

Remodeling Myths: Do-it-Yourself?

If you read home improvement books and magazines, you are familiar with the 'do-it-yourself' concept. Homeowners are advised -- on the basis of a single article -- to take on any task, regardless of the scope and complexity of the project, rather than hire a professional. The premise of do-it-yourself (or DIY) reasoning has almost universal appeal, namely, that homeowners will save a load of money by not using a contractor.

In fact, the do-it-yourself approach makes some measure of sense. However, the books and magazine articles promoting DIY as a cost-saving alternative often fail to make a true financial comparison between that option and the cost of a professional contractor. The authors of such articles conveniently forget to factor in the cost of a homeowner's time to manage and/or do the work, as well as the consequent loss of time spent with family, in leisure activities, or even at work, as they promote a do-it-yourself project.

Certainly, there are some home improvement or maintenance projects that are appropriate for a homeowner with some level of skill and knowledge. Examples of such projects include replacing a light fixture or door knob, repainting a bedroom, or even swapping out a toilet or faucet, among other tasks.

But when it comes to significant residential remodeling work, whether redoing a kitchen or adding a room or deck, very few homeowners have the requisite skills and time. Furthermore, the average amateur has no clout with specialty trade contractors and materials suppliers and cannot therefore negotiate the best pricing and scheduling.

This is not to say that homeowners have no role in the remodeling process. For instance, it is up to the homeowner to establish a budget for the project based on what they can afford to spend, to evaluate and select the best contractor for the job, to educate themselves about the type of project they want and how it gets built, to ask questions and demand satisfactory answers throughout the project, and to make sure expectations for quality, cost, and time are communicated and met.

This 'Decide-it-Yourself' approach is a much more effective and appropriate use of a homeowner's time and skills than the 'do-it-yourself' method. Even if the amateur manages the initial design and working drawings, he is likely to come to grief in building codes and permitting issues, even before starting work with subcontractors. Rather than trying to manage every detail of a remodeling project, 'Decide-it-Yourself' homeowners entrust a professional remodeler to shepherd the project on their behalf and to their expectations.

In addition to their management skills, professional remodeling contractors offer other benefits, such as a wealth of experience with similar projects and the craftsmanship to perform a given task or the ability to supervise the performance of a specialist's work. Remodelers understand how all of the pieces go together, from the proper scheduling of successive trade contractors and building inspectors to the knowledgeable connection of a framed wall section to the foundation, to the roof, and to the existing home. These are skills the professional has honed over several years of training and experience, just as anyone who works in any job or career learns the specific tools of her trade.

So, should you do it yourself? The answer comes down to this: do you truly have the skills and time to commit to the entire process of making your project a reality? Every professional remodeler can tell stories of desperate homeowners who needed to be bailed out of do-it-yourself projects that have gone terribly wrong. For all but the most skilled, hiring a professional may be the best way to stay within a budget for time and money, and the best way to achieve a happy outcome.