

“Salvation”

Must Read Guidelines for the Remodeler/Home Builder

A book within a book

To create my dream house I both remodeled an existing home and constructed a significant new addition. I took away many lessons that apply to both experiences. When I began, I had no resources or no book I could consult. I learned every lesson the hard, and usually, the expensive way.

These lessons/ideas can save you money, grief and time. They can make the process, if not exactly enjoyable, then at least not miserable. You will be able to check the quality of construction and hopefully recognize mistakes when you see them. Follow these lessons and you will end up with a better house. Even if you have no previous experience in construction or remodeling, these can be enormously useful. I don't pretend I learned every lesson, but it's a handy collection.

Many of these apply to new construction. You can have a superior end product if you wipe the stardust from your eyes right from the beginning. Even before you begin you can save yourself a great deal of time, money and heartache with proper planning. So set your dreams aside, those rose-colored glasses, and look at this as a business venture, which it primarily is. This approach and proper planning will help you avoid many pitfalls and can greatly reduce the construction costs that come from ongoing changes during the construction phase.

In my experience the key to proper planning is to constantly remind yourself that some day you will sell this house. This runs contrary to

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what most new buyers are thinking. They are focused on what they want, or what they can get for the price they can pay in an area where they want to live. There's some thought given to eventual resale, but not nearly enough, in my view. This is especially the case when you are having a house built.

What will houses be like ten years from now? What will people want them to be? While ten years may seem a little far off to worry about now, today's smart homeowners will want to stay informed. The main reason to do so, is that the house you own today may no longer fit your needs tomorrow, perhaps simply because there might be one (or two!) new family members.

No matter what an owner may intend, statistics show that the average person moves once every six years. A house therefore must be regarded as an investment, not just simply as a home, with one eye on the real estate market. Contractors and homeowners alike would prefer to believe that every dollar spent on a house automatically adds to the value of that house. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Different projects will recoup back different sums. For example: a \$50,000 pool addition may add only \$20,000 of value.

So you should consider what the next buyer would want. What will they expect? A few hundred or thousand dollars spent planning at the beginning during the construction of your house can reap you ten times that amount on resale. This is not a time to be overly cost conscious or shortsighted.

What is a good value in home remodeling? For most, it's the best quality at the cheapest price, period. But the fact is, there's a lot more you need to consider:

The Product – Cost at time of purchase – Long-term performance – Maintenance – Health Effects – Green product (environmentally friendly)

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The Work – Functional layout – Attractive – Skillful craftsmanship – Code approved.

At least four more factors should be added: - The location – The property – The neighborhood (don't over improve your house compared to nearby houses) – Demand (subject to uncontrollable circumstances, like ongoing and upcoming trends, economy, supply, etc.)

Be certain that you have a proper floor plan; not something bizarre, but one you can live with. Some of the new computer programs (CAD) such as the one I used can greatly assist you in “seeing” how the finished product will look. Such a program will also let you make changes and see the result.

GENERAL DESIGN & LAYOUT

- Airy bright rooms (particularly kitchen, bathrooms and family rooms)
- Kitchen, dining room and family room visually open (now being labeled as kitchen/eat-in/family space)
- Large master bath
- Home Office
- Guest room
- Media room
- Exercise room
- “Play room”
- Skylights
- “Super Organized” walk in closets
- Glass blocks
- Fireplaces

- Three-car garage (also well organized)
- Window walls (windows, windows and more windows)
- Bigger laundry room with plenty of counter space and “a place where the ironing board can stay up all the time.”
- Vaulted ceilings and exposed beams
- Curved walls and archways
- Phone/Computer/Internet/Cable jacks in every room
- Wood floors

KITCHEN

- Mini office workspace (equipped with computer)
- Islands
- Walk-in pantry

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- Double sinks
- Stainless steel or restaurant grade appliances
- Ceramic, granite or tumbled marble counter tops and backsplash
- Earth tones ceramic or Mexican tiles flooring
- Wood floors.

BATHROOM

- Larger much brighter (with the help of skylights and/or large architectural window and/or glass blocks)
- Separate tub and shower
- Double bowls vanities
- Jetted tubs for two
- Custom tiled walk-in shower with built-in bench
- Earth tones and/or tumbled marble tiles
- Heated Floors.

MASTER BEDROOM

- Slightly smaller to accommodate his-and-hers larger closets and dressing areas
- Parlor
- Separate sitting room with TV and/or workspace
- Fireplace

- The latest trend: “The Morning Bar”.

EXTERIOR

- Stucco, stone, brick or cedar siding or shakes
- Architectural shingles, fiber cement, tile or slate roofing
- Redwood or cedar decks
- Tree fencing.

ELECTRICAL

- Home automation
- Halogen recessed lighting & track lighting
- Commercial ceiling fans
- “Decora” style switches, dimmers, outlets and jacks
- Solar powered exterior lighting.

MECHANICAL

- Earth coupling heating and cooling pump
- Central heating & cooling
- Heated floors
- Central vacuum
- Central Alarm

FRAMING

- Engineered wood products
- Steel framing

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Owners of newly built or remodeled homes are always expressing regret that they did not do something in the beginning when it was much less costly, or even possible. Media and power outlets always seem to be in the wrong place, or worse, there simply aren't enough of them. So examine each room critically. Don't just envision how you intend to use them initially; consider to what other ways you can use them, and what other uses a prospective buyer might desire.

What's Out:

For different reasons the following items, or even rooms, are poor investments:

- Wall to wall carpet
- Vinyl tiles
- Vinyl sheet ("linoleum")
- Wallpaper
- Paneling
- Flush hollow core doors
- Storm windows and doors
- Through the windows air conditioners
- Ceiling tiles
- Suspended ceilings
- Marble countertops
- "Solid surface" countertops

When it comes time to remodel, if you have all the right "ingredients", you're not going to spend a single dollar; you'll be investing it.

Your house is your most valuable asset; treat it right and it will become your best investment. And even if you end up not ever selling your home, you will still make a good investment: in your family's quality of life now!

Which professional will I work with?

Unlike your accountant or stockbroker, your contractor may be a part of your daily life. He will know how you look early in the morning and how well you've trained your dog. It makes sense that you should take some time to carefully select someone you can trust.

Remodeling is notoriously known as being a "dusty, dirty, over

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budget, over time, let your dog out, catch you in your underwear” kind of business. But it can be a fun experience when you choose a remodeling contractor who is experienced, reliable, and trustworthy. You get to create your dream room or dream home and learn a little about design and building along the way. All you need to do is to ask questions ; questions that many remodelers don’t feel that they are asking enough. So tap into your curiosity and ask away.

Ask the right questions.

Depending upon the scope and size of your project, choose questions that are relevant and important to you in order to make an informed decision. Remember, you’re the boss and your goal is to find the best match and candidate for your home improvement project. Recommended questions are:

1. How long have you been in the business?
2. Can you provide me with a list of references of jobs you’ve completed similar to mine?
3. What percentage of your business is repeat business?
4. Have you done work in my area before?
5. How many other jobs will you be working on simultaneously with mine?
6. When are you available to start my project, and how long do you estimate it will take?
7. Is the business a corporation or a sole proprietorship? Who are the principals?
8. Where is their office located?
9. Have you ever had any disciplinary action filed against you by any state or local agency or a homeowner? Why and how was it resolved?
10. Do you have any open legal actions pending? Have you had any since being in business?

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11. Have you ever done business under a different name in my state or any other?
12. Have you ever declared bankruptcy?
13. Do you have employees, subcontractors or both?
14. How long have your employees/subcontractors been working for you?
15. Do you carry Workman's Compensation Insurance?
16. How often do you communicate with customers as the job is progressing?
17. Will I be assigned a project manager? Who fills in for them when they are not available?
18. Have your employees been certified in remodeling?
19. How often would I be able to walk through the job? How much notice would you need?
20. What is your approach to problem solving and resolving complaints regarding workers, materials, and workmanship?
21. What is your approach to cleaning the job site daily and at the end of major stages of work?
22. What safety issues do you consider when leaving the job at the end of the day?
23. Do you keep track of weather changes in order to protect the structure?
24. If I have pets/children, what is your approach for keeping them safe?
25. How much time will you spend on my job each week, either on site or in planning?

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Pay attention to the answers.

Make sure you pay close attention to the remodeling contractor's response and reaction to your questions. Ethical remodeling contractors will be open to answering your queries as it helps clarify both parties' positions. This is your money, your investment; don't hand it over blindly.

Verify all the information.

Take the time to verify the remodeling contractor's answers to your questions, such as license status, any disciplinary action, insurance coverage, credit standing with the Registrar of Contractors and Better Business Bureau, their lien history with the county, and court records for lawsuits.

When a group of remodeling contractors was asked what questions homeowners asked most frequently, the group unanimously agreed that their most popular queries were basic questions about timing and costs. Unfortunately, these are not the type of questions that are going to tell you much about a particular remodeling contractor. While a reasonable timetable and budget is important, it shouldn't be the primary focus of an interview or job. You should also focus on trust and quality.

It's also important to realize that sometime it's not the answers you get that are significant, but what you don't get. Asking the right questions is not enough. You need to pay attention to your instincts and to what information is missing.

Avoid remodelers that demonstrate any of these signs:

- If they can't verify the name, address, telephone or credentials of the remodeler.
- If the salesperson tries to pressure you into signing a contract.
- If the company or salesperson says your home will be used for advertising purposes so you will be given a "special, low rate."
- If the builder/remodeler tells you a special price is available only if

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you sign the contract “today.”

- If no references are furnished.
- If information you receive from the remodeling contractor is out of date or no longer valid.
- If they are unable to verify the license or insurance information.
- If you are asked to pay for the entire job in advance, or to pay in cash or to pay any large sums ahead of progress on your project.
- If the company is not licensed with the Registrar of Contractors, cannot be found in the telephone book, and is not listed with the local trade association, such as NARI.
- If the remodeling contractor does not have an established office, written procedure, and an experienced staff that are necessary to successfully complete your project.

Be cautious when:

- You are given vague or reluctant answers.
- The remodeling contractor exhibits poor communicative skills or descriptive powers.
- The remodeling contractor is not accessible.
- Your questions are not answered to your satisfaction.
- The remodeling contractor is impatient and does not listen.
- The remodeling contractor does not walk you through their process step-by step.
- Only the work is addressed, instead of your needs as a homeowner.
- You are not told about some of the difficulties and frustrations that you will encounter during a remodeling project.
- The remodeling contractor is not capable of assisting with design, project specifications, construction document preparation, and permitting.

Finding the right contractor – the artist who will carve your dream into

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reality – is a real challenge. It requires research, interviewing, negotiation, and yards of documentation. The fact is there's an art to finding your artist. And you need to be patient during the process. But most of all you need to be knowledgeable.

To help you find a reliable, modern master, and not a fastbuck artist, I make the following suggestions:

Seek out those who know the best contractors/remodelers

Get contractor recommendations from architects, building inspectors, bank mortgage officers, your town's newspaper real estate editor, and from friends and relatives who have recently remodeled. Obtaining at least three sources is strongly suggested.

Ask to see samples of the their work

Sit down with each candidate, in your home, and discuss your project. If you've sketched a plan, present it. Share information about your tastes and life-style, and talk in general about your remodeling ideas. Ask to see a photo portfolio showing examples of work that the contractor has done. Proud parents photograph their babies; so do proud contractors. The best contractors will show their portfolio without being asked.

What picture does their reputation paint?

Find out as much as you can about each contractor's credentials. Although this will take some time and leg work, both will pay off. Good contractors get fan mail. Ask your candidates for theirs. Narrow your list of choices down by asking them to submit proposals. Along with the proposals, request both liability and workers compensation insurance certificates. In evaluating their plans look for top quality materials that assure long-term performance. Last but not least, ask yourself whether each candidate is someone you'd really enjoy working with. (That's a part I overlooked.) Then make your decision.

Understand every stroke of the contract

Study this document as if your entire project depends on it; because it does. Study the financial details carefully. Pay special attention to total price, payment schedule, and any penalties that may be brought against you. The contract should describe every part of the job, including the start date, product specifications (brand model, color, quantity, size), warranties, workmanship, and a completion date. It should also make provisions for changes during the construction, uncontrollable delays and clean up. A contract legally seals the deal, so only sign and complete an acceptable contract. You should add a penalty provision for the contractor if he doesn't finish on time. The contractor is responsible for obtaining all the building permits and for meeting all building codes and ordinances. Separate permits may be required for electrical, heating and plumbing work. The contractor is also responsible for calling the building department and scheduling periodic inspections. This is crucial because inspectors usually have absolute authority to order work dismantled if it's not done to code or without permit.

Sometimes the true test of a contractor comes not during the construction of your home improvement, but after. You should know that true professional contractors stand behind their work – when their crew is on site and when their work is finished. Dependable, reputable contractors will usually write their post construction responsibilities and assurances into their contract. You should make sure that the contractor's position and the matters are understandable and clearly spelled out before you sign the contract.

By following the suggestions on this page you will establish a solid professional relationship with your contractor. And, if you're like most proud remodelers, the end result of this relationship will also be well documented: within your family photo album.

So expect to work with several professionals in various areas of your project during the planning stages before finding the right one. You will

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almost certainly want one expert to look at the work of another because you aren't educated or experienced in that area and it's the only sure way you have of knowing if what you have is what you want or need. You don't buy the first car you looked at (at least you shouldn't), and you don't marry the first man or woman you date, so you should feel no reluctance to discard professionals as you seek the right one. Remember that you are in an educational phase at the very beginning, and though you remain there throughout the project, initially it is most crucial. Picking the brains of people who do this for a living is part of that process.

This isn't something you should feel bad about: They expect you to do this. Just as a car salesman laughs all the way to the bank at the customer who buys the first car he sees and pays full price, an architect, general contractor, interior designer or home entertainment specialist will respond in much the same way if you don't double-check what they recommend. Remember, it's your money; they work for you. It isn't your responsibility to make things easy for them.

Listen to your house and spouse!

The concept of a Tabula Rasa – a blank slate – is usually associated with philosophy or psychology, but it's a useful concept in thinking about dwelling places and building or renovating them.

At the very beginning of the process go house buying. Not really, of course, but the idea is to visit the kind of houses you intend for your remodeled or newly built house.

When you buy a new house you're getting a partial blank slate; you

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choose from models offered by a particular builder, and from a series of finishes the company offers. You can get a blank slate by having a home designed by an architect, but your site will always affect the design.

When you buy an old house, the slate has been scribbled on and erased many times. You can erase it or erase some of it, but you're going to have some historical baggage. I keep harping on this point because in every single rehab, to some extent it is the house that will be telling you what you can do.

There's no place this is more prevalent or more important than in determining how and where the new systems will be installed. There is a standard sequence in the industry for how this should be done. The Big Three Contractors – heating ventilating – air conditioning, plumbing and electrical – the first one to get to work is the HVAC contractor. There are two reasons for this: One is because ductwork is the hardest thing to conform to a given space, and because of that, it is the first thing that has to be considered in the planning stage. Typically you would want your supply registers near exterior walls and particularly near windows. The return air vent should be centrally located in the house and the thermostat should be near the return air vent.

You will probably need chases (enclosed vertical boxes) and bulkheads (enclosed horizontal boxes) to conceal ductwork. In most houses you will have to run a trunk line to the basement equipment down at least one side. The smaller supply lines can cross the room in the ceiling between the joists. How these lines are placed can have a significant influence on the design of the space. For example if you have a chase at one end of a wall, you may want to put an identical fake chase on the other end and put an entertainment center and/or bookshelves between them to disguise the real chase.

Once the ducts are in place, the next step is plumbing. While water lines can run almost anywhere, drain lines, like ducts, may be difficult to configure, partly due to the stricture of building codes. The hardest thing

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to place will be the 3-and 4-inch sewer pipes and vents. All open drains must have taps in them to prevent sewer gas from entering the dwelling, and all pipes must drop at least $\frac{1}{4}$ inch per foot run. Allowing for the drop, and maybe for the trap, will sometimes require a lowered ceiling or a bulkhead in the room below. The plumbing and ductwork must be coordinated with each other before work is begun to avoid problems. Otherwise, without fail, the duct man will install his duct right where the sewer line has to go – or the plumber will put the sewer line where the duct needs to be.

Electricians have the most flexibility. They can work around almost anything. However, you still need to include them in the planning stages to avoid conflicts. Say you're planning to have some recessed lighting in the kitchen below a bathroom. You need to know that it probably won't fit in the same framed bay as the ductwork or the sewer pipes. So you may need to rethink the layout of one room or the other to get your recessed lighting where you want it. When you are planning the bulkheads and chase for the ductwork, keep the plumbing and electric in mind. They will both need a way to get to the basement into the existing service connections.

Eye Toward the Future

1. Evaluate your lifestyle to help you find out what features you want.
2. Don't just work with your contractor/interior designer/architect – develop a relationship with them.
3. Use colors and materials that match your site – try to give your home a sense of history – that it has been there along time.
4. Don't date your project – chose features that are timeless
5. Think of a resort and a dream that your home is one also – a place where you can unwind, enjoy the amenities and your family.

The future of home design may include larger guest quarters – two or

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more bedroom guest quarters will become the norm. I believe homes will do as I did and use real stones not faux. Homes of the future will have estate look-well groomed and meticulous landscaped common areas. These homes will have grand game rooms filled with the latest games, fitness and entertainment features available. In addition, these future designs will have large outdoor pavilions fitted like indoor kitchens – gone will be the stand alone barbeque.

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But the time may be right to take a look at our attitudes toward buying or building ever-larger homes.

A number of architects and authors across the country have been exploring over the last couple of years the idea that the small home can offer many advantages to living—and doesn't necessarily mean living in a sandbox.

There's nothing wrong with a big house if you can afford it. Real estate brokers are fond of reminding us that a house is, for most Americans, their single largest investment. But it is also their single largest expense.

With low-interest mortgage, you can get “more house for the money.” But you also get higher insurance premiums, higher property taxes, higher utility bills and higher maintenance costs, ongoing expenses that are bound to escalate in the future.

The simple fact is, a less-than-large home is more energy efficient, cheaper to furnish easier to keep clean, and less expensive to operate, insure and maintain—even if it costs the same to buy or build as a big house. The difference is, if you spend less on the extraneous space, you'll have more to spend on architectural details, beautiful materials, high quality furnishings and comforting extras – elements that make life easier and richer.

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Monumental houses discourage thrift and encourage extravagance. We feel compelled to fill them up, not just with the essentials, but the gadgets and gizmos and well, stuff, if there's room for it. A smaller home is far less demanding. It encourages you to be selective about the things you live with and can demand more simple living.

A large house is wasteful in even more fundamental ways. Even if you can afford a 5,000 square-foot house, a home half the size could actually give you more space in which to live. Sometimes in large homes, hallways can account for up to 20 percent of the square footage. At a typical construction cost of \$100 per square foot, the hallways alone in a room and formal living room, space that are seldom occupied but for which you are paying out hard-earned dollars every single day of the year.

The fact is, we haven't outgrown our houses. Our houses have outgrown us. In the past years, the average size of new homes has ballooned from 1,400 square feet to 2,000 square feet; despite that the average family size has shrunk from 3.6 to 2.7 people. But in new middle-class housing developments throughout the land, even larger homes, in the 2,500 to 5,000- square foot range, are now typical.

Take your pick of explanations for this: a thriving economy and seductive interest rates, social climbing, status seeking or blind allegiance to bigger-is-better thinking. What we may need are not bigger homes that complicate our lives with debt and duty, burden and bondage, but smaller homes that coddle us, enrich us, give us sanctuary, emotional and spiritual comfort, along with peace of mind. Search your soul.

Some elements seem to be universal icons of homeliness that can make a modest home live large: an open floor plan, a window seat, a screened porch, a fireplace, attractive natural materials, outdoor living spaces and objects that reflect personal passions and attitudes.

An open floor plan that combines kitchen, dining and living spaces caters to casual lifestyles. It requires less space, not more, because you eliminate the formal dining and living rooms. That alone could save

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up to, say, 500 square feet or, at \$100 a square foot, up to \$50,000. It won't seem smaller than three individual rooms because there won't be any interior walls to block long-distance views, nor does it have to feel as cavernous as an airplane hanger.

This casual, multipurpose space is where people can gather, mingle, move about, interact and participate in the rituals of cooking and dining and relaxing. That wouldn't be possible if there were three distinct rooms with walls.

You can design an inviting peaked window seat. With windows on three sides, it's a perfect perch for bird watching, reading or meditating.

It's like a place where somebody can go outside, without going outside. It's a personal retreat and refuge within a large room, very cozy and almost childlike.

Because smaller houses should have an abundance of windows to blur the distinction between indoors and out, maybe forget the glass-enclosed sunroom and choose instead the breezy charms of a screened-in porch.

Change your mind and you can change your life, the gurus tell us. Whether you're building or buying, think about your preconceptions and priorities:

- Going smaller is not about sacrifice. It's making thoughtful decisions about what you really need to be happy.
- Be willing to discard old notions about bigger is better. The bigger the house the bigger the burden. Simplify your life rather than complicate it.
- Get some prospective. There are people living in hurricane-ravaged Honduras and Ecuador—or in an alley downtown—who would be glad to call home the big box your refrigerator came in. Now, is a bigger house a necessity or an extravagance?
- Develop an attitude of gratitude for what you already have: a roof over your head, walls to keep you safe and warm, central heat, indoor plumbing, furniture to comfort you, a kitchen to nourish

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you and electric lights. You have what you need. Now be careful what you wish for.

A house that favors quality of design over quantity of space satisfies people far more than... those characteristics in reverse.

If you are having a house built for you by a large homebuilder, consider paying for all or some of your own upgrades. This gets a bit involved, and frankly you will be lied to a lot when the builder claims he can't do it, but the idea is to find out how much something will cost you after the house is built rather than have the builder do it during construction at a higher price. You will need to pay for these upgrades out of pocket since you can't include them in the mortgage, but they may be much less expensive and often of higher quality.

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For example, say you want expensive tile. You tell the builder you don't want the cheap carpet installed because you only plan to take it right out. As a result, you want a credit for the carpet since the builder isn't installing it. After you take delivery of the house you pay someone to install the tile you really want for half the price the builder would have charged you. There are complications to this approach but it can be made to work and the savings, as well as the satisfaction can be enormous.

There is another variation. Sometimes it's less expensive for the builder do something rather than for you to pay to have it done afterwards. Find out what is available at each stage and how much extra it will cost so you can make informed decisions. Often the cost for adjusting a wall or moving a window is negligible.

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Planning and implementing as much as you can as early as you can in the remodeling and construction process is extraordinarily demanding because you will be called on, as I was, to visualize how you will use a room before it exists, in many cases. It is very easy just to see one way of doing something and going with that, usually filled with misguided enthusiasm.

For example, at first glance you might decide the living room furniture will go a certain way to be a certain size. And you might be right. But maybe you will have forgotten traffic flow. I once lived in a house where the only way to reach the kitchen from the bedrooms meant walking between the couch and the television, a very undesirable situation for someone such as myself. In that case the furniture could be moved to eliminate the problem, but if you don't think this through at the beginning, such a solution might not exist. You have to picture the room, as it will be, then imagine the problems and solutions. It is daunting and you will make mistakes, but the more you get right the less expensive and better will be the outcome.

At one time you needed a phone jack everywhere in a house because telephones were hardwired, and so were computers. Today these tend to be wireless, which gives you greater flexibility, but when it comes to electricity there is no such thing as wireless. You still have to plug in most of what you want to use. Which means in any room think long and hard about where you want outlets. My general advice is put them everywhere because your needs will change.

Keep in mind as well that electrical outlets with lamps attached often serve as the on/off switch for light. You need to consider which outlets should be connected as light switches. One condo in which I lived required that the television and stereo be plugged into such a switch. Visitors were always turning them off and I'd have to redo the stereo settings. It was a real pain, but there was no non-switch outlet where I placed the television. Someone had been asleep at the wheel when they'd

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planned that living room.

Also, if a room is set up so that you will have some furniture floating away from the walls, you may need to place an outlet or outlets flush with the floor. This is very expensive to add after the fact, so think this through. You don't want to be running electrical cords for people to trip over. But you also want to be cautious, as nothing is worse than an outlet stuck in the middle of nowhere if you decide to move the couch.

Consider your remodeled or newly built house room-by-room, beginning with the bedrooms. In general, though there are exceptions. There's only one place to put anything in a bedroom. The bed goes here, the dresser goes there, and the television goes here. So, keep that in mind. You don't want the king-size bed to go here, if the television goes there off to the side. You need to be careful where the media jack goes and you don't want the only phone jack to be behind the dresser rather than beside the bed. And that's where you'll want your Internet connection, though increasingly houses are wireless.

Again, consider placement of your light switches. There's a tendency these days to put the switch about three feet in from the doorway, even when it's at the right door. I don't understand it. Maybe it looks neat. When I walk through a door in the dark I want to place my hand right on the light switch, I don't want to be groping along the wall searching for it.

Which brings up another point. Keep in mind that you spend most of your time in a bedroom in the dark. So, how about that pathway from where you'll sleep on the bed to the bathroom. You don't want to be running an obstacle course.

Now, I've never liked houses with both a living room and a family room. That "front" room, as we called it when I was a boy, was directly off the front door and typically remained pristine and untouched, a showplace that was only used when the insurance salesman came around or your daughter's new boyfriend came around, back in the days when

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we actually met insurance agents and our daughters bothered to tell us whom they dated. It always struck me as wasted space, but if your house or planned house has one, you'll want to consider its requirements, i.e. proper placement of furniture and the various outlets and lighting you'll require. In this regard keep in mind that many families use this room for other than its intended purpose. I've seen many converted into home offices or play areas for small children, so keep media and Internet outlets in mind.

The family room, that place where all the action takes place, is a bit more complicated. The primary reason is that this will likely be the location of what we now call our home entertainment center. I dealt with this issue by building my own home theater, but recognize this won't be the case with most people.

Home entertainment today is complex, made all the more complex because it is evolving. It was frustrating, and though I can place some of the blame on Andy, my media tech, he really hasn't been primarily at fault. It's really been troublesome because modern technology simply doesn't work as advertised. There are problems after problems after problems just getting systems to do what they promise.

Back to your living room. Most people will have both a television and sound system there. You will certainly know even before you hire anyone where the big-screen television is going to be placed. So... be sure you install enough outlets for everything. You'll want extra as well because you don't know what the future may hold, except that electricity isn't going wireless any time soon.

Decide where your furniture is going to be placed as well, and keep in mind that watching television isn't the only function this room will serve. If you have children you'll be playing with them there. You and your spouse will talk there. And when you have friends over the television might even be turned off so you can enjoy a conversation. You don't want everyone sitting so they are staring at the wall or blank television.

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All this can be complicated, and you need to work it out in advance.

In addition to the placement of your television screen, you will need to consider where to put your speakers. As remarkable as the advances in television have been, no less have been those when it comes to sound. It may be you'll need to run wires, and if that is your decision you will want to think this through at the earliest possible stage. Speaker wires are inconvenient and expensive to properly run after the fact.

But increasingly this is a wireless age, and that is especially true when it come to speakers. Speakers are smaller and better all the time, and more and more of them do not require wires. The technology is leap frogging over itself so that may well be your solution, or the option you turn to if you don't get the hard wiring right from the beginning.

Speakers can be "there" in front. Or over "there" to the side, or "back there." They can be high, mounted towards the ceiling, or low at the floor. They can be objects of art anyone can see or hidden from sight like yesterday's laundry. Again, it's a question of thinking this through at the beginning. Ask questions, get professional advice.

When I said that my home theater has been the most problematic, primarily I was talking about the speakers. They are that important, and difficult. You want experts and professionals for everything you do in remodeling or building your house, but you really, really want someone good for this.

Surround sound, which is quite popular, has its own set of problems that have nothing to do with wires. If you decide to go with this route you must be very careful about where you place the furniture. For the system to work properly you will not have much flexibility later, which means where you put that comfy couch in the beginning is where it will remain unless you are prepared to go back to square one.

And what about your pool area? And the other areas outside the house? Will you want music out there? Most people do for that time they spend by the pool, or barbecuing, and for when they have a party. You'll need

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to consider where these speakers are to be located, and where the controls for them will be as well, since you'll be outside the house when you're using them.

You should also consider initial traffic flow in your house, and not just for the living room. In other words, where do people enter and leave, and how do they get to where they need to go. You'd think that the front door was the most commonly used entrance in the average house and you'd be surprised. In most cases it's the entrance from the garage or carport. Make certain you want that traffic routed through the kitchen, as that's what builders usually do.

As for your front door, in most cases it's the entrance your guests will use, and it is usually inadequately lit. Typically you will have a single light over or near your front door with a switch immediately on the inside. You'll want more, and I suggest three switches. One is for the light at the door while the second is for outdoor junction boxes. You will use these for holiday lights and lighting features you might want to have from time to time. The third switch is to illuminate the exterior walls of your garage and the garage doors themselves. This is extremely useful and generally overlooked. It allows you to light that part of your house when you are expecting or saying goodbye to guests, not to mention it's nice to flood that area with light if you hear a bump in the night.

If you are like most of us, you won't use your dining room that often, but there are two changes from the usual that are necessary. You'll almost certainly have a larger than average light fixture over the table and it requires a more substantial junction box than it usually provided. You'll want a heavy-duty metal one to support its weight. The light switch to this fixture should also be a dimmer, a feature often overlooked.

I don't think it's too much to say that most families all but live in the kitchen if it's of any size at all. If they don't live there, it remains the most used room in the house. There is a great deal you can do to increase its functionality.

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Consider the measurements for your refrigerator and stove space. Typically your builder will make these a standard size, but you might prefer appliances that are bigger than standard. Just think how often a regular size refrigerator is filled to overflowing. Go to an appliance store and look at what is available. In addition to a larger refrigerator, you might want a double oven and will need to make allowances for it. Even if you don't want one, a future owner might very well. The difference in price between the usual and some thing much nicer is often not that much.

If your design includes a breakfast nook, an interior or kitchen designer is essential. If it does, you will use it almost to the exclusion of your formal dining table, so be absolutely certain it is the right size for the furniture you have in mind. Triple check the location of the overhead light because you can be sure it will be in the wrong place.

Go to a cabinet store and review the wide range of features available. There are a surprising number of variations you can use. Consider the space you have available in your kitchen and select those that make the best use of it. Keep in mind that you will store a lot more than kitchenware and utensils in a kitchen. You need enough space for everything.

You might also want to include a small desk area in or near the kitchen. Most people find this very convenient for letter writhing, paying bills, writing shopping lists, and such. This area can be incorporated into your cabinet design, and a telephone and computer jack will be very useful.

Consider now how high your kitchen ceiling is going to be. Cabinets are typically 36" in height, but 42" cabinets cost almost the same and will give you another useful shelf.

Now look at lighting. The kitchen is the one room in your house where you are certain to be using instruments with very sharp edges, and electrical appliances near water. You want to be certain you can always see what you are doing. Even if you have a window over the sink, you will be using the sink at night and will want good lighting that has its

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own switch. You will have an area for a cutting board or boards and that area also needs to be well lit. And there's the stove. You can't cook if you can't see.

All these examples illustrate the importance of giving extra thought to lighting. Lighting under your cabinets is extremely useful. If your kitchen is a bit small it will also give the illusion of extra space, an effect that will come in handy when you sell the house, but it will also make working in the kitchen a much better experience. Place these lights on their own switch; as such lighting is very useful in the middle of the night.

You will, of course, want a media outlet for use in the kitchen, so be certain to select the best location. There is often only one. And you will want electrical outlets, lots of electrical outlets. Most appliances today come with very short cords, so keep that in mind.

If you can, and space permits, build a kitchen island. It will provide you with additional working area, which is handy if two of you are cooking together, and give you more storage space underneath, as well as a place for a pair of stools for casual eating. In many layouts the counter serves as a transition from the kitchen to the living area.

If you are serious about your cooking or believe the next owner might be, then you will want to include the piping for gas to your kitchen. Serious cooks prefer its versatility to more conventional electric cook tops. Allowing for gas is much less expensive early in construction or remodeling.

And don't forget your microwave oven. Placing it over the oven is the most practical use of space, but wherever you elect to put it, don't let it be on the counter. It just takes up space and collects dirt beneath it.

Your master bedroom will also see a lot of traffic; often two of you will be in it at the same time so it's helpful to have two of some things you use. Have a separate shower stall and oversized tub if you can manage it. This rule of two also includes two widely spaced sinks. Two medicine

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cabinets, even two toilets, if possible. Yes, I know about that last part. I designed our house to have private toilets in our master bathroom - mine even has a urinal hers has a toilet with a built in bidet.

This is another opportunity to repeat my belief that you need to consider the next owner. In this case I added safety bars by the toilets. I even had two by fours included inside the wall against which the bars are mounted so when I use one I don't rip it off the wall. Older potential owners will really appreciate that I took the time to include them.

You want to be certain that your master bathroom and all bathrooms are well ventilated. Steam and humidity tend to collect in the room and need to be vented. An overhead fan is not a bad idea either since it will help scatter that humidity, while both it and windows will help defog your mirrors.

Women usually prefer a lower vanity with space left for their knees and a large mirror for doing their makeup and hair. You'll get kudos for thinking of it and earn the cost back on resale. As for the sinks, I suggest having the counter be higher than is usual. Leaning over to brush our teeth is no fun the older we get, and not leaning over is messy.

For the children's bathroom keep in mind a place for a stool or a kick plate in a cabinet with a stool pull-out. You'll want scald-resistant fixtures all around, shower curtains instead of shower doors, and round edges with blunted corners on the counter space. The cost for all this is quite modest and it will bring you greater peace of mind, as well as help protect children from themselves.

Whether you are building or remodeling, do your best to have a laundry room. Even one of modest size makes the task of doing laundry much, much less onerous and though size helps, a proper layout is essential, especially in a small space. You need space on which to set the washing as you do various loads. You need a nice flat area on which to set the washing as you do various loads. You need a nice flat area on which to fold clean clothes. You need somewhere to immediately hang whatever

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needs such treatment, especially in these days of no-iron clothes that have to come out of the dryer immediately. And you will likely want an area in which to iron, since technology has yet to eliminate that chore.

One of the issues to keep in mind is the amount of humidity generated by the washing and drying process. As a consequence, this should be a well-ventilated space, certainly much better ventilated than is typical. The room also needs to be well lit since you are doing what is essentially manual labor there.

Laundry room cabinets are simply great and you can save some money here if you like as they are often less expensive to install after construction. If building new, they are easy to put in and very useful for storing detergent and all things you need in the room.

You will also want an extra-large sink in the laundry room if you can manage it. They are very, very useful. What all this means is that you should plan for the plumbing and the many electrical outlets all of this requires. In addition, a telephone and cable television outlet will be convenient and useful.

We've come a long way since the first single-car garages. I've mentioned that I designed and built an oversized four-car garage to accommodate SUV's and my Rolls Royce. I urge you to keep this in mind because even if you don't own a SUV, your prospective next owner surely will.

But garages have become much more than a place to store the car between trips. Many have work areas for do-it-yourselfers. All should have plenty of storage space. Cabinets mounted high in the vehicle area are very useful. Again, these can be added at a reduced cost if you prefer. Be certain that they are deep, deep, deep. You will waste much valuable storage space by installing a standard cabinet that is overly shallow.

The key, as is the case in all of these suggestions, is in planning and doing the essential work early on. You don't want to place electrical switches or a telephone jack where you will later install cabinets. Whether you are building or remodeling a garage, work closely with your designer and

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consider all the options. You need to be certain you leave sufficient room for your vehicles when planning for cabinets, while keeping in mind that most garages have enormous areas you can use for storage with proper design.

Interior garage lighting is generally minimal, but you will want much more of it. You will also want many electrical outlets near the front of the garage when they will be handy for use outside the garage, in the yard and on the driveway. You will certainly want a dedicated circuit or three, each with its own amperage breaker. If you overload the circuit while using a sander or compressor you won't then lose power somewhere else, such as in your laundry room while running the washing machine or dryer.

You should also pre-wire for garage door openers, especially if you have more than one garage door. You don't want them both on the same opener. Also, allow room in your garage for a soft-water system even if you don't plan to have one. You'll be glad you did when you can point that place and tell the next owner, "You can install a soft-water system there if you like. It's all plumbed and ready."

And finally, install an outside door to enter your garage. You don't want to have to open and close your garage door every time you enter and leave it. This is one of those extras the builder can usually do more economically than you can do yourself later.

You should also devote attention to the exterior of your house. In recent decades, patios and balconies have turned into private outdoor living areas. You don't want to be having Sunday brunch on your patio in your house robe in full view of your neighbors or passing traffic. These areas should be placed in such a way to be private. If they cannot be, and often the layout does not allow much privacy as we'd like, then consider landscaping and foliage to provide you with the desired isolation.

If your patio originates at your kitchen it is not difficult to make the two work together. You might like a serving window from the kitchen

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to the patio or even one of those Dutch doors if the doorway is properly positioned. As for the patio, you are almost certain to have a barbeque there, so keep in mind the wiring for it, or a propane or gas line, and make certain to have a sink with running water next to it. You'll likely have a television outside so you'll want a media outlet, and you probably need a telephone jack. Be sure you pre-wire for speakers since you'll probably want to run the sound from inside to outside without interruption. You can blend the patio to your living room as well if that is where it is located. Finally, keep in mind shade. Nothing is so unused as a very hot patio exposed to the summer sun.

As for a balcony, these tend to be very underutilized. Try to design one large enough to be of practical use or it will simply become a space to sweep off the time to time. Keep in mind the sun and shade again, since they will influence how often the balcony is used. And consider the view. It can be short-range, say of your lovely backyard, or a more sweeping one if it is high enough, such as when the house is on a rise of land.

On the exterior of your house plan on more faucets than customary, at least one at every corner of the house. You don't want to be dragging a garden hose with you everywhere. You want to hire a good landscape artist/ designer.

Plants and Pets

Make sure that your plan includes co-existence for your plants and pets. If you have a garden, leave room by the fence for your pets to patrol. They'll be happy. Maybe include a digging pit – dogs like this

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especially terriers and dachshunds. Make sure there is plenty of space between gardens for the dogs to run. Remember some plants are toxic to animals:

- Sago Palms can cause liver problems.
- Rhododendrons can have a gastrointestinal effect.
- Yews can cause sudden acute cardiac failure.
- Oleanders have a cardiac toxicity.
- Check with your vet to be sure!
- Make sure your landscape architect knows about your pets!

When you know your outdoor space isn't living up to its potential but you're not sure where to start, heed this advice.

Make sure you hire a qualified landscape architect

This should be your first priority. Ask to see examples of their work to ensure they can do the type and style of design and construction you want. Look at the websites of landscape companies and ask their landscape architects to send you portfolios of work or provide the reference list. If possible, have a landscape architect give you a personal tour of his or her past projects.

Get a consultation and estimate

Request a site consultation that will include the architect's comprehensive opinions on how to improve the property. There are normally charged by the hour and work best when the architect can visit the property and see it in person. Make sure the consultation does not obligate you to work with the architect. You should receive an estimate for all or part of the work (whichever your request) and most of the time, remember final costs are negotiable.

What services do landscape architects provide?

A good landscape architect will design a master plan for entire property. If you don't want to purchase the whole package of work, you can pick and choose particular elements to include. Grill gardens are currently a popular request, but driveways, pools, parking courts, walkways, walls, terraces and decks also need construction and/or landscaping design.

When you decide on a landscape architect, what process can you expect?

Your landscape architect will design a set of plans and may manage the construction of the project. They may solicit bids from contractors, including irrigation, lighting, and brick masonry and pool companies, among others. They should be able to provide you with estimates for each part of the project. This will enable you to choose based on quality and cost.

You'll also want more electrical outlets than are usual as well. Put some in the eaves for exterior Christmas lighting. They are always handy, and much better than running an electric cord when you need the power.

For any number of reasons, outside lighting is just as important as that inside the house. You will want lights placed in such locations, and with such control, that they can serve three functions:

1. The usual mood setting that spreads subdued light in a flattering way across your landscaping.
2. The party setting for when you have guests and don't want them stumbling around in the dark [including pathway lighting]
3. Your family's security. You want to keep the bad guys away and you want, with the single turn of a switch, to flood the exterior of your house with overwhelming light.

This brings to mind the need for security cameras. Since the cost has fallen so far, and since they can be wireless, there is no reason not to have

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them. I have security cameras and televisions throughout my house so I can watch what is going on outside from all the areas where I spend time. For example, while working in my upstairs office, when I hear the front doorbell I can glance at a screen and see who is there. I can also, day and night, scan the exterior of my house to assure myself that all is well.

As for control, be certain you've thought out where you want the switches for your exterior lights. You'll want one in the front and one in the back, at the very least. You'll want more than a single switch for them inside the house. Plan this in advance.

Keep in mind how you will be using your patio, pool area and barbecue, and plan for appropriate lighting. I'm always surprised how dark some barbecues are and how many genuinely dark spots you can find near steps.

Then there is the RV. It's not likely you will have one, since most people don't, but they are quite popular and having a parking space designed for one can be a deal cincher for prospective buyer. If you have room, provide the pad for one, as well as access. A large gate to your backyard will come in handy more often than you realize. Locate it on the garage side of the house, and make one gate smaller than the other so you don't have to open both of them when you don't need a large opening.

HOA – The Dreaded homeowners association

These communities are more and more common these days. We live in one with a lot of politics.

Before you sign, read your HOA covenants and restrictions – these rules tell you what you can and can't do. This is a very elaborate contract potential conflicts include:

1. Restrictions on number, size, and type of pets.
2. Exterior antennas, flags, colors, fence types.
3. Having a home based business.
4. Commercial vehicle parking restrictions.

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5. Reserve funds may be a problem.
6. What do dues cover, ask about past hikes-why, and ask about move in fees.
7. Are there enough – if not you may have large capitol calls in your future.
8. Ask for a copy of the association's financial statement – if they don't have one – that's a red flag.

Make sure your contract to buy the home is contingent upon reviewing and approving HOA documents so you can back out if those documents are worrisome.

There's a lot more but you get the idea. There is absolutely no reason for your home construction or remodeling project to turn into the hell I endured. Happy building.

