go around in circles with all the different options until you are ready to throw your hands up and go back to renting an apartment. For those clients who have champagne tastes and beer budgets, I assist them in the proverbial stealing from Peter to pay Paul by finding ways to economize on one material so that they can splurge on another, all the while keeping the style/look of the project congruous.

3) Take your time when you are planning out a kitchen or bath remodel and try to have all your materials selected before the first hammer swings. If you are planning on gutting the entire space then I typically recommend clients spend up to twelve months planning/designing the kitchen and up to six months for a master bathroom. The same guideline would apply to new construction. This minimizes decision making under duress which rarely provides optimal results. Additionally, I often recommend that homeowners live in a recently purchased home for up to a year before they start planning a remodel project. This allows them to develop a clear idea of what they like and dislike about the space as well as get a feel for the natural light over the changing seasons. For less extreme projects you can scale back on the planning time but given the investment of your hard earned dollars more planning usually equates to fewer change orders, less dollars spent and greater project satisfaction.

4) Differentiate your needs from your wants. Do you need a warming drawer or would you simply like to have one? If you have an erratic schedule with kids going in many directions and working parents whose schedules can be unpredictable, then a warming drawer is a great appliance for keeping the home fires burning. If you are empty nesters who travel a lot, then you probably will not get an adequate return on your investment in this appliance and you have given up valuable space in your kitchen for it. You want a two person jet tub? Are you going to upgrade your water heater to supply that tub and do you regularly have the extra 20 minutes that it will take to fill the tub or would you be better off allocating those funds to a two person multi-head shower?

5) Do consider resale but... My rule of thumb is, if you plan on staying in

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your house for five years or more than design and build for you not some perspective buyer. If apple green countertops float your boat then go for it but also consider whether or not you want to face them very morning for at least the next ten years.

6) Keep things congruous. Expensive granite countertops typically should not be combined with inexpensive pressboard stock cabinets. To begin, the granite is heavy and in time the pressboard cabinets may not take the weight and begin to sag thus making it difficult to open and close the cabinet doors. Second, pairing these two items could have an appearance that is similar to putting custom chrome wheel hubs on a Ford Fiesta car. Together they just won't deliver the look you are trying to achieve. Another thing to consider is, do the materials on your wish list match your family's life style and your willingness to clean and maintain them. Learn about the durability and maintenance requirements of your selected materials before you purchase and install them.

7) Kick the tires. There are many "live appliance showrooms" in major cities across the US where you can actually turn on the burners of the cook top and bake a batch of cookies in the oven. You can bring your own bell pepper and sauté it or the distributor will provide you with food stuffs to actually cook. Contact the manufacturer to find out where the closest live showroom is to you or consult with a professional kitchen & bath designer. Please note that these showrooms typically feature mid-high end appliances such as Gaggenau, Miele, Sub Zero, Thermador, Viking and Wolf, just to name a few. When looking at wall ovens, I always encourage clients to open the doors and feel the weight of the door, do they like the hinging mechanism, the racking system, the door handle, the control panel and/or the interior lighting? With dishwashers, I encourage them to take their plates into the showroom and make sure they fit properly in the dishwasher's racks.

8) Avoid the temptation of buying materials/appliances well in advance of installation just because they are a "good deal". Although it is very tempting to purchase that dual fuel range that you have had your eye on because your local appliance store is having a sale but try to abstain. One of several things can happen: 1) the unit may sit in your garage for 12 months or more and your warranty could expire before you even get it out of the box, 2) you are not likely to uncrate it prior to installation and if it sits in your garage for an extended period of time and you discover it is damaged upon uncrating, you may have no recourse, 3) if it kicks around your garage for any period of time it is likely to become damaged and 4) the manufacturer may change the styling thus the "matching" microwave you held off on buying now has an updated control panel and handle from the oven sitting in your garage. Additionally, avoid purchasing cooking equipment from rummage sales and internet auctions because it can be difficult to insure there are no recall issues associated with the unit and the fact that the item will not be shipped in its original protective packaging can make it susceptible to damage.

9) Get real – don't believe those home remodel reality TV shows. Well designed kitchens and baths can not be remodeled in a weekend especially by a novice. So, be honest with yourself – do you really have the skill set and time to start and complete a remodel yourself? If your answer is no, then enlist professionals to help you with your project. Hiring architects, contractors and/or designers can save you time, money and for some homeowners their marriage. Finding the right professional(s) for you can be an arduous process but keep this one simple thing in mind: these people will be in your life and by the end of your project they will likely know a lot of intimate things about you and your family so choose professionals that you like and trust. Someone you would feel comfortable leaving your wallet and your toddler with for an entire weekend while you travel out of state!

How do you find these people? Well as with most professional services, ask your friends, family members and neighbors. Additionally, you can contact the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, National Homebuilders Association, National Association of the Remodeling Industry and the National Kitchen & Bath Association. These groups maintain high standards for their members in terms of ethical business practices and educational and experience requirements.

Expect to pay an hourly consulting fee to meet with most build/design professionals. During the course of your consultation, these professionals will undoubtedly provide you with some very valuable information and thus they should be compensated for it. It is just like when an appliance repair person comes to your house to investigate why your dishwasher is not

working and you pay them an hourly rate for their time even if they do not perform a repair.

10) Assume nothing. To minimize the opportunity for misunderstandings, get everything in writing whether it is from your appliance retailer or your building/design professional. Purchase orders and service contracts should spell out, in black and white, everything that is going to happen and everything that isn't. For example agreements should provide an estimated time of completion (delivery), materials (with model numbers and colors where applicable), fee and payment schedules, etc. For every change order you request, put it in writing, and expect the results to be tacked onto your bill (restocking fee) or bid. Don't accept scribbles on cocktail napkins from your designer or building professional.

11) Consider your projects impact on the environment. Based on my experience, there is a general misconception about the cost of environmentally friendly building materials and design practices. It is widely believed that they are more expensive. Now it may be true that the up front cost may be higher for an energy efficient dishwasher or a recycled content material countertop but on the back end you save on operating and maintenance costs thus often making these products a better buy over their less "green" brethren. Another thing to consider is the plethora of tax credits and rebates available for environmentally friendly products (go to www.energystar.gov).

12) Don't throw away your serviceable cabinets, plumbing fixtures, etc. If you don't need extra storage capacity in your garage/basement, then consider donating your old serviceable kitchen cabinets to a local charity. Three such local entities that will not only accept but will often deconstruct for you are Builders Bargains (a not for profit new/used building materials reseller that donates their cash receipts to Habitat for Humanity) located in Bremerton www.kitsaphabitat.org, the Housing Resource Board on Bainbridge Island (a not for profit providing housing for low income individuals and families) www.housingresourcesboard.org and the Re-Store located in Seattle (a not for profit building materials reseller that uses their receipts to reconstruct salmon habitats and clean up beaches and parks) www.re-store.org.

Now that you have the essentials for a successful project, pour yourself a cup of coffee and kick back with a stack of home improvement magazines and start dreaming!

About the Author

Molly Erin McCabe, AKBD is a professional kitchen and bath designer and owner of A Kitchen That Works™. She is a member of the Olympic West Sound Chapter of the National Kitchen & Bath Association and the Kitsap Homebuilders Association Green Built Program. Ms. McCabe is the co-designer and co-builder of a three star Built Green home. She can be reached at 206-780-1906 or molly@akitchenthatworks.com.