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Adventures in home renovation - pitfalls and triumphs of kitchen rehab

By B. B. Kaye



Kent Cremolini carefully reviews plans with Francis Combes of Premiere Kitchens in Lafayette. Photo Andy Scheck

is left to chance between a homeowner and the craftspeople and designers who are entrusted to create it.

Tom Pollock, a Lafayette resident and home improvement contractor, has been in home renovations for over 30 years, beginning as a union carpenter in Colorado. "Most of the people I work with have already been to an architect to get the big things worked out. I would say to most people who are thinking about doing (a renovation), sit down, think about, and write down what their preferences are. What would they really like, in the design or layout, like where they want the sink, and what size refrigerator. Then they can relay those details to the architect or contractor.

"Even when clients do talk with an architect and they think they have an idea of what is going to happen, they have trouble communicating it to whoever is doing the work," said Pollock. "They may assume that a feature will be located somewhere, but have not communicated it to anybody. They should communicate all along the job."

Pollock says architects may have one idea, and so they may do things differently from what the client wants. "Clients should review drawings carefully, and let the architect know if what they are drawing isn't going to work out," he said. "It's much more difficult after the fact. The more planning and thought, and the more you can communicate your preferences, is a good start."

Storefronts may appear to have an increased legitimacy over more transient contractors, but occasionally even brick-and-mortar businesses can be a front for the unscrupulous. Owners of a store in Pleasant Hill that specialized in custom cabinetry are currently embroiled in litigation with several Walnut Creek and Lamorinda residents, accused not only of incompetence but also of making off with tens of thousands of dollars in deposits. Kent and Jan Cremolini lost a \$50,000 deposit for kitchen cabinets there, and are attempting to recoup their loss in the courts.

Not to be dissuaded in their desire for a new kitchen, the Cremolinis are forging on with another designer, and are now happily working with Francis Combes of Premier Kitchens in Lafayette.

Lafayette residents Anita and James Low recently completed a bright and spacious modern renovation of their kitchen after enduring 11 years in the small, dark, outdated original.

"It's difficult to eat well in a kitchen that doesn't work," Anita Low said. "If you don't have a place to prep and a place to cook, everything has to be quick, or you buy ready-made food, or you spend a whole day of your weekend figuring out a meal plan. My kids were really happy when we got the kitchen done. After four months (of renovation), the first thing that they wanted was scrambled eggs!"

This renovation, however, was not the Low's first attempt. They tried a contractor who had done a friend's kitchen, and a number of their friends' kitchens as well. "I called and asked for references, and looked at his work, and he seemed to be okay, but looks are deceiving."

The Lows eventually discovered that the contractor was using someone else's license. Fortunately, they had tried him out on smaller projects first, before committing to anything larger.

Kitchens have evolved dramatically over the last 100 years. Your great, great, or even only great grandparents may well have cooked meals in a wood burning fireplace or over a coal-burning stove, after pumping water by hand out in the yard and carrying heavy, sloshing pots back into the house for cooking and washing no matter how cold the time of year.

Nowadays, a kitchen is the most complex room in a house.

Done well, a kitchen can dramatically increase your quality of life, becoming a sublime center of easy living, a joy in which to entertain family and friends. Done poorly, it can be a miserable affair, inspiring only avoidance or, worse, be an unhealthy and dangerous place.

A truly great kitchen can only be the product of thoughtful planning and communication, where nothing

"A big red flag was that his own subcontractors told us that his work was not up to par, and that he had a habit of overcharging previous clients by a lot," Anita Low said.

In the end, that contractor became unpleasant and threatening, and even attempted to collect tools not belonging to him which had been left by other subcontractors.

After that experience, the Lows were thorough and careful in choosing a contractor.

The architect they found was amazing, and he helped them look for somebody who was trustworthy. "This was going to be a long project, with a bigger budget than anywhere else in the house, so we wanted it done right - we had waited years to do it right. I recommend that whether the work is small scale or large scale, that someone be on the jobsite at all times to make sure that the work is done, and done right."

The contractor they finally settled on had worked in the architect's own home. "My contractor was awesome, and trustworthy to the point where I gave him the keys to the house after months of working with him, and I have never done that with anybody else. I would even trust him to watch my 5-year-old," Anita Low said. "He understood not only the structural parts, but also the plumbing and electrical. Not all contractors can do that, and that's where the subs come on. Ask who's doing the work? How many people will they be subcontracting? How long have they been working with those subcontractors to know the quality of their work and reputation for trustworthiness? Ask for extensive references."

The finest contractors are an amalgam of experience - well-read, artistic, technically knowledgeable, well-versed in materials, tools and techniques, ethical, and rare.

One of the things you can do to prepare yourself for any renovation work is to read building books about your type of project to help you recognize if the work is proper and that the right materials are being used.

Building department rules can vary widely from municipality to municipality, but if actual structural changes are not being made, it is often permissible to replace kitchen interiors without an architect. You can create a sketch, or have the contractor sketch what you communicate.

But Pollock warns that even if you are only replacing cabinets, city rules might require you to get a permit if the work you do is over a certain dollar amount. "It used to be \$500; it might be more than that now, except for painting. Everything has pluses and minuses - while it's more expensive to get a permit, the city will be overseeing the renovation and protecting you from an unscrupulous contractor or craftsman who might do inferior work, or not do something up to code."

Homeowners may apply for permits themselves and save some money, but they should educate themselves beforehand in the related codes and terminology. Be sure to ask your local buildings department what their rules are. The more thought that goes into planning - such as changes to plumbing if a sink is relocated - the more pitfalls can be avoided. And always allow for contingencies! Once walls are opened there may be surprises, such as concealed structural damage, dangerous wiring, or corroded or improper plumbing that needs to be replaced or upgraded.

If you do discover such things, look on it as an opportunity to correct them, and do them right. In the long run, you'll be happy that you did.

(This reporter has been a New York City licensed Home Improvement Contractor and a New York State licensed Home Inspector.)



Detail in a featured kitchen during this year's Lafayette Kitchen Tour Photo Sora O'Doherty

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[back](#)

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