

To Remodel or Not

By Ken Ryerson



Ryerson residence under construction

As I can personally attest, the age-old question of whether to remodel or not to remodel is a difficult and very personal decision. In our household, this discussion went on for the better part of two years. My wife and I endlessly and passionately debated our options: to upgrade with the existing floor plan, to add on and upgrade, or to trade up to a bigger house. We finally hired an architect (one that we had known for years), and started the process of changing our 3 bedroom, 2 bath home into a 4 bedroom, 2.5 bath home.

Finding a Contractor

As daunting as the decision to remodel was, it was miniscule compared to the decisions still to be made, the biggest of which was the selection of a contractor for our project. As there is no substitute for a personal referral from a satisfied client, my first plan of attack was to ask everyone I knew for the name of their contractor and their experiences with that contractor. And when I say everyone, I do mean everyone, even people that I barely knew. In fact, on Halloween night while taking my kids trick-or-treating, we rang the doorbell of our friend's neighbor. While our kids were choosing their candy from the treat bucket, I took advantage of the opportunity to ask if they had remodeled recently and who their contractor was.

So the first rule of picking a contractor is to ask EVERYONE you know (from friends to acquaintances, co-workers, and neighbors) who they used and whether they were satisfied with their contractor's work. Make sure to take lots of notes, as all this information that you

are collecting will start to blur together after a while.

Keep in mind these basic tips when hiring a contractor – ignore them at your peril:

- Hire only licensed contractors
- Check a contractor's license number and history online at www.cslb.ca.gov
- Get at least three references from the contractor and make sure that you contact the references. Even better, see if you can arrange to view their past work. It's often a good idea to ask for the last three projects that they worked on.
- Get bids from at least 3 contractors
- Ensure you have a written contract and make sure that you do not sign any contract until you completely understand the terms
- Never pay more than 10% down or \$1000, whichever is less
- Don't let your payments get ahead of the work completed
- Don't make final payment until you are satisfied with the job

If the job is significant in scope, you will want to hire an architect to draw up your plans. Finalize as many of the details up front as you can, such as the appliances you want, flooring and type of fixtures.

The more details that you can finalize upfront, the more accurately you will be able to plan your budget. Having these details ironed out beforehand will allow the contractors to give you a much more accurate bid. And perhaps more importantly, you will be in a better position to compare the bids that you do get.

Although the detailing process is a lot of work upfront and can seem interminable, this strategy worked very well for us. We spent many months researching online and visiting vendors to pick our countertops, flooring, appliances, fireplace, windows, plumbing fixtures, etc.

Going into the project, I severely underestimated the amount of work that this would require – I remember telling my wife that we could just take a weekend to do all of our shopping, to which she laughed in disbelief. To further punish me for my unrealistic expectations, my wife then proceeded to make me go with her on all of the shopping outings.

Selecting a Contractor

As mentioned above, the more details you can provide to the contractors, the more accurate their estimates will be. By outlining all the details in your bid package, the contractors will be able to give you accurate prices for your specific items, as opposed to providing a general 'allowance' amount for your finishes. This will help to ensure that there are no surprises down the line, and that the cost of your project doesn't balloon because the finishes you want are more expensive than the generic 'allowances' that the contractor provided in the initial bid.

After speaking with fifteen contractors, we elected to get bids from five of those contractors. When we received the bids back, we were a bit surprised to find that the difference between the highest and lowest bid was over \$100k. This may not be the norm, but I asked each of the contractors to also provide me with their subcontractors' bids to allow me to better compare the numbers for each line item (i.e. roofing, flooring, electrical, framing, etc.)

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Not surprisingly, we found the highest and lowest bids to be the least detailed and thorough. Therefore, it was easy for us to throw out the lowest and highest bidders, as is often recommended. That left the three middle contractors, who we felt were the most thorough in their bidding process. Each of these contractors brought out their subcontractors to walk through the job. When I compared each of these bids, they were within \$25k (~ 4%) of each other. Therefore, we felt very comfortable with the accuracy of the numbers for each of the remaining three bids.

In the end, picking a contractor was a lot like dating. There are various aspects of consideration that go into the decision making process. The four biggest for me (and for most people I would imagine) are:

- Did I trust the contractor?
- Would he/she do a quality job?
- Would he/she finish the project in the time stated?
- And do it for a price that I could afford?

In the end, we went with Stubblefield Construction, based out of Moraga. In fact, Rob was the contractor who did the kitchen remodel for the neighbors on our friend's street that we visited while trick-or-treating on Halloween night. The owners graciously invited us in to take a look at their new kitchen. They were so happy with Rob's work, that they were holding a party for their friends the following Saturday, to which Rob and all his subcontractors were invited. They even invited us to join them so that we could meet him. To make a long story short, we ended up going to their party and meeting Rob, and that was the start to what we are hoping will be a beautiful relationship. Our remodel started in the beginning of June and we are scheduled to move back in before the end of the year. I'll keep you posted on how things go...



Ken Ryerson

Ken Ryerson lives in Moraga with his wife, Linda. They have an 8 year daughter and 6 year old son who are both attending Los Perales Elementary School. Ken is a Lamorinda Residential Real Estate Specialist with Pacific Union in Orinda. If you have any questions or comments, he can be reached at 925-878-9685 or via email at Ken@RyersonRealty.com



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