

home **EDGE**


Hell's Kitchen

*How a dream renovation became a nightmare...
and how you can keep it from happening to you.*

By Mark Stewart

No home renovation project goes exactly as planned, regardless of how meticulously you've planned in advance. Deep down, most homeowners understand this. However, when a "home reno" jumps the tracks, it produces the kind of gnawing, roiling anger that can throw your entire life out of whack. I speak from experience. Last summer,

with the kids out of college, out of the house and out in the world being solid (and self-sufficient) citizens, we decided to pop for an entirely new kitchen.

The time was right. Although we had inherited a perfectly functional kitchen from a previous owner, it was what my wife liked to call "dated" the day we moved in. Two



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decades later, as the cupboard doors were falling off their hinges, she usually inserted an expletive in front of “dated.” Those hinges, by the way, were stamped Made in West Germany, so yeah, they were [expletive] dated. The upside of waiting so long was that we completely agreed on the optimal layout. We knew what we needed and didn’t need, and set a budget that reflected all of these sensible choices.

The final bill was about \$40,000, which is about what we budgeted. There was a fair amount of custom work and carpentry involved, but it’s not a huge space so we thought the price was reasonable. The cabinets and countertops were first-rate and we could not have been happier with the results. My wife really put a lot of research and legwork into these choices and was unflustered when the stone place sold our first counters out from under us by mistake. She didn’t even freak out



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when our kitchen contractor failed to count the number of cabinets until a couple of weeks after they had been delivered, only to find out that the manufacturer had forgotten to build one.

Less than 10 percent of our budget was dedicated to flooring. As luck would have it, flooring turned out to be 100 percent of the problem. We picked an installer who had an impeccable reputation. It was a family business that had been around for decades. The beloved father had given way to his daughter, who exuded the class and confidence you like to see in these situations. Her salesman came to the house and suggested a high-tech linoleum product that would give us the unusual floor design we wanted. It sounds icky, I know, but it was really cool (and not inexpensive).

We live in a century-old house on the side of a hill, so nothing is exactly straight. The kitchen floor has a bend



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A photograph of a dining room. In the center is a round, dark wood dining table with a white tablecloth. There are four white upholstered chairs with dark piping around the table. A large, ornate chandelier hangs from the ceiling. On the table, there is a bowl of fruit and a glass of milk. In the background, there is a white hutch with glass shelves holding various items like vases and dishes. The walls are white with framed pictures. The text "BRITISH HOME Emporium" is overlaid in a serif font. Below the table, there is a line of text: "Interior Design • Custom Woodwork • Fine Home Furnishings". At the bottom, there is contact information: "91 Main St., Madison, NJ 973.443.0303 BritishHomeEmporium.com Mon-Sat. 10-5pm" and social media icons for Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn.



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to it that reflects 100-plus years of settling. The previous owner, a roofing company executive whom we knew to be meticulous, had solved this problem when he re-did the kitchen during the Bush I administration. The cabinets may have been disintegrating in 2017, but the floor looked as good as the day it went in. We just weren't crazy about the look. As the salesman assured us that we had made a brilliant choice, I began to question whether he was thinking in two dimensions or three. Or whether he just said Yes to anything, collected his commission and then dumped the job on the workmen. No, he responded, this is a "floating" floor, so with some leveling in a couple of spots, it is actually an ideal choice.

The renovation timeline, from demolition to completion, was four weeks. We aren't stupid. We knew it would take longer. But our contractor and his carpentry crew, who

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did exceptional work, kept telling us this was a relatively simple, straightforward job. So of course, 24 hours after the flooring was installed, we knew something wasn't quite right. In several places, the seams that were supposed to fit snugly together were curling upward to such a degree that you could almost trip on them. Needless to say, the cabinets couldn't go in until this issue was addressed. Despite several conversations with the owner of the flooring company, she did not send anyone to look at the problem, nor did she make the 20-minute drive from her office to our house to evaluate the problem for herself—for more than six weeks from the day we first alerted her that something was obviously wrong.

As anyone who has lived through a kitchen reno knows, there is no part of your family routine that isn't completely disrupted during construction. We had a second

refrigerator in the basement, which was great, but our only cooking appliances were a toaster and a microwave, which we moved into the library. (Full disclosure, the "library" isn't as fancy as it sounds—it's a room with two bookshelves and we couldn't think of a better name for it). Meanwhile, a fine layer of dust settled on everything we owned.

Finally, the flooring company owner showed up. She rattled off a series of theories and excuses for why the material failed. Most of them sounded like they were our fault or the fault of someone who no longer worked for her. We countered each with the same question: Why didn't you come the day after we told you there was a problem? Her answer was that she had worked with this product for years and never had a problem. As the words crossed her lips, I could tell she wanted them all back. If

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AS SEEN ON TV

Home renovation shows come in all shapes, sizes and formats. As a group, they represent the most popular and profitable genre of television programming. HGTV leads the way in this category, airing *Fixer Upper*, *Flip or Flop*, *Ellen's Design Challenge*, *Brother vs. Brother* and *Property Brothers*—with a total of 15 million viewers. According to HGTV's on-air talent, these are five of the most common (and costly) home renovation mistakes:



HGTV

- Buying the cheapest materials
- Building a small bathroom
- Narrow hallways, doors and staircases
- Forgetting to upgrade electrical
- Hiring the wrong contractor

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that was the case, then you should have been here an hour after we called, not six weeks later. She sent in a crew to fix the problem but it was really too late. The cabinets had been installed around the trouble spots in the flooring, and within a few weeks of their “fix” the seams began to separate. There is no way to fix this and there is no way they will ever see the balance of the invoice they sent me after they walked out the door (without so much as an apology).

This was not our first brush with an unprofessional home improvement professional. We hired a local guy to do some much-needed re-shingling and lay a new roof over a large enclosed porch. This was in the fall of 2012. He disappeared after Sandy, the shingling unfinished and, within a year, the incomplete roofing job began leaking into our family room. Oh, and by “disappeared,” I mean he began working for my across-the-road neighbor, who had deeper pockets and more appealing indoor projects. Back in the mid-1990s, when we owned a house overlooking the Hudson River in Weehawken, we sprang for an addition in anticipation of our second baby. The contractor did fine work except for one thing: He was 5’2” and I am 6’2”. I still have marks on my head where I constantly banged it on the bay window he installed exactly 6’1” above the back entrance to the home.

I’ve had my issues with contractors on smaller jobs, including one who pocketed the money and then disappeared into the wind. And we’ve had some great people work for us, too. Each time we hire someone, I hop on the web and read about renovation nightmares and how to avoid them. Over the years, I’ve made my own list of do’s and don’t’s, which I am always willing to share and continuously update. They are as follows...

- If you use a referral service like HomeAdvisor.com, be aware that they send the job out to tradespeople within a huge radius of your home. You may be inundated with



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calls and have to explain your job more times to more people than it's worth. We recently had a tricky gutter repair (our roof has an unusual design) and I was shocked at how many people were willing to drive 90 minutes or more from all over the state for what was probably a \$500 job. What does that tell you? Either they are going to overcharge you to cover their travel time or, worse, they will "find" something more expensive to work on while they are there. Once when we lived in Hudson County, our local car repair place was caught on camera poking holes in engine hoses to create big problems where only little ones existed. My radar was up when the first guy said he'd drive down from Hackensack to Monmouth County to fix my gutter. Of course, he never showed. The next HomeAdvisor gutter guy came from Warren, couldn't solve the problem, did a temporary repair and asked to be paid in cash. I assume that was to avoid paying HomeAdvisor.com their cut. No more internet fix-it adventures for me!

- Make sure your contractor is licensed and insured. This sounds like a no-brainer but I've had people work for me who it turned out were not. This information should be on the estimate they give you. It should also be on the ad you first saw and even on their vehicle. If you use

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someone who is unlicensed, no one is going to help you go after them if something goes wrong. If you use someone who is uninsured, or who uses workers that are either off the books or undocumented, have a chat with your home insurance company to find out if you are covered should someone get hurt. Every contractor in New Jersey, by the way, is licensed in Trenton, so it's easy enough to check. It's also a good idea to run your contractors past the Better Business Bureau. If you are planning a big five- or six-figure job, it's not a bad idea to contact your attorney's office and ask if they can do a search for any lawsuits once you've narrowed your contractor choice to one or two.

- As a job evolves and the to-do list grows or changes, make sure everything new is written down and agreed to. A misunderstanding (or worse) resulting from a verbal agreement can be difficult to resolve. This is

especially true when the contractor or project manager speaks English as a second language. Some of the most skilled and affordable tradespeople you'll ever meet have mastered their craft but not the native tongue. If you ask for something specific and get a nod or a Yes, don't assume you've communicated clearly. We brought in a company for a big interior painting job and they did spectacular work. The only problem was that the person with whom I was dealing was Portuguese. So when we agreed on a price that included painting "all the woodwork," I was surprised when I was handed an extra bill for the six doors they painted. The doors are wood. Are they not woodwork?

- You set the payment schedule. Make it crystal clear that there will be "benchmarks" throughout the job where you'll be writing out checks, agree on what those are, and then say something like, "We'll get along great until

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you start asking us for money on things you haven’t completed.” If you feel you need to explain further, just say, “Sorry, but you are paying for the sins of the last guy who worked here. I hope you understand.” Believe me, the contractor will understand. On a six-figure job, there should actually be some kind of language in the contract stating that a portion of advance money will be placed in escrow.

- Although I’ve never done this, consider offering a “completion bonus.” A friend of mine promised 5 percent extra if the job was 100 percent complete and the workers were out of the house by a certain date—I think it was two weeks after the estimated finish date—and it worked! He said it was the best money he ever spent.
- Finally, don’t assume the “smallest” part of a renovation job won’t cause the biggest headache. Unfortunately, I learned this the hard way. **EDGE**