

HOMES

Home renovations on your mind? Here are a few answers to your questions

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Renovating your home is often a leap of faith — you have to trust the contractor to execute the plans, stay on budget and finish on time.

On the other side, your contractor must also trust you to stay on track with your design and not make “extra” requests or unreasonable deadline demands in the middle of the job.

One of the GTA’s most respected renovation contractors — Brendan Charters, co-owner of award-winning Eurodale Developments — answers a few questions to offer advice about planning and executing a renovation.

Q: Is there ever a good time to get a reno done? A bad time?

A: It depends on what you’re looking to do.

Long gone are the days when contractors take the winter off. These days they’re too busy and the winters are milder.

Then, of course, there’s more condo work — which is indoors. Normally we’d try and get any poured concrete footings in before Christmas but you know these days it’s easier working in February outside because if there is precipitation its frozen, not liquid a better to deal with.

The best time is when the contractor you want has the time.

Q: RenoMark is a great place to look for the right contractor but they’re busy because they’re highly recommended. Do people panic and compromise on a choice of contractor, just to get it done?

A: It’s an issue. People may have bought a house to renovate and are still living in their old house and now they have two houses to carry, two insurances, two heating bills, two tax bills.

It’s very attractive when a contractor says, “I can start in two weeks or a month.” But you know those contractors who join RenoMark have taken the time, and spent the money, and invested in following the principles and guidelines of the association. It shows they take their business seriously and they’ll take your renovation seriously, too.

The other way is by due diligence. Are they licensed to do this type of work? Are they insured for the type of work? What have they done before? Check recent customers and even customers from 10 years ago. See if they’re still happy. And go to a site and talk to a customer. It’s one thing after the reno but when you’re in the throes of it, it’s different.

We all lean to price but sometimes price isn’t everything. The big question is, can you work with them? Because you’re going to be working with them for weeks, maybe a year and you want to be able to get along with them.

Q: Condos have become the biggest selling type of home in the GTA. Yet how do condo owners deal with the challenges of renovating, such as scheduling, timing, access and finding a contractor who will do a condo reno?

A: Some won't work on condos because of the challenges. We've done many and in fact we just won a BILD award for one of our condo renovations. It's tricky and you need to know the rules, not just the building code but the condo bylaws. Usually, you can only work 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday. Also you have to be aware of the sound transmission qualities of the materials you're using and make sure it complies. Still, when you look at value in condo renovation it's there. Compared to a downtown condo of 800 sq. ft., for the same investment we took a 3,000-sq.-ft. condo in Mississauga and completely redid it, taking it to two bedrooms from three.

And there's a ton of these large condos from the '80s boom around. I think there's a huge future in renovating these units to modern day tastes.

Q: We're always told that kitchens and bathrooms, in that order, give the most return on investment. But are there other renos that also deliver a real return?

A: Sure — we have basements! And the potential to upgrade and renovate that space is huge. You can dig down, underpin and put in an eight-foot ceiling, insulate and waterproof and turn a dark, damp mouldy environment into great living space with heated floors for either a rental, or nanny space, or guest bedroom, or office, or recreation area.

Q: What's the balance between renovating because you want to live in comfort and style vs. increasing your re-sale value?

A: This is a conversation you must have. If it's about return on investment, get a local real estate agent who knows the area to tell you how much your house would be worth if you sell after the renovation.

But if you're renovating to live there, then it doesn't really matter because if you live in a place 20 years or more it won't matter. You'll probably renovate again after 20 years because a lot of renovations are about what's fashionable.

If you're only going to stay five years then don't blow your budget on a big renovation.

Q: What's the biggest mistake people make in planning their reno?

A: The biggest mistake is that people focus on what they see in a renovation, and not enough on the home's systems. They don't apply enough of the budget to long-term issues like energy consumption and occupants' health. They'll spend on a high-end appliance but not insulate. But I tell people, you can always swap out an appliance later or change a countertop. If you have to rip out walls to go back and insulate, it's a lot harder and more expensive — so do it now. Concentrate on what we call the building envelope and the systems in the home for clean air.

Q: Why do some renos go horribly, horribly wrong.

A: From both the homeowner's perspective and the contractor's point of view, the big issue is managing expectations. When the contractor over-promises and under-delivers, a trust is broken. Homeowners have a role to play, as well. They have to be honest in their expectations around a real budget.

It's a relationship, and you need both parties to engage and to take it seriously. If the homeowner is unfairly set up over timelines and budget, then they will feel like they've been sold. Homeowners also need to be cognizant that the contractor needs decisions in a timely way to their job, so they have to make sure their side of the table is clear. They have to commit to working together.

Q: Clearly, planning is the most important thing in a reno — even before you choose a contractor. Do people leave enough time? Especially given that the City of Toronto building department is backed up and permits are being delayed.

A: I've seen it from one extreme to the other. I've had clients work for a year on their financing, and alternative living arrangements and designs, while others just want it done yesterday.

Six months of planning is the absolute minimum before you put a shovel in the ground or swing a hammer on the site. A year is better.

A year will give you a better choice in choosing a contractor because, if you go last minute and you find a contractor and he or she isn't busy, you should ask why they're not busy. Also, it's far better to work everything out on the drawings ahead of time rather than to say, 'Oh, yeah, we want to move this wall and open up this door.' Those are extras and they're going to cost you more.

Q: Budgeting is always a challenge. There's always going to be a surprise lurking behind a wall or in a supply chain somewhere. What's the best approach to budgeting?

A: Generally when you're working with houses built in the '40s, '50s, '60s, even '70s and '80s, you know what to expect. You know where you're going to find asbestos, and knob-and-tube wiring, because you know what systems they used when they were built.

There are always surprises, like find plumbing that isn't to code or something, so you want to have some contingency, say 15 per cent of your overall budget. For large jobs that could be \$20,000 or \$30,000 but you may never spend it.

The homeowner has to be able to stick to a budget, too. If they budgeted tiles at \$5 a square foot and then got up-sold at the store to \$15 a square foot — what does that do to the budget? So they need to have self control, as well.

Q: With the debate around the housing market — Is it a bubble? Will it burst? Or will immigration continue to drive sales? — some homeowners may be nervous about taking on a renovation only to discover the value of their home drops in a year or so from now. What are your thoughts?

A: Real estate is always a hot topic of discussion. We're obsessed with it. Without giving personal financial advice, it's pretty simple: Do only what you can afford. If you're borrowing, decide whether you can carry the cost if interest rates were to rise. Can you pay for it with cash — not under the table — but cash from your savings account or current account and not be as affected by interest rates?

Don't worry about whether your house is going to go up or down so much because you'll always need somewhere to live. As long as you don't overspend and can afford to carry the costs, you won't be forced to sell your house.