

Adventures in Renovation

By Anne Marie Males

Once upon a time, I thought I knew a great deal about renovation. After all, I had been writing about housing and renovations for more than a decade, had been married to a professional renovator for longer than that, and had a hands-on role in more than one renovation project, including many small ones (new kitchen, new bathroom) at our old house.



But none of this background work prepared me for the experience of going through a major renovation of my own.

Now you may be thinking that renovation must be a snap when you're married to a renovator, and sure, there are certain advantages. The principal one is that I didn't have to worry about the quality of work -- my husband's company, Northern Edge Construction, was the recipient of awards from the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association for best renovation, and I've seen plenty of finished jobs and met plenty of satisfied customers over the years.

But, like the shoemaker's children who were perpetually barefoot, our renovation always took a back seat to "real" jobs, and tradespeople who were scheduled to work on our house were always being sent elsewhere to make sure those jobs stayed on schedule.

Our adventure in renovation began with a phone call from a homebuilder/developer friend of mine, Craig Marshall, who had a piece of property adjacent to a church where he was going to build a collection of townhomes and single family homes. The only building on the site was an old Manse, which was no longer used as a Minister's residence, and was rented out. They had planned to tear the house down, but as the city would only allow them to build one additional townhome if they did, they were planning on keeping the house and using it as a sales centre. Craig was on his way over to see the inside of the house for the first time -- was I interested in tagging along?

In an act that may be viewed by some as the ultimate in impulse shopping, I agreed to buy that house right on the spot, and to this day I have absolutely no regrets. Bank managers, lawyers and other interested parties could be won over later, I was sure -- I knew this was the house for me, and I had no intention of letting it slip away.

The house in question was (I found out later) built in the 1920s, and is a text book example of an architectural style known as British Arts and Crafts. (In the United States, this style became known as Mission, and is usually marked by heavier, chunkier lines than its British counterpart.)

The good news was that nothing major had been done to the house since it was first built, aside from routine maintenance. The bad news was that nothing major had been done to the house since it was first built-- meaning all new wiring was necessary to replace the existing knob and tube, along with new plumbing, and new heating and new everything else.

The house was beautifully proportioned, with large principal rooms, and four good-sized bedrooms, but like all houses of this era it had two major flaws -- a tiny kitchen and an even tinier bathroom. Our primary goal was to renovate the house in a manner that was in keeping with the character of the home, without creating "a period piece." To do this, our plans called for the removal of the existing rear enclosed wooden porch, to be replaced with a two-storey addition, which included a larger kitchen on the main floor, a master bath and walk-in closet on the second, and a wine cellar in the basement.

A highly-talented architect was called in, and by the time the plans were finalized, they included the following: 420 square feet of new construction including a new kitchen and new master bathroom, a fully-finished basement with another bathroom, a second storey balcony off the master bedroom, a deck with hot tub, a wine cellar, a full second story (another 360 sq. ft.) added to the separate two-car garage, a remodelling of the existing bathroom, and work in each existing room, including refinishing the hardwood floors, stripping layers of



paint and wallpaper, and refinishing wood trim and panelling.

In the months it took to finish (well almost finish) our house, I learned a great deal about renovation from a layman's perspective, and, for what it's worth, I am passing on this knowledge to anyone who is considering a major renovation.

If at all possible, do not live in the house while it is being renovated.

Has the movie *The Money Pit* taught us nothing? I know circumstances and budgets may not make this possible, but if you are considering a major renovation, it's worth it. We were able to stagger our closing dates on the two houses so we could live in our old one for three months while the new one was being worked on, and the thousands of dollars this cost was money well spent. Talk to your friends -- those who describe renovation as "hell" invariably lived through it, while those who lived elsewhere describe the process as "fun" or "rewarding."

Do as much research as possible on your home.

If you own an older home, learn as much as you can about the architectural style. This will give you invaluable ideas in planning your renovation, and allow you to speak intelligently to designers and suppliers. For example, when I visited Turn of the Century Lighting in Toronto to find an antique fixture for the dining room, I was able to say with great authority that I was "looking for a fixture for typical British Arts and Crafts dining room with wood paneling," and they were able to recommend several right off the bat.

If you live in an older home, you may also be able to do some research on the home itself and the people who lived in it. In my case, this was relatively easy -- I started with a visit to the Scarborough Archives and a call to the church next door. By following up the leads these sources provided, I've found a list of all the Ministers who lived in the house over the years, I know who built the home, I've located old photos, and even interviewed a man who grew up in the house. I still have several leads to follow up on, but this process has already given me a real sense of history, knowledge of what the house used to look like, and a greater appreciation of my home.

Do not even attempt to act as your own general contractor.

You can take this advice with a grain of salt given my obvious conflict of interest, but I have now seen first hand that finding good trades, managing them and keeping a large renovation on time and on budget is a full-time job.

Simply put, there are good tradespeople and not so good tradespeople.

It took my husband over 10 years to assemble the trades he uses today. Because these guys are essentially freelancers, they go where the money is -- meaning a single small job is not nearly as important as the dozens of jobs a full-time general contractor may send their way, so his or her jobs take priority. A good general contractor can also effectively choreograph the different stages of the project, and the trades needed for each stage, and manage the personalities involved.



Budget more money than you think you'll need.

When you're renovating, you will invariably hear the phrase "while we're at it, we might as well....". This phrase is invariably followed by an idea that will cost you more money. In doing our own renovation we spent significantly more than originally budgeted, due to our own upgrading mid-process. Some of these changes were necessary (the wiring and plumbing was in worse shape than we thought, a fact that could only be determined once the walls were opened up) and some were simply cosmetic (stainless steel appliances instead of white, a granite countertop, upgraded cabinets, and gorgeous light fixtures I decided I couldn't live without.) Yes, we could have stayed on budget if we tried, but these changes made all the difference, and I don't regret a single one.



Professional advice is worth paying for.

About fifteen years ago, I purchased the world's ugliest couch. I don't know why I did this, except that I must have liked it at some point. Thriftiness has prevented me

from replacing this monstrosity, and for more than a decade I have been faced with couch-related regret. This time around, I was determined not to repeat my error, and decided I would hire an interior decorator to provide advice on my new living room. I spoke to several friends for recommendations, but finally found someone through a television program called The Decorating Challenge, which airs on Women's Television Network.

If you've never seen the show, it involves couples working with an interior decorator and a small budget to redo a room in a friend's house over one weekend. I really enjoyed the rooms created by one designer, Lynn Raitt, and, because of the show, I knew she could come up with beautiful and creative decorating solutions on a limited budget.

Finding a decorator you like and can work with is really a matter of personal taste and comfort. A few I spoke to did not seem that enthusiastic about my project, but an initial phone call to Lynn convinced me she was the right one. She knew a great deal about British Arts and Crafts, and suggested a few great ideas right there on the phone.

When working with a decorator, ask right up front how much they charge, and be honest about your budget and what you want to do. Like many decorators, Lynn charged a flat fee for the initial consultation, plus an hourly fee after that.

After the first visit, Lynn returned with several colour schemes, including carpet samples, wallpaper and paint chips. I absolutely adored the first one she presented, which involved wallpapering the ceiling, an idea that was unusual, but was in keeping with the spirit of the home. Her expertise was also invaluable in tying together the many pieces and styles of furniture I had collected at auctions over the years. And yes, with Lynn's help, I found a couch I love.

While some people may consider paying a decorator an extravagance, I know her professional advice and guidance saved me both time and money, and I would do it again in a second.

Delays are inevitable.



No matter how well the process is managed, certain delays are inevitable. Cabinets arrive not as ordered, tile goes out of stock, bad weather makes roofing impossible, and so on. A good contractor will discuss timing with you realistically, and give you a best and worst case scenario.

If you are doing a lot of work yourself, it will invariably take much longer than you predicted, too. I had stripped plenty of wallpaper in my day, and budgeted one weekend to get it all out of the bedrooms. How could I know it was, in some rooms, seven layers deep, with paint in between? This job would ultimately require several weekends and the help of several really good friends. Ditto refinishing the wood on the built-in bookcases and mantle, which resisted every known chemical stripper and finally required extensive hand sanding with steel wool.

Should you renovate or move?

Different people will give you different answers to that question, but in my opinion, if you like the house and the neighbourhood, you should definitely renovate. Today, we have a one-of-a-kind home that suites us to tee -- with unusual features you would never find in a newly built home. Talk to your friends, find a contractor you can work with, and create the home of your dreams -- it requires a certain amount of commitment, work and patience, but in the end, the results are well worth it.