

# So you think you want to remodel?

SOME THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU START

8

STEPS TO GET YOU  
FROM IDEA TO  
CONSTRUCTION

**DBC**  **Remodeling &  
Construction**

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# 1

## STEP 1

### Decide why you want to remodel.

**S**tart your process by really thinking about the reason you want to do this.

What problem are you trying to solve?

Do you need more space?

Does your current space not flow well?

Or do you mainly want to change the look or style?

Figuring out what it is that bugs you the most...what it is that you really want to be different or fixed when you are done...that is a key step before you move forward with any kind of remodel. If you don't figure out what it is that makes you crazy or how you want the space to function, you won't be happy with the final product no matter how well the remodeler does his job.



## STEP 2

### Determine your budget.

**Y**ou need to know a ballpark of what you intend to spend and how you will finance it. If you have never remodeled before, a good rule of thumb is whatever you think it will cost, it's at least double.

House flipping TV shows are great for ideas, but horrible for budget. They have done a great disservice to regular people's expectations for how much remodeling should cost. Whatever world they get prices from, it is not located on this planet. ☺

For a more realistic view of prices, a great resource is Remodeling Magazine's annual listing of "Cost vs. Value." It is free to access online and you can look up expenses by specific areas of the country. Erie is not a target market, but nearby markets that will give you a ballpark would include Allentown, Youngstown, and Pittsburgh.

## Find someone you trust.

**F**ind a trustworthy remodeler or a trustworthy designer.

This is a “chicken or the egg” kind of question. Good remodeling requires good design....but good design is worthless without a good remodeler to execute it with excellence. Which you find first is totally your choice.

If you have connections for a great designer start there and ask who they love to work with as a remodeler. If you have a lead on a great remodeler, start there and ask them which designers they recommend. Either way – the important part is to start with someone you trust.

If you are starting completely from scratch, the best way to find someone trustworthy is to start by talking to friends. Just ask people you know who they have hired and what their experience was like. Cross-reference those good recommendations with Facebook, Google Reviews, and Angie’s list.

If you know a really trustworthy person in a related industry (such as electricians, plumbers, HVAC, lumber yards, etc) ask them who they like working with. Remodelers who pay their bills and treat sub-contractors well typically treat customers well too. Good reviews online will help give you perspective. Just like any other reviewing system, you might get one or two complainers who wouldn’t be happy no matter what the remodeler did...but if you see a pattern of bad reviews or a total lack of reviews, use caution.

Check with the local Builder’s Association to find out if they are a member in good standing. In PA, make sure the remodeler is registered with the Attorney General’s Office. All contractors are required by law to be registered with the AG’s office. If they are not registered, do not use them.

Initial contact with a remodeling contractor will often involve a meeting in your home where the contractor takes preliminary measurements, looks at your existing structure, takes some pictures for reference during estimating, and if you do not yet have a designer, refers you to the right kind of designer for the job you are considering. (ie, kitchen designer specialists vs. deck designer vs. sunroom designer) Spend this time getting to know your potential remodeler....do you like them? Do you trust them? Do you feel you can work with them?



### The Search

- ☐ Ask friends for recommendations
- ☐ Facebook recommendations
- ☐ Google Reviewss
- ☐ Angie's List
- ☐ Recommendations from related field
- ☐ Builder's Association
- ☐ Are they registered with the AG Office?





#### STEP 4

# 4 Get the space designed.

**S**top.

Do not proceed.

Do not continue.

Do not pass GO, do not collect \$200.

Do not move forward on your project  
at.  
all.

Until you have it designed. On paper.  
Not in your head.

Period.

Whether you start with a designer first or get referred by your remodeler to a designer, getting a good design down on paper next is KEY to your success.

Remodelers build things....they build them safely, strongly, meet or exceed code and build them to last. Good remodelers are experts at

understanding the underlying structure of your existing house and figuring out how to tie in, how to make transitions smooth, how to install products professionally and beautifully.

But they aren't designers.

A designer is an artist with training in function and flow of space. A good designer will determine your use, your style, ask you questions to help you think about all the aspects of the space that you might not even be considering, and then help you make decisions that you might not realize you even needed to make.

Have you ever seen a remodel that technically was done right....the walls are smooth, the floor is level, the structure is sound, the paint perfect and the seams tight....and yet the space isn't appealing and you just can't figure out why? Something just wasn't laid out well or planned well...something just doesn't function or flow right.

Cutting out the design step is the fastest way to waste money on a remodel you ultimately won't be happy with.



Another reason to get a design on paper is to make sure your estimate is accurate. A contractor can't accurately estimate the cost of a job if they don't know exactly what you want. And the reality is it is a waste of time to get any estimates before you have a design.

## **Getting estimates before you get a design on paper will end up being like comparing apples to oranges to pepperoni.**

There is no way to compare estimates if they are based on different or incomplete information.

If contractors are working with vague information or are unsure what you want in the end, there is no way to know what decisions they are making for the sake of the estimate that dramatically affect your price.

In non-construction terms, it's like asking 3 different men to fill a cart full of groceries for you at three different grocery stores so you can compare the costs. They are each filling the same space; one grocery cart. But if you didn't give them a list, you don't really know what they are deciding to fill it with.

Are they assuming you are eating normal or throwing a party?

Are they planning for you to eat rice and beans, or an organic vegetarian menu or fill the cart with steak? Or lobster?

Did they buy you generic peanut butter or Jif?

If you don't know what they are putting in the cart, knowing how much they tell you the cart costs doesn't really help you compare. There is no way to compare estimates unless you know exactly what is supposed to be in it. You have to start with a detailed design plan, the "grocery list", and then a contractor can accurately tell you how much that will cost for them to do.







The design process takes time.

Spend the time to get the design right. Make thoughtful choices and trust a good designer to lead you well. **Be honest** with your designer about your budget. Letting a designer run wild with picking high-end finishes and expensive design aspects doesn't help anyone if it prices the project completely out of your budget. So, tell your designer your ballpark budget and make sure your choices are realistic for your project.

Watch out for this common mistake: homeowners sometimes pick high-end finishes but want a "deal" on labor and installation.

This rarely turns out well.

An expensive set of cabinets installed at a "deal" by a "cheap" contractor who is inexperienced or cuts corners will not look expensive...it will look cheap. However, a less pricey set of cabinets and modest finishes chosen in good taste with the help of a designer and installed with excellence by a trustworthy contractor will look much more expensive than it actually was.

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**Expensive finishes  
and materials  
installed poorly will  
end up looking cheap.**

## STEP 5 Get an estimate.



Once you submit a final design to your contractor for an estimate, expect to wait 2-3 weeks for them to get back to you with the estimated price.

Good contractors are often very busy, especially during certain seasons. They are balancing ongoing jobs with estimating. They are also waiting on prices from the suppliers for the products you are choosing. Sometimes suppliers need 1-2 weeks to get back to the contractor with the materials price, which in turn the contractor needs in order to finish the estimate. Keep in mind anything out of the ordinary or custom ordered just plain takes more time to estimate and to get delivered. The more special or unique it is, the longer it will take to get.



Most contractors run a full schedule and are scheduling jobs 6-10 weeks out from contract signing.

If a company seems too eager or too available (as in, “pick us, we are available tomorrow”), you should probably ask why. Sometimes unexpected things happen to create holes in any company’s schedule, but sometimes being very “open” is a red flag that a company might not be reliable.

Also know that there is a 6 week or more lead time on many of the materials you as a customer are going to order, such as sinks, tub surrounds, tile, and flooring. Even if your contractor is “available tomorrow” your new sink won’t be.

Expect to meet with your estimator to review the estimate in person.

The details in an estimate can be overwhelming, and it doesn’t help the customer or the contractor for all the information to be dumped via email. Best practice is for the estimator who put the estimate together to sit down with the client to deliver the estimate, answer questions, and discuss the project in detail now that an accurate dollar amount is attached to it.

If the budget expectations and the estimate line up and the customer is satisfied with the contractor, the contract can be signed on the spot.

When an estimate and client budget do not match up, often the estimator can immediately discuss with the client what aspects of the job cost the most and where there are opportunities to scale back or change scope if the budget requires it.

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**Be aware: estimates have an expiration date. Supply prices change. A hurricane or flood in another part of the country dramatically changes the price of lumber or other supplies here.**

Be aware: estimates have an “expiration date.” A hurricane or flood in another part of the country or world dramatically changes the price of lumber or other supplies here. Material prices and supply issues will significantly affect your estimate. The exact same job estimated at different times, even by the same contractor, will often come in at very different price points based on the cost of supplies and the internal changes of the remodeling business.

Also make sure you understand “allowances” as shown in your estimate. If you have not picked out your specific finish materials (ie the tile, the sink, the fixtures, etc) the only way a contractor can give you an estimate is to put an “average” price in the estimate as an “allowance.” This is the contractor’s way of giving you an estimate without those choices being made yet. The contractor is picking a price in the middle, but depending on your taste, the price might seem low or high. The “allowance” dollar amount verses what the final price ends up being rests in your hands. It will ultimately change based on your finish choices for each of those items. It means if you pick something cheaper, you save money...but if you pick something more expensive, your ultimate price will be higher than the estimate.





## STEP 6 Sign a contract.

# 6

**A**lways.

Always.

Always sign a contract.

By law in PA, any job over \$1,000 requires a contract. It doesn't matter if it is family, friends, or strangers, you have to sign a contract and the contract is required by the Attorney General's office to have certain pieces in it. If you have a contractor willing to skip the contract, be concerned. *(\*\*My own grandma had to sign a contract when my company remodeled her kitchen.\*\*)*

Most contracts will be between 10-20 pages, will include an actual start and end date, and several other required parts that tell you about your rights and protections by law.

It is very normal for a contractor to be scheduling jobs 8-10 weeks out from contract signing. Keep this in mind if you need a job done by a certain time, you need to plan sufficient time to follow all the above steps and complete contract signing more than 8 weeks before your desired finish date.

The contract also lays out how the contractor will collect payment. Pennsylvania State law allows a contractor to collect up to 30% of the job up front to cover material costs and other expenses, but the amount each contractor chooses to collect up front can widely vary and could be any amount from 1%-30%.

The contract will also spell out how the progress payments, or draws, will be expected as the construction gets underway. Most contracts require final payment immediately upon completion of the job. Unlike credit card payments or utility bills, contractors do not operate on a 30-day payment plan. It is very normal and expected for contractors to require final payment immediately upon job completion.

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**Any job over \$1,000 requires a contract by law. My own grandma had to sign a contract when I remodeled her kitchen. Always sign a contract.**



## STEP 7

# Pre-Construction Phase.

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**P**rior to the project start day your contractor should be in communication with you about preparation steps.

Each company has its own policies and procedures for this step. Our company sends out a pre-construction checklist with reminders such as removing all the photos and decorations from walls that will be worked on, protecting sensitive materials from drywall dust, and creating space in your garage for the materials such as tile, flooring and fixtures that will be delivered by your suppliers for the job.

You should prepare yourself as well as your home for the remodel. Construction, even when done exceptionally well, is inconvenient while it's happening. It can be hard both physically and emotionally as you go through the process, the mess, and the added people in your home. Good contractors help you prepare as much as possible, as well as contain the debris and dust as much as possible. Appropriate expectations and preparation will greatly diminish the stress of remodeling.

Setting communication expectations is an important part of the pre-construction phase. As the start of your job nears, your contractor should be in contact, explain what is happening, and set up expectations for how often and by what means they will be updating you and how you can reach them with questions and concerns that arise.

## It's kinda like a wedding.

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Clients can feel nervous, overwhelmed and unsure about what is happening during a remodeling project. At DBC, we try to remember that while this is one of hundreds of similar jobs we have done, this might be the first major remodel you as a client have ever gone thru.

Much like being a caterer or photographer at a wedding, we want you to know we do this every day, and at the same time be sensitive to the fact that you don't. We want to set your mind at ease that you can trust we are skilled and practiced at what we do, while at the same time never losing sight that this process is unfamiliar to you and we can't take for granted you know what happens next. We make it a priority to communicate frequently and do our best to ease your concerns and fears as we go through the project together.



# 8

STEP 8

## Construction Begins.

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You made it!

CONTACT US:

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## Treat everyone well.

At DBC we believe that everyone deserves to be treated well. Foremost we treat our customers and their family members with the utmost respect. We treat our coworkers well. We treat our subcontractors well. We treat our material suppliers well. We treat our delivery drivers well. Why do we do this? Because when everyone feels respected everyone recognizes their value and puts their best effort toward the project.

# Everyone.

## Keep everything clean.

It is our belief that everything needs to be clean. Construction can be messy, but we believe in doing everything we can to contain the debris and clean it up before we leave. Our passion for keeping everything clean goes beyond just the dust of the job site. We also believe that it is vital that we keep our appearance clean and that we keep our language clean as well. Why? Because our customers are important and they have children, family, neighbors and friends who do not need to be afraid that a worker's appearance or language will be offensive.

# Everything.

# Everytime.

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## Excel every time.

We believe that doing the basics of construction is not enough. We strive to excel every time. We want to utilize the best products and the best practices and work hard to do so. Why? Because we want our customers to be able to sleep at night knowing that what they can't see is as excellent as what they can. We want to sleep at night knowing that we have installed quality products with excellence and care. We also want our customers to look forward to working with us again and again.

