



Do It Right

Local contractor discusses the ins and outs of remodeling

By Julie Foster

Maybe you've had it with sharing the bathroom with two teenage sons. Or your tiny and ill-conceived foil wallpapered kitchen is stuck in the 1970s. The time has come to make some changes in your home, but you may be hesitant since you have no clue where to begin.

To get a better understanding of what's involved in remodeling, I recently attended a seminar on the subject hosted by Mills Builders, a local, family-owned business.

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Carol Schluntz, vice president of sales, and Jonathan Mills, president and production manager, discussed how to put together a remodeling team and how to obtain permits, and they talked about the bidding process and gave pointers on topics such as design considerations. The first thing I learned was how vital preliminary research is to the success of your project.

"It just really helps if you have your ducks in a row," said Schluntz.

Homeowners need to take the time for some serious planning and discussion before contacting a builder



This home was raised and moved back on the lot and a basement apartment was added



A second story was added to the back of this house

or architect. Sit down with your spouse or partner and other family members. Start by determining what it is you want to achieve. Is the goal more space? Or do you want a different style and more functionality?

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Schluntz suggested writing down your wants and needs and then prioritizing them. Think about quality versus quantity. Do you want the finest finish work you can afford, or does your growing family need a more utilitarian space rather than fancy cabinets? The key is finding a balance that suits your needs and budget.

Schluntz suggested using the numerous resources available to stimulate your imagination. The more you know what you want, the easier it is to communicate with a builder, designer or architect. Go to home shows. Look through design magazines and style books. Take advantage of Sacramento's many neighborhood home tours. All of these activities will bring your ideas into focus.

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After deciding what you want to accomplish, you can begin to think about financing your project. How much do you want to spend and how much will it cost?

“Some people get confused about budget and cost,” explains Schluntz.

A budget is how much is available to spend on the project. Your costs depend upon the type of finishes you want. You also need to determine how you’ll finance your project. Will a family member help out? Will a bank finance your project? Can you use savings?

Schluntz receives plenty of calls from people wanting a ballpark figure for costs per square foot to build in Sacramento. These figures can’t be determined in a quick phone conversation, said Schluntz: There are too many contingencies to allow her to provide an educated answer. A price per square foot to redo a kitchen is going to be higher than one for revamping a garage into an office space. Plus, there are other costs homeowners need to anticipate, including school fees, energy calculations, engineering and design fees and permits.

When does your remodel need to be completed? Schluntz noted that often homeowners want to remodel before an event like a graduation party or the arrival of a new baby. They must allot enough time for the design phase of the project, the permit process and finally construction. A year is not too long a time frame for a large project.

Choosing your contractor is sort of like choosing your marriage partner, according to Mills.



Mills Builders added a second floor to this home and a casita in the back



A second story was added to this East Sacramento home

“You need to be able to communicate well. The longer the process goes on, the more important this becomes,” he said.

So how do you find a contractor who will be a good fit? Mills suggested asking friends for recommendations. If there’s a home remodel in your neighborhood you admire, ask the homeowner who did the work. Homeowners can also check the Contractors State Licensing Board for a listing of contractors. Then ask questions.

How long has he or she been in business? What types of projects does he like to do? What are the payment arrangements? How many crews does the company have? What remedies are available if you’re not happy? Do you feel comfortable with him or her? Is this someone you want to work with?

“The contractor should be able to clearly and succinctly explain the entire process of your remodel,” said Mills. “If not, there is a problem.”

Some projects require an architect and designer. Other projects, such as a deck, outdoor living spaces, a trellis or leveling your house, generally only require a contractor. But if your project is large and complex, you probably need to work with an architect or designer. Find out whether an architectural firm specializes in residential or commercial work. Does the architect prefer to design interior or exterior spaces? Also consider what style you want and locate an architect who enjoys that type of work.

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