

RENOVATE YOUR KITCHEN THE SMART WAY

HOW TO PLAN, EXECUTE
AND SAVE MONEY
DURING YOUR
KITCHEN REMODEL



JOHN GERARD

RENOVATE YOUR KITCHEN THE SMART WAY

How to Plan, Execute,
and Save Money
on Your Kitchen Remodel

by

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Our Home from Scratch Blog

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For

Lisa and the girls.

I. Introduction

In the fall of 2003, I was 24 and had just bought my first house. The purchase was sparked by a voicemail that my father left me, nearly two months earlier. Not known for having a patient or deliberative approach to his decisions, but rather quick, impulsive ideas (he would say “instinctive”), his voicemail was characteristically short, and yet still caught me off guard.

“Hey Johnny, it’s your dad. Give me a call when you get to work. I think you should buy a house.”

Oh okay. Sure. Wait; let me write this down before I forget it. Call dad. Buy house. Got it. Thinking he probably had the wrong number, or was unaware that I was only out of college for a year, I called him back. Surprisingly, I received a reasoned, but still excited, monologue on interest rates and opportunities. He suggested I buy something small and affordable since 1.) I could, and 2.) Interest rates were in the historically low 6% - 7% range.

When my parents bought their first home in Northeast Pennsylvania, back in the early 1980’s, their interest rate was something in the neighborhood of 14%. Thus, his prior experience, coupled with the financial climate at the time, led to his phone call.

After finding a Realtor, and touring an “exhaustive” list of two, or maybe even *three* houses, I bought the first one that fit the bill. It was a fixer-upper, but not so bad that I couldn’t move in. It had three bedrooms and one bathroom. In the Roxborough section of Philadelphia, it was close enough to the hipper Manayunk that I could still get away with telling my family and friends that it actually was in Manayunk.

One family owned the home for decades, and when the elderly woman who owned it passed away, I bought it from her daughter. When I met her at closing, she told me that her and her seven siblings were raised

in the house, and she was sad to see it go, but was comforted by the thought that I would bring new life to its aging walls. She was excited over the prospect of me ripping out the carpet, and refinishing the hardwood floors. I was too.

Back to the house, it was old. Most likely built in the first decade of the 20th century, and it had been neglected for quite some time. The carpet was yellow shag in terrible condition. The living room wall was covered with triangle mirrors; gaudy enough to make Liberace blush. On the opposite side of the house, the entire length of the wall was covered in grey paneling thrown up to hide the deteriorating plaster behind it. It wasn't fooling anyone. If you tapped the wall with your hand, the sounds of falling plaster could clearly be heard behind it.

The kitchen was an addition, likely from the 1960's. It looked like a decent size, until I rolled a refrigerator into the space. Then, it got very tiny. The cabinets were poorly painted metal. The entire kitchen was covered in paneling. There were three single-pane windows; two were painted shut. The drop-ceiling was clearly hiding something. The flooring was linoleum, and at the time of purchase, was actually fairly clean. Unfortunately, over time with a single guy and his friends living there, it would get beat up.

The bedrooms were not much better. Two of them were a good size, but the windows were single pane glass with cracked and peeling paint on the frame. The lone bathroom was in such poor shape; it could've auditioned for a starring role in one of the *Saw* films. It had a four-foot long, green tub with a green tile surround; also most likely from the 60's. My roommates and I reckoned that, it was likely the smallest residential bathroom in North America.

When I bought the house, I had every intention of completely renovating it; restoring the house room by room. I moved in around October, and I envisioned a like-new house by Christmas of that same year. *That same year.* Take a minute to laugh out loud at that idea. It's the equivalent

of a first grader telling their parents that they hope to complete their Master's Degree in Economics before middle school.

Let me fill you in on a little secret. In 2003, I had **no idea** what I was doing. It took me some time to realize the house was going to take major effort to renovate, and that I needed to bone up on my home improvement skills. I didn't have enough money to hire contractors, so I had to do most of the work myself. It was going to be a much longer process than I realized, and I was going to fail miserably more than once.

Right out of the gate, I started the renovation process in the wrong order. My father suggested I rip out the carpets and have the floors refinished. Then, I could move out of my rental and into the house. Sounded like a smart idea.

Under the carpets, the hardwood floors were a gorgeous Red Pine. I had a local flooring guy sand them down, and apply the standard three to four coats of poly. They were magnificent. It transformed the feel of the house overnight. You could see your reflection in the semi-gloss finish. They stayed magnificent for about a week. Until, I ripped off the paneling on the walls and opened up half a dozen spots for wiring access. Horsehair-plaster dust has a certain way of dulling shiny floors. Go figure.

After about a year most of the house was renovated, except for the kitchen and the bathroom. The floors on the second level were refinished. All the bedrooms were painted, and got nice new doors and windows. Much of the plaster was repaired with fresh drywall, which was hired out. There were still some projects that I worked on gradually, but on the whole, I took about three years off from home improvement.

I knew how important the kitchen and bathroom were to the future value of the home, so I wanted to get those rooms done right. I thought it best to wait until I knew exactly what I wanted to do with those spaces. Plus, I was single at the time and enjoying life in the city. What was the hurry?

Everything changed around Christmas of 2006 when I got engaged to Lisa, who is now my wife. I knew she would be moving in right after we got married, so the house would have to be finished before the wedding. At the time, I had gotten back into the home improvement groove by adding a second bathroom, installed in the basement. Having a fully functional, second bathroom meant I could completely gut the primary bathroom and leave it out of commission for several months, if required. A second bathroom also meant a higher sale price in a neighborhood full of homes with only one.

The second phase of my home's renovation started in the spring of 2007 with a demolition party. I invited about twenty friends and family, provided free food and beer, and we absolutely gutted the kitchen and the bathroom. It was a brilliant idea.

Although, I should clarify that the beer didn't get brought out until near the end of the demo. Drunken people and hammers don't typically have happy endings. I rented a twenty-cubic-foot dumpster, parked it on the street, and handed out safety glasses and hammers. It would've taken me weeks to do that level of demolition working alone.

After the party, the kitchen and bathroom were exposed down to the cinder block walls. People occasionally talk about taking a room "down to the studs". Well, these rooms didn't even have studs left when we were done. Although to be fair, they barely had studs at all.

It took me the better part of a year to finish the second phase of the renovation. I had planned on doing most of the work myself and did so for several months. Until, it was clear it wouldn't be finished in time for my spring, 2008 wedding. I was able to finish up the framing and insulation myself, but I hired out the plumbing, electrical, and drywall.

At the time, I was also working on my parent's shore house nearly every weekend; leaving my house for evenings. My best-laid plans, to save oodles of cash by doing ALL of this kitchen and bath work myself, went out the window. After stewing for a few days on the added cost, my

disappointment gave way to guarded optimism. What was going to take me several more months of exhausting labor was now going to be completed in less than three weeks. Yes, I had to pay for it, but I was getting expediency in return. Moreover, as each contractor performed their respective tasks, I was able to watch them and learn from their experience.

The lion's share of my savings ended up coming from building my own cabinets along with doing the rest of the finish work. At the time, I'd done little carpentry, but felt that cabinets were something that anyone with the time and the right tools could knock out. Even though I was short on time, I made this project a priority and budgeted it into my schedule. After spending most of my savings on hiring out the other work, purchasing the cabinets I wanted wasn't an option anyway.

To make sure I knew what I was doing, I did some basic research on cabinet construction, which means I read a couple books and watched some *New Yankee Workshop* episodes. Totally nailed it. The cabinets looked amazing. They cost around \$2k in parts and lumber. They were painted white with inset shaker doors. They weren't perfect, but no one thought they were homemade; not even the folks who ended up buying the house from me.

We sold our home in 2010; after deciding we wanted to leave the city. We're suburb people. The city was fun, but it was time to move. We listed our house on a Monday, and agreed to the terms of sale with our buyer by Wednesday night. The house was under contract in two days! The Real Estate market wasn't in great shape. If I recall correctly, it was generally considered a buyer's market at the time. To get a house under contract in less than a week was a bit shocking and wonderfully satisfying. The look of the remodeled kitchen and bathroom ended up playing a large role in the feedback we received when we sold it.

There are a few reasons I wanted to open with this story. Some of you may already be familiar with my DIY experience from our blog, *Our*

Home from Scratch. However, I don't think I've ever shared this part of my backstory. We started blogging in 2011, after my wife convinced me that we had enough DIY skills and that maybe we could have some fun online. By the time we started writing blog posts, I had already remodeled our first home and finished some other big projects, including other kitchens. I was knee deep in sawdust by then. That said, I want to make it abundantly clear that I wasn't born with a power tool in my hand; I made a lot of mistakes as I learned. I didn't start my first true DIY project until I was in my mid-twenties.

When I bought my first home, I didn't have many skills to fall back on, nor did I own a lot of tools. Hell, I hardly owned any tools at all. Nonetheless, I worked at those skills, I took the time to learn the processes, and I'm a more capable do-it-yourselfer because of it. DIY skill development is a continual process that does not have an end point. I've been tackling home projects for over a decade now, and I can say, with a large degree of confidence, that I'm still learning. Don't let the fact that you've never tried something deter you from attempting it.

Another reason I wanted to share this story is to make it clear that you **can** remodel your kitchen yourself, and you **can** get great results without any prior home improvement experience. Yes, it certainly helps to be handy, but pulling off a well-executed kitchen renovation requires more **project management** skills than DIY skills. Your kitchen renovation can be broken out into different sub-tasks. Then, you can hire portions out, or take on some of the projects yourself.

Getting a handle on the entire **remodeling process** is more crucial than knowing how to tile a backsplash or hook up a sink. Almost every DIY skill that you need to complete an entire kitchen can be learned from a few YouTube videos, or from a knowledgeable friend or family member. There are hundreds of videos and blog posts on the Internet on how to tile a floor, how to hang drywall, and how to install cabinets, but there are very few resources that attempt to lay out the entire remodeling process for you, or that do it in a way that you stay in control of your renovation.

Lastly, there is value in sharing my experiences with my first home and kitchen remodel. The process wasn't pretty, and I made a lot of big mistakes along the way. More importantly, I learned many lessons, which I hope to pass on to you through this book. Hopefully, you will seek to avoid my errors. There are few home projects more challenging or more rewarding than renovating your kitchen. I hope this book enables you to better understand the renovation process, so you come out on top.

John Gerard
April 21, 2014

II. About this Book

First and foremost, I wrote this book for people who are planning to renovate their kitchen. Ideally, you will have some DIY experience. This way, you'll have the option of performing some of your own work. Although, that certainly isn't required.

After you've finished reading it, you will have a clear understanding of what is involved in the kitchen remodeling process. Then, you can plan your remodel properly by finding the right contractors, communicate with them more effectively, picking the right projects to do yourself, and saving money without cutting corners.

Even if you don't plan on performing **any** of the work yourself and instead plan on working exclusively with a general contractor, this book will help you understand the scope of the work involved. This will help you keep your general contractor honest and **you** in control of your kitchen renovation.

This book is about the process. If you understand and follow the process described in this book, you are going to end up with a kitchen renovation that is finished on time, well thought-out, within your budget, and done the way you want it.

Kitchen remodels are unique home improvement experiences, in that they touch nearly every element of the home improvement industry. You have flooring, electrical, plumbing, carpentry, cabinets, lighting, countertops, appliances, and on and on. Even skilled general contractors and the handiest homeowners can quickly get overwhelmed with the level of coordination required. After reading this book, you will be better equipped to coordinate and manage your own renovation.

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PART 1

PLANNING *and*
EXECUTING YOUR
KITCHEN
RENOVATION



CHAPTER 1

THE KITCHEN REMODELING PROCESS

In this chapter, we're going to explore the remodeling process as a whole, its various forms, and your role in the process. There are a large number of ways this process can unfold, but I'll share the most common scenarios I've encountered. Once you have a clear understanding of the process, you'll be able to better control it. More control means lower costs, less confusion, and hopefully, a better result than if you were in the dark.

The Homeowner

We'll start our discussion with your role as the homeowner. Easily the most important cog in this machine, the homeowner is bankrolling the entire operation, and you need to be on your game if you want this remodel to go right. Right out of the gate, the homeowner needs to answer four fairly basic, but essential questions.

1. Do you need to remodel the kitchen?
2. What is the scope of the remodel?
3. What is the budget?
4. What are the functional requirements?

We'll take a few minutes, and briefly discuss each of these questions. Getting the answers to these questions done and done right will make your remodel go significantly smoother than if you wing it. Trust me.

To Remodel or Not To Remodel

Do you **have** to remodel your kitchen? That's the first question you need to answer. You're probably thinking, "Isn't that the point of this book?" Yes, it is the point, but not everyone **needs** a new kitchen. There are lots of great reasons to remodel your kitchen. You need to make sure that your reasons for remodeling make sense. Otherwise, you could be wasting your time and money. You spent more than a few bucks for this book. If after reading this section you end up not renovating your kitchen and saving thousands of dollars; I think we'll both be happy.

Here are a few great reasons to remodel your kitchen:

1. Your current kitchen is dated, beaten up, or plain ugly.
2. Your current kitchen no longer meets your needs.
3. You are remodeling your house, and the kitchen needs an update.
4. The home won't sell, or won't sell quickly, without an update

Of course, there are loads more reasons to remodel your kitchen than the ones I've listed above, but keep in mind that for every valid reason to upgrade a kitchen there's an equally poor reason to waste money on a kitchen remodel. Before you spend another dime, you need to make sure that you are upgrading your kitchen for the right reasons.

If the items in the list above are examples of good reasons to remodel, what are examples of poor reasons? Good question. Here's one. Let's suppose a couple named Jack and Jane are preparing to sell their home. They believe that they need a newer kitchen in order to get a quick sale or to maximize their home's value.

Instead of consulting with a local Realtor or conducting their own basic market survey, they choose to invest their money in newer, trendier cabinets, a high-end countertop, and new stainless steel appliances. Jack and Jane assume this will be a sound investment. They discuss their plan with some contractors they are thinking of hiring and the local

cabinet salesperson. Not surprising, everyone tells them an upgrade is a great idea.

After spending \$25,000, their new kitchen looks amazing. The only problem is they didn't need to do anything in the first place. A quick real estate search of local homes would have shown them that homes comparable to theirs, with brand new kitchens, are only selling for around \$5,000 higher than the homes that don't have those upgrades. This means, in all likelihood, they will end up losing \$20,000 over this decision.

Although Jack and Jane lost money on this deal, it doesn't mean you will. Your circumstances may be different. Some minor changes to this example make a big impact on the bottom line. For example, if Jack and Jane were planning on living with their brand new kitchen for another five years before selling, then this purchase doesn't seem so ill advised.

Alternatively, if their home is the absolute only one in town without granite countertops and their cabinets are beat up, then their home is not as likely to sell for as high a price as those other homes. If the homes with upgraded kitchens are selling for \$30,000 to \$50,000 more than homes without the upgrades, a \$25,000 new kitchen now seems like a smart investment. Get the picture?

The key lessons learned from these examples are to seek independent investment advice from a knowledgeable authority and to do some basic homework on your options. A local real estate professional can help you determine whether or not your kitchen should be updated prior to a sale. They'll do this by looking at "comps," which are homes comparable to yours. They can tell you what features other homes in your market price and neighborhood are offering. You can even do some quick and simple research on your own using Realtor.com, Zillow.com, or Trulia.com to determine what comparable homes in your neighborhood have going for them in the kitchen.

If you don't need to remodel, the return on your investment isn't going to net a faster sale, or a higher sale price, you should stand pat. Minor,

targeted changes, like replacing laminate counters with granite or some fresh wall paint, may be all that's needed to improve your home's value.

In that case, you might not need to hire a general contractor or a kitchen designer. Again, this whole discussion may sound strange coming from someone who's writing a book on remodeling a kitchen, but it's a crucial question you need to ask yourself before you take a sledgehammer to your kitchen cabinets. For the rest of this book, I'm going to assume that you have a need for a new kitchen.

Scope

Now that we got that out of the way, let's talk about what you need to do next; determine how much work needs to be done. What do you need to replace or remodel? Is the remodel a complete gut job or is it more superficial like new counters and cabinets? For most kitchen remodelers, it's somewhere in-between. If you can't answer this question yet, or don't know how to, don't worry. We'll get there over the course of the next couple chapters.

In the meantime, write down a list of the must-haves: new countertops, new cabinets, new floor, new lighting, and new appliances, for example. This will be your starting point.

Budget

For homeowners renovating their kitchen within a budget, that budget plays a big role in determining the scope of work. You'll need to figure out how much money you have available to invest in this project. As your budget can determine your scope, your scope can also drive the budget. Once you start getting quotes from designers and general contractors, you can then adjust the scope to fit your budget.

You'll need to figure out the absolute total amount you have available for this project. You shouldn't share this number with anyone you plan on hiring, or instead, tell them a lower number.

For example, if you have a budget of \$20,000, you may want to tell your designer or contractor that you are only willing to spend \$12,000 to \$15,000. You can keep the rest to cover unexpected overages or save it.

You don't want to be in a position where the contractor scales up their work scope only to eat your entire budget. It can happen. Even honest contractors do it. If you tell someone you have \$20,000, they are going to expect that you want to spend every penny, and they'll attempt to help you with that goal.

If you only want to spend \$10,000, but are prepared to spend \$20,000, don't tell anyone working for you unless you know keeping your true budget secret will negatively affect your remodel. Be prepared to be flexible with your budget, but don't show your hand unless you have to. We'll discuss project estimating and your budget more in depth in a later chapter.

Functional Requirements

Next up, you'll want to develop a list of functional requirements for your new kitchen. Not sure what those are? Chapter 4 is dedicated entirely to this process, so we'll only scratch the surface here. To give you the short version, you want to treat your kitchen remodel like any other major purchase. You start with must-haves, then down-select into nice-to-have features, and finally, the design choices. Don't start with the design choices. For example, you wouldn't buy a computer based on its looks. You don't walk into a computer store and ask for a white computer. You ask for a computer with a certain screen size, hard drive capacity, RAM, processor, or whatever features you need. The looks come secondary. If you want a white one that meets that criteria, great, but don't start with the color. Remodeling your kitchen so you get the kitchen you need is EXACTLY like that. If you purchase for looks as the first priority, then you may have to sacrifice some feature you need.

The Home Improvement Models

Once you have answers to all four of these critical questions, you can start planning the execution of your kitchen remodel. There are multiple ways to run the renovation; in this section we'll take a look at several. These models describe the relationship between you (the homeowner), a kitchen designer, and a general contractor (GC). We'll discuss more about each person in later chapters, but for now, you should examine the pros and cons of each structure, and then pick the model that you feel will best work for you.

100% Outsourced Model

We'll start our discussion with the 100% Outsourced Model. This option is the most comprehensive version of the kitchen remodeling process you're likely to see, since it has the most number of unique individuals involved. It might not be the best option for everyone, but it's very common.

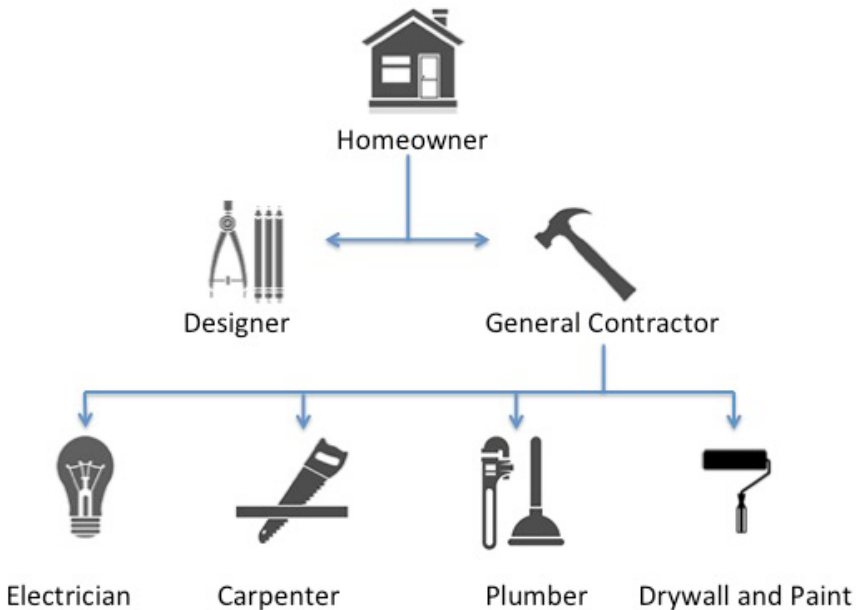


FIGURE 1: THE 100% OUTSOURCED MODEL

Here's how this process works. The 100% Outsourced Model starts with the homeowner defining the renovation requirements, the scope, and their budget. The homeowner then hires a kitchen designer to come up with a vision for the finished space. The designer produces a material list based upon the requirements of their client. The homeowner then uses that plan to solicit bids from several general contractors (GCs). Once a GC is selected, the GC will hire various sub-contractors to execute the plan and finish the remodel. The subs might include plumbers, carpenters, electricians, cabinet folks, countertop installers, tile installers, etc. The GC will perform some minor finishing work like caulking, painting, and trim work. This model is pretty straightforward, and there shouldn't be anything too shocking here.

PROS:

- This option is almost completely hands off for the homeowner once it starts
- Each participant is highly skilled in their respective work areas
- Higher skilled workers result in quick project completion times

CONS:

- Requires more coordination across multiple participants by GC
- Highest cost of all approaches
- More participants means more opportunities for miscommunication and mistakes

The GC Does it All Model

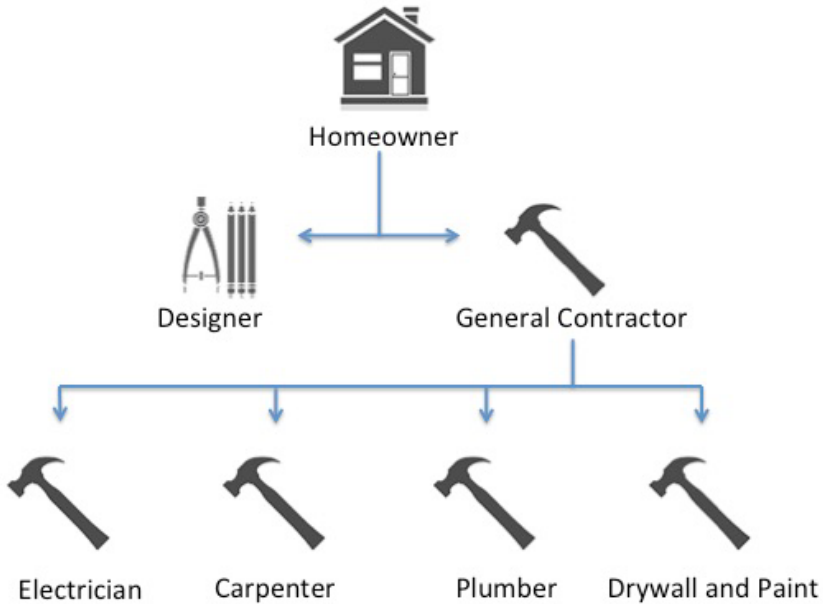


FIGURE 2: THE GC DOES IT ALL MODEL

In this situation, the GC is performing most, or all, of the tasks that the subcontractors would handle. The big benefit here is the GC may save you money since using dedicated subs will cost more. How much work is required will also determine how much work the GC is willing to tackle. If there isn't any plumbing or electrical work required that might entice the GC to do the floors himself too, since it's already a smaller scale job. Unfortunately, if the GC is not as skilled or is slower than subs, this option can end up hurting your bottom line, or this may result in poorly executed tasks. It's a pretty common approach, but be aware of the potential pit falls.

PROS:

- Only one person to coordinate
- Lower cost to overall remodel

CONS:

- Potential for lower quality work
- Potential for slower job

The No Designer Model

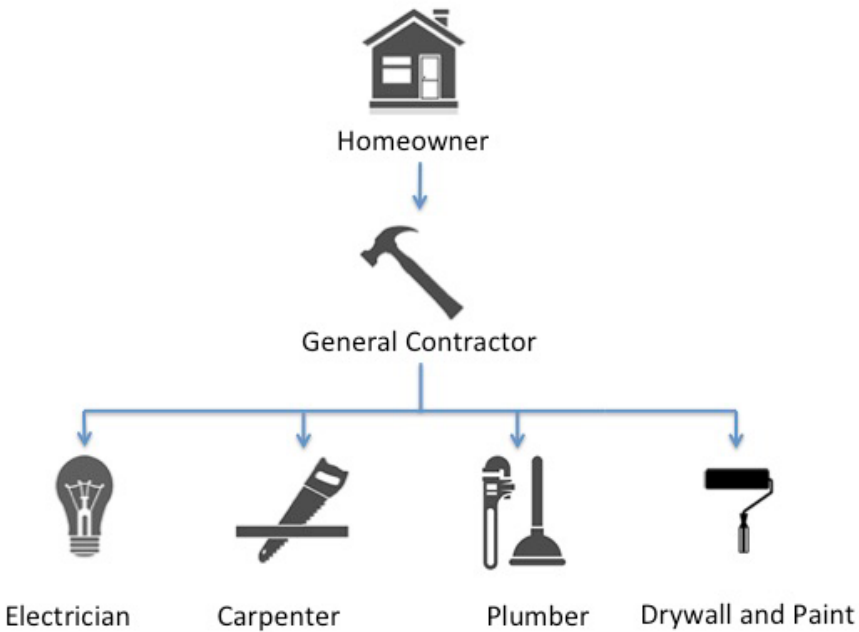


FIGURE 3: NO DESIGNER MODEL

If you don't hire a designer, you can invest those savings elsewhere. You can choose to spend it on an increased work scope, higher quality materials, or keep it for yourself. You're also biting off more of the upfront work like selecting materials, sizing cabinets, and so forth. If you don't fully complete this work it could leave your GC waiting for you to make

design decisions. If the GC is left waiting, it might cause them to start another remodel, until you've gotten your ducks in a row. If you don't have an eye for design, picking this option can be difficult, and leave you with a mismatched or poorly coordinated finished product.

PROS:

- Saves the cost of hiring a designer

CONS:

- Homeowner has to make all design and material decisions without designer input
- Can be difficult to coordinate all materials if homeowner isn't proficient at design

The Homeowner as GC Model

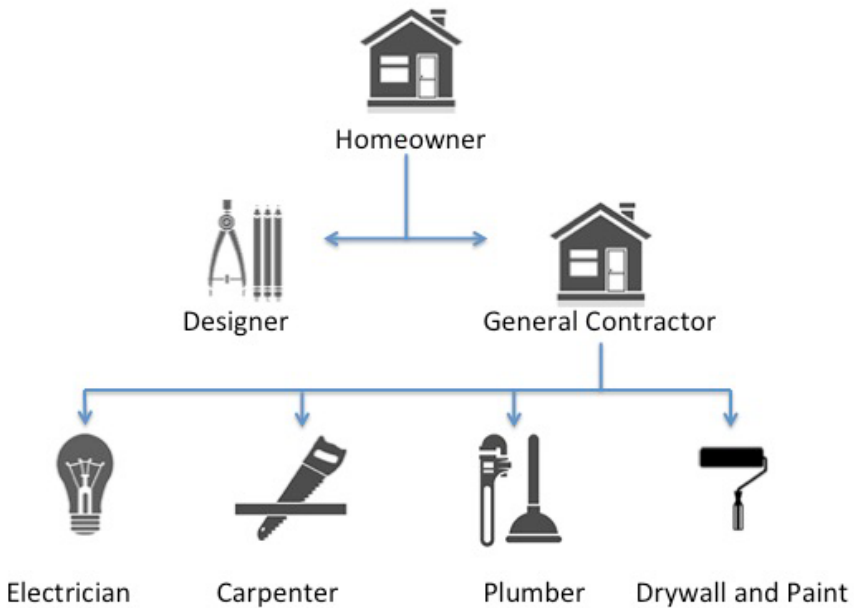


FIGURE 4: THE HOMEOWNER ACTS AS THE GC MODEL

In this approach, you act as the GC. You figure out what work needs to be done, from your own experience, and you hire out your own subs. This setup means that you are responsible for applying for the permits for the demo, for being home to let the subs in, and dealing with all the problems that can arise during a kitchen remodel. If you're not handy or don't have much DIY experience, even if you're not doing your own work, this approach may not be the best idea.

PROS:

- Saves the cost of hiring a GC

CONS:

- Can be difficult to organize the remodel and coordinate the subcontractors
- Can be very time consuming

The DIY Homeowner

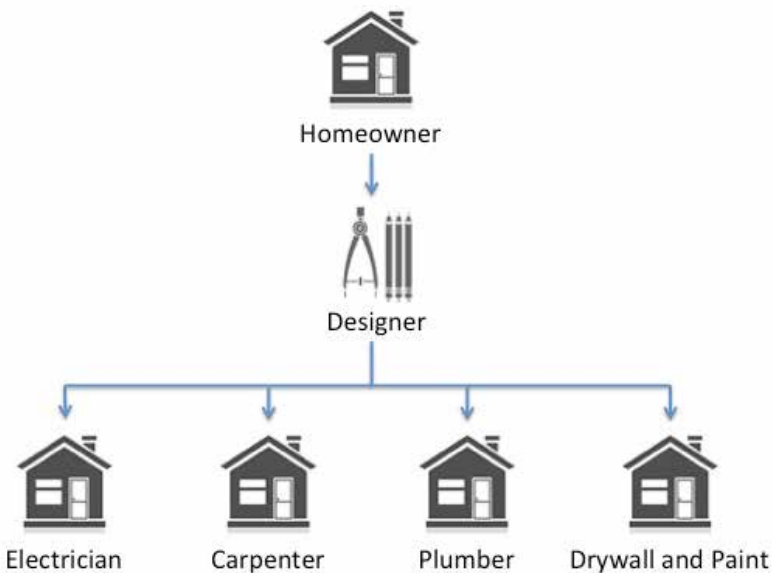


FIGURE 5: DIY HOMEOWNER

If you are willing to do **all** of the work yourself, then you fall under the DIY Homeowner model. The clear benefit to this approach is the cost savings. You also get the personal satisfaction of having undertaken and completed a major home improvement project. Not everyone has the skill or the determination to remodel their own kitchen. It's a big deal. The downside to this approach is the time investment and added aggravation. Unless you can work on the project full-time, you'll have to stick to nights and weekends, which means it's going to take much longer to finish than if you hired it out.

PROS:

- Saves the most money out of all the approaches (if done properly)
- Can be very satisfying to run your own remodel
- No need to deal with contractors

CONS:

- Entire job is run by the homeowner
- Mistakes are more common
- Can end up being expensive if repairs are required
- Can be extremely time consuming
- Results can be poor if the homeowner doesn't have the necessary technical skill

CHAPTER 2

DEFINING THE PROJECT SCOPE

Now that we've discussed the kitchen remodeling process and the role you play in it, we can set our sights on planning that new kitchen you've been pining (or pinning) after. Before we start picking out cabinets and appliances, it's important to take a close look at your kitchen today. In this chapter, we're going to take a hard look at your current kitchen, and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. You can then record those characteristics, and feed them to your designer and GC. The last thing you want to do with a kitchen remodel is make something worse than it already is, or let an issue with your current kitchen drive you nuts in your next kitchen.

We'll also take a hard look at the electrical, plumbing, lighting, and other areas of your existing kitchen to try and get an idea of how much work is needed to bring your new kitchen up to date. By completing this process, you'll be better aware of the task ahead of you, and you'll be better prepared to deal with a GC.

What Needs to Go

When I was planning the kitchen remodel in my first home, there was a lot that I hated about that space. The paneling was awful. The vinyl floor was torn, stained, and peeling. The windows were single pane, broken, and had about ten layers of paint on them. In case you're wondering, yes, ten layers of paint is enough to prevent them from opening. On a cold morning, which in Philly is 9 months out of the year, dew would form on the *inside* of the windows.

The kitchen had a drop ceiling. **A DROP CEILING!** The upper cabinets were sheet metal painted white. The bottom cabinets were wooden, but not well made. The lighting was inadequate. There were only a few small windows, and the light fixtures were fluorescent and would of looked more in-place at a 1970s factory. There wasn't enough storage. Not even close. The countertop was a laminated particleboard that was starting to de-laminate after a good 40 years of use. All in all, it was fairly typical for a 40-year-old kitchen designed in the 1960s.

As much as I enjoyed venting about the condition of my first kitchen, it actually serves a purpose. It helped me list all of the features of the kitchen that were worn, dated, non-functional, ugly, and broken. All of those horrible characteristics had to go in order for me to consider my kitchen remodel to be successful.

Now don't get me wrong, it wasn't hard to walk into that kitchen, and identify everything wrong with it. Your kitchen may not be in as bad condition as mine was, and it may be harder to pick out the things that bug you, but there is value in performing this exercise yourself.

Let's get started. Take a stroll through your kitchen, and give the room a real hard visual examination. We'll start with the ceiling, and work our way down. I've listed a series of questions you can read through, and you should write down your answers. Remember, the intent of this exercise it to identify the areas you can't stand. For example, I'm going to ask you if you have a popcorn ceiling. I'm not a fan of popcorn ceilings. If I were to remodel a home with a popcorn ceiling, I'd have it smoothed out. If it were me, I'd list "popcorn ceiling" as a major negative, but you are free to let your own taste be your guide. If you like popcorn ceilings and don't mind keeping it, then you wouldn't list popcorn ceiling as a negative feature.

The point of this exercise is to define the scope of the renovation up front, so you can give your designer and your GC a complete list of everything that needs work. Nothing will eat into your remodeling budget more than expanding the scope after you've already started. The tendency

for the budget to grow due to the scope growing is often referred to as "scope creep."

You may know you want your paneled walls replaced, but unless you tell your designer and your GC up front, they may assume you don't want them fixed. They might think they look fine. If they find out after the demo that you wanted those panel walls ripped out, then prepare to pay additional costs for new demo, debris disposal, and any nasty surprises behind those walls.

That's not to say that this exercise will eliminate unexpected costs, because it won't. It will, however, put you and your team on the same page in terms of workload expectation. You have to keep in mind that you've likely been living in your home for some significant amount of time. You are aware of *all* the minutia that you want corrected.

Your GC probably spent 30 minutes there during a walk through. The things that stand out to you won't necessarily be the things that stand out to the GC. Don't assume they're going to fix something unless you point it out, and the repair gets reflected in the quote. Got it? Good.

Let's get started. We'll work from high to low. Be sure to take notes.

Problem Area Assessment

The Ceiling

Is your ceiling in good shape? Are there any cracks, watermarks, nail pops, or obvious seams? Is there a drop ceiling? Will it need to be painted? Is it level? Is it a popcorn ceiling? Is the ceiling sagging?

The Lighting

Is your overhead lighting in need of replacement? Do you have those long industrial fluorescent tubes? Would you like the light(s) relocated? Do you need **more** lighting? Are the work areas properly lit? Is it difficult

to prepare meals in the kitchen due to insufficient lighting? Is the lighting too much or too harsh?

The Non-Cabinet Kitchen Walls

On the walls where you have no cabinets installed: Are they smooth? Are they scratched, dented, dirty, or full of holes? Is there wallpaper? Is there paneling? Do you have pictures or other frames? Are those frames hanging on screws or nails? Are you replacing or rearranging those items? Is there any visible water damage? Are there nail pops?

The Windows

Are the windows in good shape? Are they broken, cloudy, discolored, or full of rain or mildew? Are the window frames vinyl or wooden? If vinyl, have they yellowed or darkened from sun exposure? Is there any mold or any dark spots on the window ledge or sill? Does the window have a sill? If not, would you like it to? Do the windows leak when it rains?

The Doors

Are there any doors to the exterior or interior that need replacing? Are the existing doors wide enough for your needs, or should they be wider? Is a double door, sliding door, or French door required? Do the doors leak when it rains? Do they close properly? Are they in need of any hardware change, including the addition of a deadbolt?

The Floors

Does the flooring need to be replaced? Does it need to be power cleaned? Does it need to be repaired? Are there major dips or uneven spots? Is the floor level? Does it squeak or make any creaking noises when you walk on it? Does the floor have a lot of movement when you step in certain spots?

The Cabinets

Do the cabinets need to be replaced completely, or can they be

salvaged with a painting or a refinishing? Are they dirty or broken? Do all the drawers still work? Is there a soffit above the cabinets that you would like removed? Are they in good enough shape that they can be donated, or do they need to be trashed?

The Appliances

Do the appliances need to be replaced? Are they old? Do they require a lot of electricity to operate? Is there any discoloration from age visible? Are any of them broken? Is the microwave or range hood connected to an outside vent?

The Plumbing

Looking underneath the sink, are there any leaks? Does the refrigerator have a water supply line installed for an ice or water dispenser? Is your oven gas or electrical? If you'd like a gas oven, is there a gas supply line available behind the oven? Does the faucet need to be replaced? Do you have a soap dispenser? Would you like one?

The Electrical

Are all of your appliances currently on their own separate circuits? You can determine that by turning off a kitchen circuit breaker, and see which appliances lose power. Are any appliances sharing circuits? Are your kitchen lights on their own circuit? The countertop outlets, how many do have? Could you use more? Are the countertop outlets Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters (GFCI)? How many open spots are there in your circuit breaker box? Do any of your circuit breakers trip often?

Hazardous Material

Up until now we haven't discussed any hazardous material that could be lurking in your kitchen, but it's important we address them. Some home products might contain lead or asbestos, and it's vital to identify those items well before you hire a GC and start the project.

If during the course of the renovation you disturb those elements, then you may be putting you and your family's health in danger along with the health of anyone that enters your home. Lead is a toxic chemical that can cause major health issues to both adults and children, but is especially hazardous to pregnant women. Asbestos can also lead to long-term health problems, like mesothelioma, if inhaled.

Asbestos

The first thing you need to do is identify the possible areas in your home that could contain asbestos. In most residential settings, asbestos can be found in plumbing, attic or furnace insulation, and in floor or ceiling tiles. Additionally, it can be found in some drywall joint compounds.

If you suspect something in your home may contain asbestos, you need to leave it alone. Don't touch it. If you were planning on ripping out your 40 year old kitchen tiles without checking to see if they contain asbestos first, you need to re-think that. Typically, asbestos is only a concern if it is disturbed and becomes airborne. Don't ever try to remove asbestos yourself. Asbestos abatement needs to be handled by a trained professional.

How do you know what items in your home have asbestos? If your home was built before 1980, you need to be concerned about the presence of asbestos. Next, you should contact an asbestos abatement professional to have them survey and sample those suspected items in your home. A Professional in this industry will be able to properly assess your home to make sure they've identified everything of concern. You should tell them upfront that you are going to be renovating your kitchen. They will collect samples from anything they suspect of being hazardous, and have them tested at a laboratory. Once the results from the test are known, you'll know what items in your home contain asbestos.

You can then proceed with your renovation and/or the asbestos remediation. You should not hire the asbestos professional that did the survey to perform the remediation. Make sure you tell the survey

company that fact. That arrangement will help keep the survey folks honest.

Can you still renovate your kitchen if there's asbestos in certain kitchen products? The answer to that question is yes. Yes, you can. However, your GC will need to either encapsulate the asbestos, or a professional remediation team will need to remove it first. For example, if your old vinyl kitchen floor contains asbestos, you have the option of tiling or installing hardwood floor over it, or you can have a professional remove it. Unfortunately, you can't simply rip it out with abandon, it needs to be protected and removed properly.

Lead

Lead paint can be most commonly found in homes built before 1970. It poses a problem similar to asbestos in that it is when it is disturbed it can become airborne, and be inhaled. Children can also ingest it if they chew on items covered with lead paint like windowsills, for example. If you suspect any areas in your home were painted with paint containing lead, you need to be very careful how you handle those items. There are commercially available lead paint test kits that you can purchase. The kits are fairly simple to use. In the case of a kitchen renovation, you'd want to test any painted areas that are going to be disturbed as in removed or sanded. If anything tests positive, you and your GC will need a lead abatement plan for dealing with those items. At a minimum, you should hang plastic tarps around the kitchen entryways to prevent any lead dust from leaving the kitchen during the renovation.

CHAPTER 3

YOUR RENOVATION BUDGET

The scariest part of your kitchen remodel is going to be the cost. Sure, opening up walls and finding a cockroach, or seeing a dead mouse under the fridge may be frightening too, but shelling out tens of thousands of dollars for a kitchen remodel can be nerve wracking. Part of the reason it's so scary is that you have to pay for it before you ever get a chance to look at it. It's not like buying a car where you can take a test drive or rent it for a couple days to see if you like it. It can be more worrisome than buying a house. At least you can tour the house a few times before you make an offer.

If you feel a bit overwhelmed at the financial investment you are about to make, you should know that it's a normal reaction. Now, you know why I stressed at the beginning of the book the importance of determining whether or not you actually need to remodel your kitchen in the first place. It's a big investment.

In this chapter, we'll take a look at what you can expect to pay for your remodel and some strategies you can use to keep your renovation costs from growing. We'll also discuss the different material options you have for your project. If you have a solid understanding of what your material and labor costs will be **before** you meet with a general contractor, then you'll be able to better scrutinize their estimates. You'll also be in a much better position to identify areas for savings.

Typical Kitchen Renovation Costs

According to PopularMechanics.com¹, a minor kitchen renovation will average around \$18,500 while a high-end remodel averages closer to

\$54,000. Now that doesn't mean you can't get a high-end look for less than \$20,000. Of course, you can also pay well over \$60,000 and still have a basic looking kitchen.

What's the difference between a \$20,000 kitchen renovation and one that costs \$100,000? It's going to come down to the amount and quality of the material, and then the scope of the labor involved to install that material. If you select lower cost materials or reduce the scope of the project, you're going to save money. If you pick expensive items for your new kitchen and the amount of labor involved overall is significant, then you're going to pay more. It's that simple. How much will your new kitchen cost? Let's figure that out next.

Material Costs

Your material costs will likely be the biggest price driver in your renovation. A collection of kitchen remodels and their respective budgets on Fixr.com² reveals that the material costs will end up being roughly 70% to 80% of your overall budget! This trend is pretty consistent across all kitchen remodel budgets.

Let's dig a little deeper. Roughly one third of the material budget will be for new cabinets. The fact that the majority of your budget will be materials should be welcome news to you. Guess who controls the material selection for your project. That's right, **you** do. Granted, your designer will make suggestions for material, but ultimately, it's your call. If your budget starts to get too high, you can always pick less expensive items.

Believe it or not, we already have enough information to start making some rough estimates for the cost of a kitchen remodel. Here's a helpful example. Let's pretend you have a renovation budget of \$25,000 (after you pay your kitchen designer, of course). As we discussed, you can assume around 75% of that will be for materials, which is \$18,750. Subtract that amount from \$25,000, and that leaves \$6,250 left over for labor. Of

the \$18,750, around one third will go toward cabinet costs, which in this case is another \$6,250.

Knowing these rough numbers, up front, can help you while your shopping for cabinets. If you see a set of cabinets for \$10,000, you'll know that it's more than your budget can afford, or you'll need to identify savings elsewhere in your plan if you absolutely have to have them. Conversely, if you see a cabinet set for \$5,000, you'll know that you can afford them, **and** you're likely to save some money in the long run.

Your Budget

Ultimately, your kitchen renovation will fall under one of two categories: it will either be budget driven or goal driven. That is to say, you'll either have a total amount for the remodel that you'll have to stay under, or you'll simply buy what you want and it costs what it costs. I suspect that most kitchen remodels are budget driven. For example, if you take out a home equity line of credit for \$30,000 to renovate your kitchen, you'll want to keep the renovation at \$30,000 or less. If however, you have a large enough budget that you can pick out whatever appliances or cabinets you'd like, you are goal driven.

The decision on how much money to spend on your kitchen remodel is a personal decision you need to make, and I'm not going to suggest any type of bare minimum value. I will, however, urge you to make sure that you've planned properly by considering all of the expected costs.

CHAPTER 4

CABINETS AND COUNTERTOPS

Now that you've defined your budget, let's take a few minutes and talk about what materials and material quality you get for your money. Don't know the difference between Granite and Quartz? How about the difference between semi-custom or custom cabinets? If you want to know if you are getting a fair price for a kitchen product, it's important to know some of the basic characteristics of the items you may purchase.

In this section, we'll take the three major material items from a kitchen remodel; the cabinets, countertops, and appliances, and discuss them in depth.

Cabinets

As mentioned in the previous section, cabinet costs are likely to end up being around 33% of your material budget. Here is what you need to know about kitchen cabinets.

Cabinet Styles

There are two basic looks, or styles, to kitchen cabinets that are immediately apparent when you look at a cabinet. There are American style cabinets, and there are European style cabinets. American style cabinets have a face frame; European style cabinets do not. A face frame is a wooden frame that is attached to the front of the cabinet. The doors and drawers will rest against the face frame when they are closed.

European cabinets are often referred to as frameless. The doors and drawers rest against the cabinet box when closed. Frameless cabinets will have a look that is all doors and drawers. If you can't see any bare wooden spots between the doors and drawers when they are closed, you're looking at a frameless cabinet. Ikea cabinets are frameless. There is no real difference in the quality, if you are considering one or the other, however, you should be aware of the style differences.

Stock Cabinets

Stock cabinets are going to be some of the lowest priced cabinets you will encounter. They tend to come in either a stained oak or white laminate variety. They are widely available, and can be bought at your local home improvement centers. If they're made from oak, the face frame, doorframes, and drawer fronts are likely to be made from real hardwood as well.

The white, laminated cabinets however, are almost all particleboard with a laminate veneer. Even the oak cabinets will commonly have particleboard for the box components of the cabinet, which includes the bottom, sides, back panel, shelves, and drawer boxes. Particleboard is also used extensively in European style cabinets. Particleboard is adequate for most applications, but over time it will show wear. If exposed to water, the particleboard will absorb the moisture, expand, and break apart.

Cabinets are often priced per linear foot. If you have a twenty-four inch wide cabinet, that's two linear feet. Stock cabinets will run from around \$50-\$150 per linear foot, which are the prices at my home improvement center. You can also buy some versions of these cabinets unfinished but assembled. This allows you to save some money if you are willing to stain and apply the polyurethane yourself.

Semi-Custom

If you have a little more money to spend on cabinets, you may want to consider semi-custom cabinets. With semi-custom cabinets, you

get more quality components, and considerably more style and color options. Semi-custom cabinets will typically have an all-plywood construction method for the boxes, which is a substantial improvement over particleboard. They'll look better and last longer than stock cabinets. Some will also have better drawer box construction like dovetail joints instead of nails or staples. Aside from looking pretty, dovetails on the fronts of cabinet drawer boxes are stronger joints.

Semi-custom cabinets will also offer a wider range of accessories including pullout drawers, crown and valance molding, cutting boards, and other convenience upgrades. Those kitchen cabinet displays at your local home improvement center are typically semi-custom cabinet lines. They're semi-custom, because they have the ability to modify and build them to your taste, within reason. In terms of cost, you're looking at around \$150 to \$250 dollars per linear foot. It's going to vary from cabinet line to cabinet line, but they are all generally in that range.

Custom

If you have a sizeable kitchen renovation budget, you may want to consider custom cabinetry. Custom cabinets are designed and built to **your** exacting requirements. You can make them any dimension or configuration you'd like. You can have whatever features you want. Custom cabinets can give a kitchen a truly high-end look. If you pick up a kitchen design magazine from the drug store, the better-looking cabinets in that magazine are going to be custom cabinets. They'll often have inset doors, instead of doors that rest on the outside of the face frame.

Custom European style cabinets, on the other hand, may have mirror-like gloss finishes on their doors and drawers. Custom cabinets can range in price from a few hundred dollars per linear foot to a thousand dollars or more per linear foot depending upon the manufacturer and the features. You pay for quality and customization when you buy custom cabinets.

Other Cabinet Options

When you are evaluating your kitchen cabinet options, don't limit your choices to the big stores and the cabinet wholesalers. In many cities and towns there are smaller, mom and pop cabinet shops that do quality work at reasonable prices. Those shops may specialize in custom projects, but they may also be open to your smaller kitchen remodel while they are between jobs. You might be able to get a great price on semi-custom cabinets made just for you if you call around to these shops and see what they offer.

A lot of these smaller shops won't have a glossy, color catalog or a website for you to browse. You might have to visit some of their previous projects to get a sense of their work quality. If you can visit their workshop in person, you may get to see a project they are currently building. Since their business is probably more word of mouth, ask to see previous work from their available references. It's more legwork on your end, compared to a cabinet store, but you might get exactly what you want for a lower price.

Countertops

In this section, we'll discuss everything you need to know about choosing a countertop for your new kitchen: What materials to consider, where to shop for one, and how much you can expect to spend.

Laminate

Laminate countertops have gotten a bad rap over the years, but it's a bit unfair. Laminate counters clean up easy, they don't need sealing, and they are very inexpensive. Despite all that, laminate is still considered a low-grade option compared to the higher-end choices. Laminate is sometimes referred to as Formica, but that's a brand name.

A laminate countertop consists of a particleboard base covered with a thin layer of a designer veneer. When you shop for laminate, you're really only picking the design and quality of the finished veneer. Since

it's not the same material throughout, the seams tend to be a little more obvious than the solid countertop options. Over time, or through heat and moisture, the outer veneer can de-laminate and peel up from the particleboard. The good news is replacement laminate isn't that expensive.

Laminate costs will vary, but they typically range anywhere from \$15 per square foot on the low end to \$25 per square foot on the more expensive, higher quality end of the scale. Be aware, that price doesn't include upgraded edge profiles or installation costs. Laminate is also available for purchase in prefabricated sections available at your local hardware store. When you hire a contractor to install it, they will measure your cabinets, install the particleboard, and then glue the laminate to the particleboard with contact cement.

Laminate is a great option if you are trying to keep your kitchen remodel costs low. Even if you have your heart set on granite or another stone for your counters, you can always remove the laminate, and install granite at a later point. It's better to buy high quality cabinets, and throw on a lower cost countertop with the intent to replace it down the road, then to buy cheap cabinets, and install high-end granite. You'll have a harder time removing granite countertops and trying to reinstall them, than you will removing the laminate counters and replacing them with granite.

Granite

Granite countertops are enormously popular and for good reason. Granite is beautiful, it's heat and moisture resistant, and it'll last longer than anything else in your house. However, it does require annual or semi-annual sealing to prevent stains from getting absorbed into the stone.

What will ruin a granite finish? Acidic fluids like vinegar or lemon juice can actually etch the granite's finish, so even though it's a tough piece of rock, you can still damage it. Since granite is a natural product that

is taken out of the earth and cut into slabs, every piece is unique with its own coloring and characteristics. That's why if you are considering purchasing granite for your kitchen, be sure to visit the supplier or stone yard to pick out your own piece.

Don't buy a granite slab unseen. Samples are helpful, but you'll want to pick out your own slab, so you know exactly what you are getting. In terms of cost, granite runs anywhere from around \$50 per square foot to over \$100 per square foot. There are options for edge detailing, which will add some style to the countertop, but will also raise the price.

Quartz

Similar to granite in terms of the overall look, quartz is an excellent option for kitchen countertops. Unlike granite, which is a naturally occurring product, quartz is manufactured from crushed quartz stone, and formed into a countertop using a resin. Quartz is therefore going to be much more uniform in terms of color and consistency than granite and can look manufactured. Quartz is also stain resistant and never needs sealing, which makes it extremely low maintenance. It's slightly higher in price per square foot compared to granite, but cheaper to maintain.

Butcher-Block

Butcher-block is another great option for kitchen countertops. It's attractive, it has a timeless look and it's a functional work surface, so you can chop fruits and vegetables right on it. I would still use a dedicated, washable cutting board for meats and fish, but you can use butcher-block counters if you're so inclined. This type of countertop typically come in a species of wood called Rock Maple depending upon where you buy it. Rock maple is a harder variation of maple (the other common version is Soft Maple), which is why it's the best choice for butcher-block counters and cutting boards.

Not all butcher-blocks are created equal, however. Ikea offers a wooden countertop that looks like a maple counter, but it's a composite with a

top layer of hardwood over a particleboard core. The Ikea version is less expensive than a solid hardwood counter, but it may not hold up as long as the solid wood variety.

In terms of pricing, it's is fairly inexpensive compared to granite or other solid surface options. Its price varies depending upon the supplier, but you can expect to pay around half the cost compared to a similar sized granite slab.

It's also lightweight enough that it can be carried by one or two people. Large granite slabs will require a greater team effort. Because it's so lightweight, it will also need to be fastened to the cabinets in more spots than a heavier stone counter. You can throw a small section of butcher-block into the back seat of a sedan. Try doing that with granite!

Installing it can either be performed by a contractor or a handy homeowner. It's a simple process requiring no special tools.

Concrete

A recent trend, over the past decade or so, is concrete for kitchen counters. The allure of concrete counters is that you can make them as thick as you'd like (within reason). While granite, quartz, and butcher block will almost always come in 1.5" thick, concrete counters can be made 2", 3", or 4" thick. While it may be harder to find a place that carries concrete, a handy homeowner can also make them for very little cost. To have concrete counters made for you by a specialist, the cost will run up around \$75 to \$100 per square foot. However, if you decide to make them yourself, you can do so for only a few hundred dollars for the entire kitchen!

Concrete counters, for the most part, are made in one of two basic approaches. They either get poured into forms that are built-in-place over the cabinets, or they get poured into upside down forms away from the kitchen. The concrete cures in the forms in both instances, and can be made to varying thicknesses.

The difference between these two approaches is substantial only in terms of the look of the finished product. If the concrete gets poured into an upside down form to cure, when it's removed from the form and flipped over, the top and sides of the counters will be very smooth. It takes on that smooth finish because it cured against the smooth walls of the form.

Alternatively, if the concrete is poured in place over the cabinets, only the bottom and sides will be in contact with the form. The top surface, therefore, won't be nearly as smooth. It will still be somewhat smooth, but not nearly as smooth as if you used the upside-down form method.

The upside-down form method also allows you to build the forms, pour the concrete, and polish the counters with a wet grinder in a place that isn't your kitchen. You can do the work in a garage, driveway, or even in a backyard. Making concrete counters is an extremely messy process mostly because of the grinding. With the upside-down form method, once the counters are removed from the forms, they can be grinded and polished to a near-mirror-like finish.

You shouldn't do wet grinding on the concrete that's poured directly over your cabinets. Grinding and polishing throws around a lot of dirty water. You can't do that much wet grinding inside your kitchen with the other approach, unless you're okay with hanging plastic tarps absolutely everywhere and soaking down your kitchen.

There are some major drawbacks to using concrete as a countertop option. Concrete tends to have a more urban, industrial, or modern look to it as opposed to granite, marble, or butcher block, which are more versatile in their appearance. While concrete can be colored to almost any hue you prefer, it's most commonly seen in a darker shade, and can give a space a cooler look.

It will develop some minor cracking over time, which is fairly typical for any slab of concrete. The cracks are usually minor and superficial, but be aware that they will occur. The financial savings from building your

own concrete counters is very attractive, but keep in mind that you will need access to a table saw and a wet grinder to build the forms and polish the pieces. If you don't own those tools, you'll need to purchase or rent them, which will add to the cost.

You'll also need to perform some basic weight calculations before you run out and build a 3" thick concrete slab that's 60" long. Concrete gets very heavy very quickly, and you'll need to design it so that you can lift it, carry it, and install it with a few people helping you. Your cabinets may also need to be reinforced if the pieces weigh more than a comparably sized slab of granite. If you decide to make your counter thicker, it's best to make the sections shorter in length.

Several years ago, I built a set of concrete counters from scratch for my parent's vacation home. While my folks love it, it didn't come out as nice as I'd like. It has some issues, but it's still an attractive piece. I don't want to talk you out of concrete counters as an option. I just want you to know they are a challenge to build. You can read more about my personal experience with this project on my blog. You'll find a link to this project in the Resources section of this book.

Other Countertop Options

In this last section, I want to give you a quick rundown on some of the other options out there for countertops. Frankly, there are enough countertop possibilities to fill up an entire book, so I'll just stick to a few I didn't mention in detail.

Marble

Pros: Absolutely stunning and can give a kitchen a high-end look.

Cons: It's expensive and stains easily

Ceramic Tile

Pros: Inexpensive and easy to install

Cons: Looks dated, and grout lines can stain and discolor

Granite Tile

Pros: Get the overall look of granite without buying a slab. Lower cost.

Cons: Looks like you are trying to save money.

Soapstone

Pros: Beautiful dark stone that's uncommon in most kitchens. Great for farmhouse or country kitchens

Cons: Expensive, harder to find, and softer than granite. Needs regular oiling.

CHAPTER 5

APPLIANCES

Chances are if you are remodeling your entire kitchen, then you are replacing your oven, refrigerator, dishwasher, and microwave. While you're reading this next chapter, keep in mind that you can pick out whichever appliances you'd like for your home. Ultimately it's your call, however, I would hold off on making the purchase until your kitchen design is complete, unless absolutely necessary.

It is important that you feed your designer some critical information about your appliance choices. There are a couple of ways to handle this decision. You have the option of selecting the appliances upfront, and then building the kitchen cabinet layout around those specific appliance dimensions. The other option you have is building your ideal kitchen cabinet layout, **and then finding appliances** that will fit into the spaces reserved for them in the design.

Which option is better? Well, most kitchen appliances have the exact same dimensions from one kitchen to the next. Most built-in dishwashers are 24" wide. Most over-the-range microwaves are 30". Refrigerators however, have a larger range of available widths. If you end up designing your kitchen with the intent of using a 30" wide refrigerator, and then decide to buy a 36" refrigerator, you obviously will run into some issues.

On the other hand, if you decide to design the kitchen **before** selecting your appliances, you will be stuck with that dimension (or smaller), and your choices could be limited. We'll discuss the purchase in a later chapter, but for now here's what you need to know about each of these appliances for your remodel.

Refrigerator

In addition to the width of the refrigerator, you should also consider if you would like a counter-depth model. Counter-depth models will be shallower than a regular depth refrigerator, so they don't extend past the edge of the counter. Other upgrades include an integrated panel to match the kitchen cabinets, or an icemaker and water dispenser. The icemaker in particular is important to specify, because it requires a water supply line, and if you don't already have one, your plumber will need to install it.

Microwave

The microwave isn't only for over the stove anymore. You can have a countertop microwave or one built into the base cabinets. If you do plan on using it over a stove, make sure it's going to be located in a spot with a vent, or you may have to add or relocate a vent pipe. The microwave will also need its own dedicated electrical circuit. Going into your kitchen remodel, you'll need to know where you're planning on locating it, so those hookups can be provided.

Dishwasher

Dishwashers are usually installed near the sink for ease of use. Plus the dishwasher will need a hot water supply line and a drain connection, both of which are readily available if installed next to the sink. Your kitchen designer will need to know if you plan on locating it anywhere else in the room. You don't want to place it near the oven, especially if the dishwasher tub is made from plastic as it might melt, deform, or leak. When it comes to dishwashers, the higher the price usually corresponds to a greater cleaning ability, quieter operation, and sleeker design.

Oven and Cooktop

When it comes to ovens and cooktops, you have a lot of options. The first question: do you want gas or electric? Gas cooktops and ovens can

heat up faster and change temperature settings faster than a traditional coil-top electric oven, which is why most serious cooks prefer them. Some people still prefer cooking with electric, since they seem to reach a higher overall temperature, and electric cooktops and ranges are usually less expensive than gas. Anyone who's used both a gas and an electric cooktop will tell you that electric cooktops seem to boil water faster than gas.

You can also purchase combination devices that use electricity for the oven, and gas for the cooktop. Keep in mind, that even if you choose a gas oven, you'll still need to run electric power to the oven. One downside of electric stovetops is the surface will stay tremendously hot even after the burner has been turned off. If you are heating a kettle on a gas stove, you don't need to move it once the gas is turned off, where you would have to move it on most electric cooktops.

The other choice you need to make is to determine if you want a single stove unit with the oven and cooktop combined, or if you'd like a separate cooktop and oven. If you choose a wall oven, or a double wall oven, you will need a separate range top. It's not all wall ovens and cooktops though, there are also a lot of high-end combination stoves. Brands like Wolf and Viking command major prices. Make sure your designer and contractor know what option you are selecting. Electric ovens will need a 220-volt power line, and any gas lines will need to be run by a plumber.

Other Appliances

In addition to the above appliances, you'll need to decide if you want any other major devices like a range hood, a built-in espresso machine, a wine fridge, etc. Anything that can't be put away will probably need some sort of power supply run to it and will need to be taken into consideration. These items are not something that can be added at the last minute. Cabinet layouts and utilities all need to be configured to support these additional devices.

CHAPTER 6

FLOORING

Another major material decision for kitchen remodels is the flooring. Do you go with tile or hardwood? How about vinyl or linoleum? All of these choices are great options. The only flooring product you shouldn't use in a kitchen is wall-to-wall carpet. Of course you can use a runner carpet or a kitchen mat, but skip the shag.

Hardwood

Hardwood is an ideal selection if the rest of your home already has hardwood throughout. Bringing it into the kitchen can give your home a more continuous flow. If installed properly, hardwood will hold up well over time.

If you are concerned about the hardwood warping or getting damaged from frequent water exposure, you shouldn't worry too much. Yes, it can happen. However, it's probably only going to be an issue if the floor is exposed to a good amount of water over a long period of time.

For example, if your dishwasher or sink develops a slow leak that you don't discover for a few months, you will probably be required to remove a section of your hardwood and dry out the subfloor. If you spill a glass or bowl of water every now and then, it shouldn't be a problem. In recent years, hardwood flooring in kitchens has had a resurgence, and it's more common in higher end kitchens.

You have two primary options when it comes to hardwood floors. You either get a pre-finished product like a Bruce or Bellawood brand flooring,

or you purchase it unfinished. Both options are available from suppliers, and they'll both have a tongue and groove machined into them for installation. You don't want to install a plain piece of hardwood that you buy from a hardware store. It **MUST** have the tongue and groove in it, or you will get terrible seams, horrific bucking, and stubbed toes galore. Buy the right stuff.

Pre-finished hardwood is available in a variety of stain colors, and comes in several coats of a polyurethane or enamel coating. The pre-finished boards will also have a small angle cut on the top most edge called a chamfer, so when you install it, there will be a slight groove between each board.

Unfinished hardwood floors won't have that chamfer. They won't have a stain, and they won't have any polyurethane. They get installed the same way as the pre-finished stuff, but after installation they get sanded down, stained, and several coats of polyurethane are applied.

What's the real difference between these two options? The pre-finished flooring is more expensive, but it's available in a wide variety of widths, stains, and features. Once it's installed, it can usually be sanded down, and refinished a couple times if need be.

Alternatively, the unfinished flooring is considerably cheaper, but it requires much more labor to complete. The fresh stain and polyurethane coatings will smell for several days or weeks. To add insult to injury, the polyurethane coating will probably wear out before the factory coating on the pre-finished floor. However, the unfinished floor will have a smoother finish since it won't have the chamfers; some people prefer that look. The pre-finished flooring also gets criticized for its plastic appearance. Either option is acceptable; ultimately, it's a matter of personal preference.

Tile

Tile is also a common pick for kitchen floors. Whether a natural product

like slate or a man-made ceramic, tile is maintenance friendly and extremely durable. One of the few drawbacks is it can be cold to bare feet, and the grout lines can stain or discolor over time. You can avoid grout staining with common sense measures like not wearing shoes in the house, and cleaning it immediately after spills with a grout safe cleaning product.

Tile is waterproof, but grout is not, which is why you need to seal the grout after installation. Sealing it will prevent it from absorbing any liquids and will also help prevent staining. While tile is becoming less common in high-end kitchens, it's still a great all-around choice.

Vinyl and Linoleum

Vinyl or linoleum are also fine options for kitchen floors. Although people commonly interchange the terminology, they are, in fact, different products. Vinyl flooring is made from vinyl. Linoleum is made from linseed oil and other natural products. If you are at all environmentally conscious, you may prefer to purchase linoleum, since it's made from renewable ingredients, whereas vinyl requires petroleum in its manufacturing process.

Both are referred to as resilient flooring. They are both inexpensive, and can be purchased in a large sheet or in tiles. They are glued down to the plywood subfloor or to a thin piece of plywood called luan. These floors are designed to take a lot of traffic and abuse. They take spills well and can clean up fairly easily. You almost never see them in high-end kitchens, but if you are on a tight budget there are a plethora of attractive resilient flooring options that mimic the look of stone or ceramic tile.

Flooring Costs

As far as prices go, resilient flooring will be the lowest cost option at only a few bucks per square foot. Hardwood will vary depending upon

the species, the width, and the customization. You can expect to pay anywhere from a couple bucks a square foot all the way up to ten dollars or more per square foot for very high-end or exotic options.

Tile price also varies, but you can expect the ceramic products to be significantly more affordable than their natural stone counterparts. The best thing to do is to get a measurement of the amount of flooring you'll need in units of square-feet. Once you know how many square feet you need, you can simply multiple that number by the cost per square foot, which is how the pricing for all flooring products is typically displayed.

Keep in mind that you should add 10%-15% extra square footage to your total to account for waste or installation error. It's also a good idea to keep a couple extra boards or tiles around as spare parts just in case some get damaged down the road.

CHAPTER 7

FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS CHAPTER

In this chapter, we're going to talk about your future kitchen, and one thing you need to know is that your next kitchen is **all about you**. Think about that statement for a minute. When was the last time someone told you that? I'm married with three kids, and nothing in life is all about me anymore. My wife and I try to put the needs of our kids first as I'm sure most parents often do. However, your next kitchen should be all about you.

What do I mean by that? What I'm saying is your next kitchen should meet your **functional needs** and the needs of whoever is using the kitchen. If that sounds selfish, then think about it like this: if your kitchen doesn't meet your functional needs, then you will have a harder time using it effectively. You'll be less productive. You'll enjoy your time in the kitchen less, and you'll spend more time pining over all those home design magazines again. You'll potentially be wasting your hard earned money on material and labor that you ultimately may regret. Starting to make sense now?

Functional Needs

What do I mean by functional needs? Good question. I'm literally asking you to think of the functionality your next kitchen needs in order for you to be effective in your new space. Here's an example of a functional requirement: Let's pretend you have three kids and a spouse. You want a kitchen bar area that accommodates five people for those Sunday

morning breakfasts together. If you only have room for four, one person will be left standing or sitting at a table someplace else.

Notice I didn't say you have to have seating for five at a bar with a galaxy-black granite top and cherry stained bar stools. Those are taste and design considerations, and while they may be hugely important, they are second fiddle to the functional requirements we're going to develop together in this section.

If you kick-off your kitchen renovation planning by starting with, "I really want this extra wide refrigerator that's on sale this weekend," you're setting yourself up for difficulties down the road. Wait on those decisions until you know you can fit them, you can afford them, and they work with the rest of the kitchen that you haven't finished designing yet. Unless of course, you absolutely can't function without **that exact** extra wide refrigerator, then go ahead, and buy it, but I wouldn't just yet.

The goal of this chapter is for you to come up with a list of "must-haves" for your kitchen renovation. You then will be able to hand that list to a kitchen designer (if you are hiring one) or a general contractor. This process is helpful in a few ways.

1. It saves time, reduces confusion, and helps to eliminate any assumptions that you or the contractors make about the finished product.
2. When you hand your contractor or designer this list of needs, it immediately sends them a message that you know what you want (at least functionally).
3. It gets you thinking about how you'll be using the space, and what features you think are most important. We already started this process in the last chapter by making a list of all the things that are wrong, broken, or in need of replacement in your current setup. That list is your Problem Statement. In this chapter, we're working on the Solution.

Let me give you a quick example of how you may have already done this in the past. Have you ever bought a car? Recently, my wife and I walked into a car dealership, and said: "Hi, we're in the market for a new car, and this is what we're looking for: a car with AWD or 4WD, preferably one that gets over 20 mpg, disc brakes, leather interior, a hitch or tow package, and a good amount of trunk space. Oh and ideally, we want to pay under \$400 a month for it." Right out of the gate, the dealer knew which car models in his inventory he could eliminate and which ones may be the best options. Both the buyer and the dealer saved a lot of time.

Notice, I didn't ask for a particular color or for a certain set of rims. Although, I certainly could once I know my model options. In this example, before we went to the dealer, my wife and I sat down and talked about what our **needs** were for our next car. We started with our budget. How much can we afford every month, realistically?

Next, we noted that we get a good amount of snow every year, so either 4WD or AWD is important if we want to get to work. We have a limited fuel budget, and don't want to be paying a lot each month for a gas-guzzler. I think disc brakes have better stopping power and frankly look nicer. We also have a small boat and a trailer that we like to take down the shore every year, so we'll need to tow it, and for that we'll need a hitch.

We have three kids, and every time we leave the house we end up taking several bags, so a nice sized trunk would be good to have. Along with those kids come juice and milk bottles that routinely get spilled all over the seats. Leather seats are easier to clean over the cloth option.

Those were our *functional needs* for our next car. Did you see how that worked? Have you done this before? In this previous example, the dealer recommended one or two different model options, and then we started talking colors and trim packages. It's a lot easier than walking into a dealer and asking for a silver car under \$30k. The goal of this chapter is

for you to come up with a similar list of needs, not for your next car, but for your next kitchen.

Chances are your needs will change some over time, but you can make an educated guess to what those might be down the road. Let me give you another example of my point. When my wife and I first got married, we didn't own many small kitchen appliances, but as our interest in cooking grew, we ended up owning more and more of those small, space consuming appliances.

I never planned on having to fit a food processor, a small deep fat fryer, a blender, a crock pot, and a mixer in my small kitchen. We didn't design in the space to store them all. Consequently, we kept some of those seldom used kitchen appliances on a shelf in our basement. It would have been better if I gave some forethought to what I'd be putting in those cabinets a year or two down the road. Maybe I would've built an extra cabinet or two.

Now no one knows the future, so it's best to start with what you need today. If you think your situation may change down the road, and that change will impact your kitchen requirements, then you need to make your kitchen designer aware of those impending changes.

Let's get started defining your functional needs for your next kitchen. Once we have our functional requirements listed, we can move into some design choices.

In this next section, you'll see a question or two, and you should write down your responses. If you need more room, answer these questions on a separate piece of paper. If you don't have an answer yet, that's okay. You can always come back to it. The aim of these questions is to get you to think about all the ways you will be using your next kitchen. You can draw on your use of your current kitchen or a past kitchen to help you with your answers.

Ideally, after your kitchen has been completely finished, you won't have

one of those moments where you say, “You know what we should’ve included in this kitchen, but we didn’t think of x, y, or z.” By going through this process, you are much less likely to have one of those, “Oh we should have” moments.

Usage Considerations

1. Who will be using the kitchen? Only you or does your spouse, partner, or children use the kitchen as well?
2. How many people will be cooking at one time?
3. How much countertop space does the cook need to prepare food?
4. Are you interested in a kitchen island, or are you planning on having a mobile cart in the space?
5. Are all the cooks adults, or will any kids be helping?
6. Do they need to use a step stool? Will you need a place to store one?
7. Do you have a disability, or does anyone who plans on using the kitchen? What unique features do they require? (universal access, lower countertops, easy access switches or outlets, etc.)
8. Will the kitchen be a place to hang out while someone is cooking? Will you need a larger room for that?
9. How many people do you think will be in the kitchen at any given time?
10. What will you be doing in the kitchen? More than cooking? Eating as well?
11. Will you need a table in the room, a bar, or counter area for eating. Do you plan on doing all of your eating in a separate room?

12. What sort of dishes will you be cooking? Do any of those dishes have any unique requirements? For instance, do you have a large wok or many over-sized plates?
13. How often will you be cooking?
14. Does your cooking typically require a large amount of countertop space?
15. Do you normally have a lot of dirty dishes? Will you need a double sink to handle all the pots and pans, or is a single sink sufficient.
16. Do you have any pets or animals in the house? Do they eat in the kitchen, in a pantry, or other area of the house?
17. Do you regularly have guests or parties? Do you keep alcohol in any of the cabinets, or does that go in a separate room?
18. Do you want a small office desk or work area in the kitchen? Would you like a small spot to write checks, have your kids do homework, or to put your mail, keys, and that sort of stuff?

Hardware Considerations

1. Which immovable appliances do you want to include? By immovable, I mean you can't take it off the counter and put it away. Most kitchens include a refrigerator, basic oven/stove, microwave, and dishwasher, but the list can include a double wall-oven, range top, espresso machine, wine refrigerator, beer dispenser, etc. It's a good idea to at least get a sense of which makes and models you like for sizing purposes only at this stage.
2. Which movable appliances would you like to include, or which smaller kitchen appliances do you already own? These include things like a coffee maker, a stand mixer, portable deep fryer, blender, small espresso machine, juicers, etc.

3. Any additional items that you'll need to purchase like a range hood or a hanging pot rack?
4. When you wash pots and pans, would you prefer to use a single faucet with a built in spray nozzle? Do you want any built-in soap dispensers, or a separate reverse osmosis water faucet? How about an instant hot water dispenser? Do you prefer the single faucet with the integrated hot and cold levers, or do you want separate hot and cold knobs?

Lighting Requirements

1. Do you need overhead room lighting?
2. Do you need task lighting over the sink or other work areas?
3. Is ambient lighting important? Sources of ambient lighting include under cabinet and over cabinet lights.
4. Will you want lighting over any other sitting or eating areas?
5. Would you like more natural sources of light like an additional window or skylight?

Flooring Requirements

1. Do you want any particular feature (non-design related) for your flooring? For example, a non-slip surface, or an under floor heating system.

Storage Considerations

For this next section, it's probably best to answer these questions in terms of drawers, shelves, or cabinets. For example, you may have a small pantry cabinet with four drawers, but you would like more drawers in your next kitchen, since you currently keep overflow items in one or two other cabinets.

You can answer this question by saying six drawers if you want the extra room, or four if you think that maybe after you renovate you'll keep less

food in the house. You can be as exact as you'd like or make it basic. For example, you can count up the amount of cabinet storage you have by measuring the drawer widths, depth, and heights. You can also simply write down how many drawers and cabinets you have. Whatever works best for you.

If this section sounds confusing, let me make this even simpler for you. The purpose of this section is to determine if you need more or less storage in your next kitchen. Use your current kitchen as a baseline. If your new kitchen then includes enough storage, you're good. If it doesn't, then you need to know that too, so you're not surprised. You can fix it by adding more cabinets or pantry shelves, storing items in different area of the house, or getting rid of items you don't use.

1. How much food will you want to store in a pantry or refrigerator? You can get an idea by trying to determine how much you have in your current kitchen or pantry, and how much more or less you would like. Remember, it's not always best to upsize. You should also include pet food if you store it in the kitchen.
2. How many dishes will you need to store? Include regular plates and serving dishes. How many cabinets do they currently occupy?
3. How many pots and pans do you have? How many cabinets do they currently fill?
4. How many drawers full of silverware and general utensils do you have or need?
5. How much room do you need for drinking glasses including daily drinking glasses, as well as wine, beer, and cocktail glasses?
6. How much room do you need for larger serving plates or party trays?
7. Do you plan on storing your table linens or other kitchen towels in the kitchen?

8. What do you currently have under your sink? Will all that fit under your next sink, or do you think you need more room?

Okay, now that you've had a chance to read all of these questions, and think about your answers regarding what you **functionally need** from your next kitchen, you can put together a short, detailed summary that you can hand to your kitchen designer. Your kitchen designer may have their own questionnaire, but going through this on your own first, will enable your designer to hit the ground running, and it will help you to better communicate your requirements.

If you aren't hiring out a designer, and instead plan to pick out all of your own materials, then you can use this summary yourself when you plan your kitchen design.

CHAPTER 8

SELECTING A KITCHEN DESIGNER

If you are planning on building a high-end kitchen, want the look of a high-end kitchen, or don't want to deal with sizing cabinets, or coordinating colors and materials then you should hire a kitchen designer; preferably an **independent** kitchen designer. If you're only replacing your old cabinets with new ones that are the exact same size and slapping some paint on the walls, then it may not be worth the cost of hiring one. You should be able to find kitchen designers through a simple Google search in your area, or by calling some local cabinet shops or kitchen retailers.

Independent Designers

You may have noticed that I stressed the word "independent" in that last paragraph. Some kitchen designers are not independent and are tied to general contractors, kitchen cabinet suppliers, and vendors, or they will receive a commission if you purchase certain products they recommend. That's not to say that you're the only one paying your independent kitchen designer.

Some independent kitchen designers may get a commission or kickback from certain product suppliers in order to diversify their income, but they will not require you to choose products from a certain cabinet company, flooring company, installer, etc. It may be optional. That arrangement doesn't mean they won't try to steer you in that direction though, which is why you should ask up front how they get paid. Specifically ask about their affiliate relationships.

Affiliated Kitchen Designers

Alternately, kitchen designers that aren't working independently, work for a cabinet supplier or other vendor as a member of their staff or for an affiliate commission. Yes, you do pay them, but you are likely locked into purchasing something from their affiliated partners.

Here's a typical example of an affiliated kitchen designer's business model. You find a local, reputable kitchen designer named Jane. Jane tells you that she charges \$250 for sizing and selecting cabinets and countertops. After she comes to your house and takes the necessary measurements, you can sit down with her at her office and discuss your remodel. She'll show you a printout of what cabinets you'll need and a 3D rendered layout of your future kitchen, so you can visualize her concept. She tells you that if you choose to stick with her partner cabinet company, XYZ Cabinets, the \$250 gets deducted from the cabinet cost.

Awesome deal, right? If you love XYZ Cabinets and their products, then yes, it's a pretty sweet deal. You are getting your cabinets measured for zero cost. However, if you want to go in a different direction and maybe hire a small cabinet shop that does custom work, or you want to take possession of the drawings that Jane drew up, you run into a problem. You didn't buy the drawings. You bought the consultation time. You can't take the drawings to shop for a different cabinet place unless you pay for them separately. Jane will let you keep the drawings to take home if you pay a second fee, which is a percentage of the total estimated cabinet job.

In this case, Jane estimated your cabinets would cost \$7,500. She requires 20% of the total cost of the cabinets for the drawings. That's \$1,500, plus the \$250 you already paid. Unless you are happy paying \$1,750 for drawings, your choices are simple: you either stick with XYZ Cabinets, you pay \$1,750 for the drawings, or you start over with a different designer and you're out \$250.

Interviewing Designers

Now you know why identifying independent kitchen designers is important. Let me be clear about the affiliated kitchen designers. I don't want you to be discouraged from considering them in your remodel, I want you to be aware of how they operate. You can avoid falling into a trap where your money is committed if you simply ask the right questions from the beginning. What questions should you ask? Here are several.

1. What are their fees? Is it a flat fee, or is it a percentage of the project?
2. What is the designer's service or product for that fee? Are they helping you size cabinets, pick wood finishes, appliances, etc.? Do they oversee the project or step back?
3. Are they working on a commission basis for a specific cabinet company, flooring supplier, etc., or are they completely independent and being paid only by you?
4. Does an affiliate program pay them if you purchase a specific product?
5. What is their work history, and do they have a website with after-photos or references?
6. Are they qualified by any regional or national kitchen design organization?

The first four questions you should ask are designed to determine how they are paid and what you get for your money. The next two questions are basic work history and qualifications, and are equally important, but self-explanatory. You should hire someone with experience that has some sort of professional affiliation in the kitchen or design industry, like the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA). In the Resources section of this book, you'll find links to the NKBA.

Before you hire a designer, you also want to have a quick conversation with them about your expectations for your new kitchen. You should

discuss your budget and the expected scope of the project up front at a minimal level. You can wait to discuss the nitty-gritty details, like the functional requirements and the detailed scope, until your first in-person meeting.

Your first conversation with the kitchen designer is a job interview. Let's delve into each of these questions a little deeper, so you have a better understanding of what constitutes a good answer. Let's start with their fees.

Kitchen designers have to perform a greater amount of work for larger and more expensive kitchen remodels; for good reason. Customers paying upwards of \$100,000 for their kitchen remodel will have high expectations for the finished product, and the designer will have to cater to their requirements by spending a significant amount of their work time focused on selecting materials, meeting with the general contractor, and coordinating regular meetings with their clients.

Smaller jobs, in the \$10,000 to \$50,000 range, may not need that level of effort. Thus, a percentage-based fee makes sense for most kitchen designers, because it allows them to scale their work level to match the customer's needs.

Flat fees, on the other hand, can correspond to an off-the-shelf type approach where the designer performs a certain task for a defined, always-the-same cost. For example, the designer may charge every customer \$500 for assistance with selecting cabinet sizes and materials. They may charge more for coordinating tile floors, backsplashes, and countertops. You are paying a flat fee for a specific product.

Both payment structures are fine, it depends on what level of effort you want from them. If you want a designer to hold your hand through the process, then you're going to pay for that service.

The Designer's Products

Here is the minimum list of products that you should receive from your kitchen designer after their work is completed:

1. A cabinet layout including cabinet sizes and design
2. Cabinet manufacturer recommendations
3. Countertop recommendation including both type and color
4. Flooring recommendation
5. Backsplash recommendation
6. Lighting recommendation
7. Appliance size recommendation
8. Wall colors
9. General décor ideas

As you can see from the list above, you should be getting the complete material plan for your kitchen from the designer. Can you pick each of these items on your own without the help of a designer? Yes, and if you're on a tight budget and would rather save the money, dropping the kitchen designer is a valid option.

However, keep in mind that selecting these items is important, but coordinating them together into a cohesive design is the ultimate payoff from employing a kitchen designer. I can tell you that my wife and I were challenged with finding a backsplash that worked with our counters, floors, and cabinets in our first home. We picked something we really liked, but even today, I'm convinced a designer would've made that job a lot easier.

CHAPTER 9

GENERAL CONTRACTORS AND SUB CONTRACTORS

Hiring the right general contractor is likely the most important decision you'll make during your kitchen remodel. If you pick the right GC, you'll be recommending them to your friends and family for all of time. You'll be sending them holiday cards, and you'll probably have them over for dinner in your new kitchen.

If you pick the wrong one, it can get very, very ugly. Assuming you follow the steps documented here, prior to engaging with a GC, you and your GC will be much better prepared to successfully go through your remodel together. Once the job starts, often the only person you're interfacing with is the GC, so it's important you select one that you can communicate with effectively.

The Role of the General Contractor

The role of the GC is to coordinate the entire physical job once it begins. The GC essentially takes your well-thought-out plan and gets the project started. The GC will develop a plan of attack, pull permits, handle the demo and old kitchen removal, schedule inspections, and hire out sub-contractors for each unique area of the job.

Unless your cabinet company includes installation in the price of the cabinets, it's likely the GC will install them (some custom cabinet makers prefer to install their cabinets themselves).

A lot of GCs will also make all the purchases of the materials you and

your designer select. They typically get a contractors discount from various suppliers, so it's usually best to let them make those buys, as long as they are willing.

On the other hand, some GCs don't like dealing with purchasing, and they may charge you a premium for handling or storing materials. It's best to find out how they prefer to handle the materials.

In many cases, where there are numerous sub contractors, the GC is coordinating the work and lending a hand to each sub. When there are fewer subs, the GC is likely performing some of that extra work. Don't forget, smaller tasks like caulking, painting, and cleaning will also start to add up over the course of a kitchen remodel. You should expect your GC to take care of these tasks.

Finding a General Contractor

The best advice I can give you to find a general contractor would be to avoid Craigslist. Avoid it like the plague. Are there qualified, highly skilled GCs advertising their services on Craigslist? Absolutely. Are there a bunch of deadbeats that aren't very good and don't make enough home improvement income, so they need to advertise for free on Craigslist? Yep. Craigslist is great for buying used power tools and lawnmowers. Not so great for service professionals.

There are two main ways I'd recommend to find a GC: check with your friends and family if they know of **and have used** a GC in the past, or check with a review and listing service like Angie's List. Friends and family are perfect references, because if they used a GC before on their own house, you can see the quality of the work in-person. You can also ask them about the GC's work habits, their hours, etc.

Angie's List is a helpful resource for homeowners. If you're not familiar with Angie's List, it's a website where you can read reviews of contractors left by people who've used them, and you can leave reviews for contractors that you've hired. You can use it to both find your GC and subs, or you

can use it to read reviews of folks you are considering to hire. The best part is, it's reasonably priced and well worth the cost.

Interviewing GC Candidates

After you've identified a list of at least three perspective GCs you're considering, you should invite each of them to your home, so they can give you a quote for the project. Budget around one or two hours for each of their visits, and don't have two competing GCs at your house at the same time.

During or prior to the interview, you should:

1. Provide the GC everything you gave the designer (scope, budget, requirement list).
2. Provide the GC a copy of whatever the designer gave you.
3. Tell the GC as much info about the condition and setup of your home as possible.
4. Tell the GC your timeframe.
5. Request a quote with individual task breakdowns. (crucial)

They'll need to see the kitchen in person in order to give you an accurate quote and to get a full understanding of the scope of the work, even though you'll be giving them your own scope list. Their visit will give you a chance to get all your questions answered, although some of these can be answered on the phone before they arrive.

Expect them to take a few days to get back to you with their price. I'd be very leery if they gave you a quote on the spot with little or no time to think about it. A quick answer could mean they are trying to lowball you to get their foot in the door. Be sure to take notes during your interviews.

Here is a list of questions you should ask every potential GC:

1. Ask them if they are licensed and insured (during phone call).

2. Ask what portions are subbed out to other contractors.
3. Ask who their sub-contractors are.
4. Ask if the subs are licensed and insured.
5. Ask which portions of the project the GC plans on performing vs. the subs.
6. Ask them if they plan on being onsite for each task.
7. Ask them if they plan on working multiple jobs during the same time period.
8. Ask them about their work hours.
9. Ask if the GC will pull permits and which ones will be required.
10. Ask for ways to lower the price.
11. Ask for references and photos of previous work.
12. Ask them what the GC needs from you, the homeowner, in order for a smooth job.
13. Ask them how soon they can start if you select them, and how busy they are. Find out if their availability is likely to change if you take a few days or a week to get back to them.

Make sure you find out if they are licensed and insured **before** having them view your house. If they aren't licensed, then they are working illegally, and they won't be able to pull permits. If they aren't insured, then any damages to your home will be your and your insurance company's problem.

Once the GC gives you a quote for the project, you should then ask these follow up questions:

1. Does the quote expire?
2. How long do you have to consider it before the price or the start date changes?
3. Do they offer financing for projects?
4. Can you pay with a credit card?

Picking a GC

After you've interviewed your GC candidates, you should have a better understanding of what you are going to spend on the kitchen remodel. That will probably be the biggest takeaway from your interviews.

When you sit down to make a decision on which GC to hire, make sure you are making an apples to apples comparison of each one. Insisting on an item-by-item breakdown of their proposed services will get you that comparison.

Unfortunately, you can't pick and choose each lowest price option from a bunch of different GCs. You can only pick one. It's tempting to select the GC with the lowest price, but I would avoid selecting your GC based solely on price. You should select the GC that demonstrates a thorough understanding of what you want to accomplish with the remodel, has sufficient experience, solid communication skills, offers an affordable price, and has several references.

Are references really important? Absolutely. You should call the references provided by your top pick, and ask them how well the GC performed. Don't bother calling all the references for all your GC candidates. Only call one or two from your first choice. Keep in mind, those references were in your shoes just weeks or months before you, so they likely now what you are going through. They can be an excellent source of info on how the GC operates their jobs.

Here are a few questions you can ask the references:

1. How did the kitchen come out?
2. How well did the GC do?
3. Did the GC pull permits?
4. How close was the GC to the initial quote?
5. Were there any unexpected issues that came up? How did the GC handle them?

6. Did the GC show up everyday, or did they take a bunch of days off?
7. How were the sub-contractors?
8. Did the GC clean up at the end of each day?
9. Is there anything the GC didn't finish?
10. Would you recommend the GC to me?
11. How would you run the renovation differently if you had to do it again?
12. Would you hire the same GC again?

After you've gotten satisfactory answers to some, or most of these questions, you should be ready to make a decision on which GC to hire. You'll want to give the GC plenty of notice to start preparing. Your GC should make you sign a contract and provide a down payment.

Make sure to read the contract before you sign it. Better yet, have the GC fax or email you the contract ahead of time so you can take your time to review it. You can also have the GC sign a contract that you provide. You can find General Contractor Agreements on Legal Zoom for a minimal fee. In either case, a contract is an absolute necessity. A properly written contract will protect both the GC and you in the event an issue or disagreement arises.

Sub-Contractors

In this next section, I'm going to give a quick overview of which sub-contractors (subs) are likely required for your remodel. It's important to note that whenever a contractor touches any part of your home during the remodel, that area typically needs to be brought up to present day building code standards. That rule applies to the entire project including the subs.

Also remember the subs work for the GC, not for you. If you have to make a change to a sub related task, you need to run it by the GC first

to make sure it doesn't impact the rest of the job. If you see the sub doing something you don't like, you can always tell the sub to take a break for a few minutes, and then talk to the GC.

Be careful about changing the scope or design on the fly. If you need some flexibility and would like to be able to direct some of the work the subs are performing, make sure you have the blessing of the GC ahead of time, and you agree upon how much direction you can give. Surprises or last minute changes to scope are unlikely to lower your costs, so keep that in mind.

Electrical

By the international residential builder's code, new kitchens require dedicated circuits for the refrigerator, the oven, the microwave, the garbage disposal, the dishwasher, the room lights, the wall receptacles, the countertop receptacles, and possibly other unique devices like wine coolers. If your home is relatively new, say under 20 to 30 years of age, you may already have the kitchen wired to this standard.

However, if you are performing any kitchen wiring work and you only have a couple circuits, be prepared to pay for the upgrade to add the additional dedicated circuits. Having a dedicated circuit for these major appliances is a good thing. It means it's much less likely to trip a breaker if you are running the refrigerator, microwave, television, and countertop mixer at the same time. Older homes had fewer circuits with many devices on them, which meant that if the breaker tripped for the kitchen circuit, the lights might go out too.

The amount of electrical work required depends on the current configuration of your kitchen and how much renovation you are planning. If you are adding recessed lights, dimmers, or other small electrical devices that you aren't interested in selecting, the electrician may be able to offer suggestions. Often times, electricians will favor one brand over another due to their work history and experience. They typically know which brands are more reliable than others, and if it

doesn't make a difference to you, the GC or the electrician can make those decisions for you.

You and your designer, however, can still select the style of the finished piece, which is what people will see, like the chandelier or pendant light. In my first home, my electrician selected recessed lights, along with under-cabinet lighting, from a manufacturer they trusted. All I had to tell him was that I wanted under-cabinet lighting and where I wanted the switches, and he took care of the rest.

Plumbing

Not all kitchen renovations will require a plumber. It depends upon what work is being done. If you are keeping the exact same cabinet footprint as your old kitchen, meaning the cabinets are the same size and going in the exact same spot, then you may not need new plumbing.

If however, you are starting from scratch, relocating the sink cabinet, or adding a new garbage disposal or dishwasher, your GC will likely enlist the help of a licensed plumber. Plumbers will also perform any gas line work for your oven or range top.

Drywall or Plaster

After the plumbing and electrical work have been completed and inspected, some walls and ceilings may need to be closed up with sheetrock or plaster. While mudding walls isn't a terribly difficult skill to master, your GC may prefer using a dedicated drywall sub for this step. A poorly executed drywall job can spoil the look of a finished wall.

Cabinet Installers

The job of installing your new cabinets may be one of those tasks that your GC takes on, but that can depend upon the cabinet shop. Some higher-end cabinet builders, and even some smaller shops, will want to do the installation work themselves to make sure it goes smoothly. While kitchen cabinet installation done by the cabinet shop is ideal, it's not

terribly difficult to do properly. If your GC is confident they can hang your cabinets, then you may want to let them if it will save you some cash over a dedicated installer.

Tile or Flooring Installers

Installing flooring, including tile and hardwood, is a fairly simple process that almost anyone can learn. Chances are your GC will already have a great deal of experience installing floors and may opt to do this portion on their own. Professional tile and floor installers however, only perform this one task and they do it constantly. Consequently, the biggest asset they bring to a kitchen remodel is speed.

Recently, my wife and I installed hardwood flooring in our family room. It took us an entire weekend including a Friday night for prep work. We saved a few thousand on installation costs, but we also killed ourselves to get it done. Had we hired it out, it would've easily been done in one day. The question of whether or not to hire out the floor and tile work, which includes the backsplash, comes down to your schedule and the GC's workload. If you have the luxury of time, you may be able to relegate this job to the GC, otherwise plan on having to hire a dedicated sub for this work.

CHAPTER 10

THE RENOVATION

By this point in the process, you've come a long way. You know exactly what you want done, you know how much it's going to cost, and you know who is doing it. Now it's time to roll up your sleeves and start cracking.

Before The Renovation

Before you start ripping out your old cabinets, there are a few items you need to cross off your to-do list. First and foremost are the permits. The GC will need to submit the applications for the renovation permits with your local city or township government. Depending on how efficient and busy that office is will determine how long the permit review and approval process will last. Plan on it taking at least two weeks.

Unfortunately, that means your GC can't get started working until those permits are approved and paid. Prices will vary from location to location, but expect the total permit costs to be a few hundred dollars depending upon the scope of the project. What permits will you need? Well, there are several different types, and you'll probably end up needing a combination of a couple of them or the whole lot. Here is a list of the most common permit types.

1. General construction projects like cabinet removal and installation, new flooring, and any framing or drywall will require a construction or alteration permit.
2. If you are adding outlets, new lighting, or wiring then you'll need an electrical permit.

3. A new gas line for an oven, new plumbing under the sink, or a water supply line for that new fridge will require a plumbing permit.
4. An upgraded furnace or new ducting may require a fire inspection permit.

As mentioned in the last chapter, when you hire your GC, you'll want to discuss the start schedule. Make sure you and your GC agree on when the first workday will commence including the start time.

If you plan on being away or at work most days, and won't be home to let your contractors in, you may want to give the GC a copy of your house key. If your home has a security system, you should be able to create a temporary, or throw away, entry code that you can setup for your GC to use during the remodel, and then you can delete it when the job is complete. I'd also plan to get all my locks changed if I gave the GC a key once the job is done, but that's just me.

What's the best option for your project? That's really up to you. What do you feel comfortable doing? I prefer to let the contractors into the house myself each day before work. When my schedule hasn't allowed that option, I left the back door unlocked with instructions for the contractors to lock the doors when they left for the day.

So what do you do for two or three weeks while your permits are being reviewed and processed? Rather than write that time off as a loss there are some work ahead tasks you can perform that will pay dividends.

- **Hazardous Material.** By now, you should have identified any potential health hazards present in your kitchen. Make sure there is a plan in place for dealing with those products in a safe manner.
- **Outstanding Material.** If you still have to purchase any material at all, now is the time to go out and get it. Still waiting to pick out that backsplash tile or cabinet hardware? Go get them.

Nothing will slow down your GC from finishing your kitchen more than waiting for you to pick out material.

- **Second Kitchen.** Have you given any thought to where you'll prepare your meals while your kitchen is being renovated? Now is a great time to setup a second food prep and cooking area. You can roll your old fridge out of the kitchen and into a separate room, or you can pickup a dorm-sized fridge to get you through the project. If you can't eat out every meal for the duration of the renovation, then you may want to use a small electric cooktop for your meals.
- **Kitchen Preparation.** Your GC won't be able to do much of anything until you remove all of your food, silverware, and whatever else you have in your cabinets. Get everything out of the kitchen that you can. You can store non-perishable food in large storage bins. If you are able to move your refrigerator out of the kitchen, you can keep your perishable food in it until the new one arrives. If you are able, you may also consider removing the cabinets altogether. They typically aren't difficult to remove. Once you have them out, consider donating them if they are in good condition. You can call contact your local Habitat for Humanity to see if they'll take them.
- **Finances.** If you are using a home equity loan or line of credit to fund the renovation, this time period is a perfect opportunity to make sure those funds are available, and you can write checks with them. You should always pay for your kitchen renovation with a checkbook for easy bookkeeping. A GC that only takes payments in cash is a red flag. Credit card payments are also a great option, especially if you are able to pay off the balance immediately, and you earn some sort of reward points for the transaction.
- **Demolition.** You always have the option of saving some money by doing any demolition yourself. If you opt to perform the demo, make sure it's done before the GC starts.

- Clutter. Your contractors are likely to be walking in and out of your home a lot. Make sure they have a clear path with no obstructions. You may want to reserve an area in your garage, yard, or driveway where the removed demo material can be placed. If the demo is going to produce a lot of debris, your GC may recommend a dumpster. You'll need to have a space available for it. Dumpsters are roughly the length of a long pickup truck.

During the Renovation

The day you've been waiting for has finally arrived. It's time to toss out your old, dated, non-functional kitchen for your brand new digs. Let's talk about what you can expect to happen during the actual renovation, and what you need to do to make sure it runs smoothly. We'll also discuss some possible problems or issues that may arise, and how to effectively deal with them so you can stay on course and under budget.

The execution and the order of the renovation will largely depend upon the scope of the work required. For the sake of completeness, we'll use a total gut-job as our example since it's a worst-case scenario.

The Demolition

Before you do anything on day one, make sure the GC tapes the permit paperwork to the inside of a window on the front of the house. If the township or city government drives by or checks on the job, they'll want to see that paperwork whether you are home or not.

Day one will almost always consist of demolition, if you haven't already performed that work yourself. The cabinets will come out. The appliances will be disconnected, and either moved or discarded. Where applicable, the drywall and plaster on the walls and ceiling will be knocked open. That drop ceiling you have hanging out, that gets yanked down too. If any electrical work is to be removed or modified, make sure the circuits are turned off at the breaker. It's possible that the demolition crew won't

have an electrician at this point, so it's a good idea to ask the GC to turn off the power to the room.

After all the walls and ceilings are bare, the demolition may shift to the floors. Any flooring will be ripped up and thrown away. The demo crew may opt to rip out the flooring before the walls and ceilings are opened, but it really doesn't matter what order this particular work is done. If the vinyl or linoleum flooring is found to have asbestos, then this task should be done at the end of the demolition. When the flooring is removed, the plywood or hardwood subfloor should be visible.

Possible Problems During Demo

If any part of the remodel is going to make you nervous, it should be the demo. Why? Scope creep. If you add more work to the project, you're going to raise the cost. The project budget is 100% based on what the designer and GC are able to see.

Unfortunately, they can't see through plaster walls, drop ceilings, or behind drywall. When those walls, ceilings, and floors get opened up for the first time in decades, you never know what you're going to find. There could be an infestation or water damage. Who knows? Any problems will need to be fixed, and any unplanned problems will raise the cost. What are the common problems you're likely to run into? Here are several to look out for:

1. **Water Damage.** Water damage can either be caused by poor weather protection on the outside of your home, or by a leaking water supply or drain pipe on the inside of the house. Neither are great scenarios. Water damage to the insulation, plaster, or drywall can be rectified by removing and replacing any damaged items. Any damage to the framing is more serious, but is usually still repairable. The cost to fix this sort of problem will depend on how much framing and plywood sheathing needs to be replaced. If you run into water damage during a demo, try to look on the bright side: better you find the problem now than in another decade or two.

2. **Mold.** The dreaded black mold. If you have moisture on an organic material in an unlit space long enough, you'll eventually develop mold. Water damage behind walls often includes black mold as a side effect. To remove the black mold, you'll need to do the following: remove the source of the moisture, remove the mold-covered material that can be removed, and treat the area with a mold-killing chemical. Remediating black mold can be costly, but it depends on how much mold you have. The GC may opt to treat the problem without involving a dedicated specialist. If the problem is large enough, then you may need professional remediation. You also need to be very careful around this stuff. Black mold when disturbed will become airborne and can make you ill.
3. **Termites or Insects.** If you have an active insect infestation, you'll usually know it as soon as the walls get opened up. Cockroaches and other non-structure destroying bugs aren't usually a problem, you'll need to determine how they are entering your home, and make sure that access is sealed to prevent further intrusion. Termites, on the other hand, need to be killed. If they have caused enough structural damage, then that lumber will need to be replaced.
4. **Old or Damaged Wiring.** Homes that were built prior to WWII may have knob and tube wiring, or simply old and tattered cables. While these cables are usually fine if left undisturbed, they need to be brought up to today's code if those circuits are part of your kitchen work. Replacing them is fairly simple to do, but it can be expensive and a challenge if those wires are run inside the walls throughout the house. By opening up your kitchen walls, you are making it much easier for the electrician to rip the old circuits out and replace them. If the electrician needs to keep the walls intact, then they will need to fish cables through the walls. That adds a lot of time and cost.

5. **Insufficient Insulation.** If you open the kitchen walls and ceilings, and find the insulation is inadequate or missing, you should add new insulation. It doesn't cost much, and it's well worth the savings you'll get from lower heating and cooling bills.
6. **Structural Deficiencies.** This one is pretty rare, but it can occur. When the studs are exposed, there's always a chance that the framing wasn't sufficiently installed when the house was built or last modified. More common is an uneven ceiling that may require furring strips and shims to square it up.
7. **Poor Plumbing.** Older homes may have deteriorated and corroded copper water supply lines or drainpipes that are in bad shape. You may also run into a situation where the plumbing is not up to code. The good news is, plumbing is fairly inexpensive to repair, especially with the walls open.

After the kitchen space has been cleared of appliances, cabinets, flooring, and all the necessary demolition has been completed, everything in the walls and ceilings will need to be inspected by you and the GC for any obvious issues or errors. The room will be checked for any signs of the seven potential problems we just discussed.

If any issues are identified, they need to be taken care of before the wall is closed back up with new drywall. You don't need a township or city inspector to check and see if you have one of these problems. Your GC should be perfectly capable of determining if any of these conditions exist. Moreover, if your GC is using electrical and plumbing sub-contractors, then they'll be able to examine their particular area of expertise as well.

Rough-In

During this time the electrical and plumbing will be roughed-in. The work is called "rough-in" because the electrical and plumbing work isn't finished yet.

For the electrical work, that means any new circuits that are required will be added. To add a new circuit, the electrician will run a cable from the breaker box through the house to its new location in the kitchen.

Remember, you'll need a dedicated circuit for all your major electrical appliances. Each of these items will get their own circuit breaker. While that may sound like overkill, you have to remember that if the microwave or toaster trips off the breaker for some reason, your refrigerator will still have power. That's definitely a good thing.

The electrician will install plastic or metal electrical boxes where every outlet or switch will be located. The cables from the breaker box will be run to these boxes. Inside each box, the wires will be stripped back from the outer shield. The bare copper ground wires will be twisted together, and the black, white, and red (where applicable) wires will have wire nuts on their ends. If the circuits are connected to their breakers, then the breaker will be in the off position. No devices are added until later in the renovation. Don't touch any of the wires while this work is underway.

The plumbing work follows the same sort of rough-in process. The plumbing is put in place and connected, but shut off at the kitchen by a shut off valve. Often times, you'll see two supply pipes with caps on their ends, and a PVC fitting sticking out of the wall. There won't even be a p-trap installed under the sink yet.

In fact, if the PVC pipe doesn't have a cap on its end, then the plumber will often plug the end with a rag to prevent sewer gases from escaping. That sewer gas is more than just smelly, it's also dangerous to your health, so make sure it's either capped with a PVC fitting or jammed up with a rag.

This same rough-in process will also apply to any new gas lines you have run into the kitchen. The gas line should have a shut-off valve in the closed position and a cap on the end. Unlike a sewer pipe, you can't plug a gas line with a rag.

The rough-in work will only take a few days, and that will largely depend on how quick the plumbers and electricians can finish. The GC will probably stagger their schedules, so they aren't on top of one another.

Their timeline will also depend on how easy it is to run new cables or plumbing from the source to the kitchen. If they have to run cables or pipes through a finished basement, it's going to add time. If the basement is open and unfinished, then it's a very fast process.

After all the rough-in work has been completed, the GC will schedule the local electrical, plumbing, and construction inspectors for the rough-in inspections. The inspectors will compare what work is being done to the permit paperwork that was approved, and make sure the scope defined in the permit is the same as the work being performed. If your GC submitted an electrical permit application for one outlet, and the inspector sees your project includes **way** more than that, you're not going to pass the inspection.

The inspector is also there to make sure that the work is done safely and to code. If there are any code violations, the inspector will likely fail the work and require the electrician to correct the deficiencies. The inspector will then need to return to your house for a re-inspection. Same goes for the plumbing and construction inspectors. If the inspector approves the work, the remodel can proceed. You'll need all the inspectors to approve the rough-in work before the walls and ceilings can be closed up with drywall. The inspectors won't need to return until the entire project is finished.

Possible Problems During Rough-In

During rough-in, you're into the nitty gritty of the project. Any of those problems we discussed earlier will have been taken care of, and you'll see all of the behind the wall work getting done. There are still some opportunities for things to go wrong during this portion of the kitchen remodel. Here are a few issues you may run into.

1. **Circuit Breakers.** The GC and electrician should have taken a look at the size and capacity of your current circuit breaker box **before** the electrical work was priced for your remodel. However, if they didn't do that then there's always the chance that your current circuit breaker may not have room for all the new circuits your new kitchen will require. If that's the case, then you'll need a bigger circuit breaker box, which will set you back around \$1,000 or more. If you have a smaller circuit breaker box, this work will be required, but it's obviously better to find out that before the job starts rather than during rough-in. If you already have dedicated circuits for all your kitchen appliances, lighting, and receptacles, then this probably won't be an issue.
2. **Delays.** Inspectors are a unique bunch. Sometimes they can be difficult to book depending upon their schedule. My township electrical inspector is partially retired and only available for inspections on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Chances are you may be finished with the rough-in work fairly quickly, but you could end up waiting around for a week or two to get through the inspections.
3. **Code Violations.** They happen. Electricians and plumbers that work in the same area will come to know the inspectors and what they like to see during their inspections. Sometimes the inspector may surprise them with a new requirement, or a new inspector will show up and throw everyone a curveball.

Finishing Work

After the rough-in inspections are completed, and you have the green light to close up the walls, the kitchen remodel really starts to come together. During this phase of the renovation the walls get finished, the cabinets get installed and the work gets wrapped up. Let's talk about how this phase usually goes.

The Drywall

As soon as you get permission to close up the walls, your GC should have the drywall team rolling in with the sheetrock. A skilled drywall installation crew can hang an entire kitchen's worth of drywall, and get the first coat of joint compound on in the first day, assuming they have all day to do it. It will probably take a good three to four coats of joint compound until the walls and ceilings are ready for primer and paint. Expect this process to take close to a week or more to finish.

Depending on which type of joint compound they use will have an impact on the drying time. Some drywall crews will use a chemical curing product for the first coat or two. The next coat can follow the chemical curing compound nearly immediately, but it's more difficult to work and it has to be mixed with water. The other type of joint compound comes pre-mixed in larger containers, but it air dries after it's applied, which can take a day or two.

The really skilled drywall pros won't need to sand too much between coats, but they'll still create enough gypsum dust that you should protect the rest of your home from it by hanging plastic tarps up to block the doorways. Once the drywall work is done, you should look for any major flaws. If it's installed properly, you'll have a hard time seeing where the seams and nail or screw holes are located. The walls should be smooth.

Some folks will take a handheld light and inspect every inch of the wall for imperfections, but I wouldn't recommend you do that for a number of reasons. The most important reason being it isn't necessary. You should be inspecting the walls for dings, dents, and visible joint compound seams, but you should do that in the same light that the room will normally experience. That probably means normal sunlight during the day, and then any overhead or cabinet lights in the evening.

You may have to wait until the kitchen has those lights installed before you can really see how the walls and ceiling look. There are no major drawbacks to doing some minor spot correcting with light sanding and

joint compound once that work is done. Doing it after the renovation will only create a small amount of dust.

The Primer and Paint

After the drywall work is complete, the walls and ceilings can be primed and painted. I think you are much better off by applying two coats of a quality latex based primer followed by two coats of quality latex finish paint. Don't attempt to skip the primer and apply three or four coats of the finish paint. You'll waste your money. High quality latex wall and ceiling paint will run you anywhere from \$30-\$60 a gallon. It's worth it. I'd also recommend you skip the primer and paint combination products. They tend to leave more visible lines when the paint strokes overlap.

Since painting is supremely easy, I would recommend you do it yourself in the evening or over a weekend, and then let the GC comeback and get to work on the remaining project areas. I'd only have the GC paint if the price makes it not worth your effort. You can always prime the walls and skip the paint until the very end. I prefer to paint before the finished flooring gets installed, that way I don't need to worry about making a mess with it.

The Flooring

At this point in the process, the GC can choose to either install the flooring or the window, door, and baseboard trim, or even the cabinets. Every GC will have their own preference for the order of these items, but ultimately there's no ideal order of operations for this sort of thing. If the flooring is installed first, the baseboard molding can sit on top of it.

If the molding is installed first it can either be floated above where the flooring will be located, or the molding can sit directly on the subfloor. If it sits on the subfloor, the molding will appear to be shorter in height once the flooring is added, which is why I prefer to install the flooring first, and then the molding over it. Be aware that if the GC opts to install the molding first you need to request that it's installed such that it doesn't sit

right on the subfloor if you want the look of the full molding.

If you are getting hardwood flooring, the install will either be a one or two day job if you purchased a pre-finished product, or a multi-day effort if the hardwood needs to be sanded, stained, and protected with 3-5 coats of polyurethane. If you are having tile installed, a concrete board gets installed first and directly over the subfloor. The seams gets taped and filled with Thinset.

Thinset is a cement like product that comes in a powder form that gets mixed with water. Thinset is what bonds tile to floors and walls. Some flooring pros will lay the concrete boards in a bed of Thinset over the subfloor, and some won't. I don't think it makes that much difference to be honest.

Once the concrete boards have been installed and the Thinset in the seams has hardened, the tile can be installed. The tile will be placed onto a bed of raked Thinset, and should be allowed to cure at least overnight before anyone attempts to walk on it.

After twenty-four hours, the grout can be added and again allowed to cure for another twenty-four hours. Make sure the flooring pros or the GC applies a grout sealant to protect it from discoloration and staining from spilled drinks or food.

One common approach contractors or home builders will use to save money during the flooring installation will be to skip the hardwood or tile underneath the kitchen cabinets. It saves a few bucks in material money. I don't think that's a great idea. If you ever decide to do some minor modifications to your kitchen down the road, you won't be able to move any cabinets off their current footprint. If you do, you'll expose the unfinished floor under them. Additionally, the GC will still need to give the cabinets a boost, so they sit higher. Otherwise, they'll be sitting below the floor giving your cabinets a shorter appearance. In any case, I recommend you opt to spend the additional 15% or so in order to install the flooring in the entire kitchen.

The Cabinets

After the flooring has been installed, the cabinets can go in. Installing kitchen cabinets is a fairly simple task that shouldn't take more than a day or two to get done. The GC will probably install the cabinets, although some higher-end cabinetmakers prefer to perform this task to ensure it goes well.

The installation should start with the upper or wall cabinets. If the base cabinets are installed first, then it's harder to get under the upper cabinets to hold and install them. The preferred method of upper cabinet installation is to start with the corner cabinet and work out from there. To make the installation easier on the arms, a 2x4 or other board can be screwed into the wall temporarily, so the upper cabinet can rest on it. The board can then be removed after all the uppers are installed.

The cabinets must be installed through a cleat in the back of the cabinet and into a wall stud. The cleat is a thick piece of board that is designed for structural support of the cabinet. You often can't see the cleat from the front of the cabinet. If your fastener doesn't go through the cleat, then you may be going through the 1/4" thick backboard, which isn't strong enough to hold the weight of the cabinet.

Your GC should be using long drywall or wood screws with finish washers to secure the cabinets to the wall. You can check to see if the cabinet is installed properly by giving it a firm tug away from the wall. The cabinet will feel firm and secure if it is installed properly. If the cabinet didn't go through both the cleat and a wall stud then the upper cabinet could literally rip right off the wall when you pull on it. It's an easy check to perform, just make sure you are ready to catch it if it falls. It's best to ask the GC to perform this check while you watch!

After the first upper cabinet is attached to the wall, the second upper cabinet is held in place and secured to both the wall AND the first upper cabinet. One cabinet is secured to the next by screwing a fine threaded wood or drywall screw through the face frame (if applicable) or the

cabinet box into the adjacent cabinet. The GC will probably use some clamps for this task. It makes it easier to line up one cabinet flush with the next. The GC should also be pre-drilling all of his cabinet-to-cabinet screw holes. Cabinet face frame wood is often very dense and hard, and if the holes aren't pre-drilled the wood might split or the screw could get stuck.

The rest of the upper cabinets are installed in a similar manner. Following the completion of the upper cabinets, the installation of the base cabinets can proceed. They install using the same method as employed in the upper cabinets. It's critical that the base cabinets are level from one cabinet to the next or your countertop won't rest flat. The base cabinets will also need some modifications for adding in the sink plumbing and the dishwasher connections.

Countertops

As soon as the cabinets are installed, the countertops can go on. If you are going with a solid surface counter like granite or quartz, then a representative from the countertop supplier will need to measure the cabinets and the kitchen. They'll either use a digital system that maps the outline of the cabinets, or they'll make a template using thin wooden strips and a hot glue gun.

The countertop supplier will typically require another week or two until the counters are ready for delivery and installation. Make sure that after the counters are installed that they get sealed using a recommended sealing product (if applicable).

Concrete counters will probably follow a similar installation procedure. A template will need to be made, and then the counters will be made offsite and brought back for installation. Same goes for soapstone or any other solid surface countertop.

If you are getting a laminate or a tile counter, the GC can start with that project almost immediately. For laminate counters, a plywood

or particleboard structure is cut to the shape of the counters and installed onto the cabinets. The laminate veneer is then bonded to the particleboard using contact cement. It will be glued down slightly oversized, and then trimmed down to the final size using a laminate trim router.

Tile installation is similar to laminate, except the support structure is made from both plywood and a cement backer board. The tile is then adhered to the cement board using Thinset or a similar tile-bonding product.

Butcher-block counters can be cut to size and installed in a few hours.

Trim and Molding

With the countertops measured and installed, the GC will probably shift gears, and finish the window, door, baseboard, and cabinet trim. This work is usually pretty simple, and shouldn't take longer than a day or two. Make sure that all the baseboard molding looks level, all the nail holes get filled with wood putty, and then any seams get filled with painters caulk.

If your cabinets are getting crown molding, the GC is likely to use a colored wax for stained wood to fill in the nail holes, or a white wood putty for painted cabinets. All painted trim should get at least two coats of a semi-gloss paint.

Final Details

At this point in the renovation, there isn't much left to do but the finishing touches. All the electrical devices will need to be "devised-out", which means they'll receive the receptacles, lights, and switches. This work will include any cabinet lighting and outlets for the countertops and appliances. After the cover plates are installed on those devices, the final electrical inspection can be scheduled.

Likewise, the plumbing features will also go in, which will include the faucet and its connections, the dishwasher, and the garbage disposal. A

final plumbing inspection will check to make sure all of the connections are to code, and there are no visible leaks.

Expect your final inspections to be more of a formality for the inspectors. It'll be up to you, the homeowner, to bring up any functional or aesthetic issues that you find with the GC. The inspectors are only looking for code or safety violations. For example, if you have a bank of two or three switches on the kitchen wall, and you want the first switch to control the overhead light and the second to control an outdoor light, you need to tell the GC or the electrician. The inspector won't care as long as they are hooked up and working properly.

With the completion of the final inspections, your kitchen remodel is essentially done. Typically, the GC will provide some level of support for a limited time if you run into any issues or something breaks unexpectedly. However, don't go nuts with that arrangement. If your new refrigerator or other appliance breaks, you should contact the manufacturer of that device, not the GC.

However, if your plumbing under the sink starts to leak, then call your GC. The GC will either fix it or call the plumber to stop by. If after two weeks you hate the paint color, the GC will repaint it, but don't expect it to be free. Make sure you have a clear understanding of what post-renovation support the GC is willing to provide, and how long that support will last. This arrangement is likely to be detailed in the contract you signed with the GC.

After the Renovation

You probably thought you were done, right? Almost. If you found your GC through a service like Angie's List, then make sure you go online to leave a review that reflects your experience. If you were your own GC, then go online to leave reviews for any sub-contractors you hired. Don't forget to leave a review for the countertop supplier as well. If your kitchen looks really well done, then the GC may want to take a few photos for his referral book. Be prepared to return the favor for future customers of the GC who are looking for referrals.

PART 2

SAVING MONEY
on **YOUR**
RENOVATION



CHAPTER 11

STRATEGIC MATERIAL DECISIONS

In Part 1 of this book, we discussed the Home Improvement Process, and how to plan and execute your kitchen renovation with the focus on hiring a GC for the project. In Part 2, we'll shift gears and take a look at how you can save money and still get the kitchen you want. We're going to start this discussion with some specific, strategic decisions you can make that will reduce your initial project cost.

Thinking Long Term

A great way to stretch out your kitchen renovation budget is to reduce the scope of the project with the intent of doing additional work in a follow-up renovation. You'll still end up with the kitchen of your dreams, but you'll get there in multiple smaller renovations instead of one big, costly remodel. It's important that when you select an item to delay that you select one that can be done at a later point with minimal disturbance to the rest of the home or kitchen.

Here's a great example that can potentially save you thousands. Skip the granite countertops, at least for now. Instead of granite, opt for a much lower cost countertop like Ikea's butcher-block or a laminate. Instead of spending a few thousand, you're spending a few hundred. After you've saved up some additional money over the course of a year or two, you can simply pop off the butcher-block or laminate, and install the granite. This example works because the countertop is easy to remove without disturbing anything else in the kitchen. You couldn't,

for example, try to save money by postponing the wall insulation, since you'll have to open up the walls to add it.

Can't I pick lower cost cabinets, still get granite, and then replace the cabinets later? Yes, you could, but that would require you to take off the granite, remove the cabinets, install the new cabinets, and then re-install the granite. That's a LOT of work, so your savings in that case are likely to be minimal. It would be better if you spent the original budgeted amount on the higher-end cabinets and delayed the granite.

Some other examples of short-term savings by scope reduction include the following:

1. Delaying the backsplash tile.
2. Delaying the under cabinet lighting (still run the wires to it though).
3. Delaying the cabinet door hardware.
4. Adding kitchen cabinet convenience drawers at a later point.
5. Installing an economy kitchen faucet for a short period.
6. Skipping the garbage disposal until later.
7. Selecting budget overhead lights for now, and installing that great chandelier later.

Material Choices

As we discussed in Chapter 3, your kitchen renovation budget is being driven by labor and material costs, with material adding up to around 70% of your entire renovation budget. If you select lower cost materials, you'll end up with a significantly lower budget, than if you only targeted savings to the labor portion. That's why selecting a cheap GC isn't going to get you as much savings as you might think. The real savings are in the materials.

How can you save money on your material budget? You can start by selecting lower cost cabinets and countertops. If you have your heart set on white painted cabinets, consider getting quotes from a local cabinet shop, and compare them to the big cabinet suppliers. Make sure you increase the number of quotes you are viewing. Were you looking at a glass tile backsplash? Consider installing something at a lower price point like a ceramic tile.

Much of this section may be pretty obvious to you, but it's worth emphasizing that if you want to lower your budget, you have to pick less expensive items or renovate less of your kitchen. If you are determined to keep your more expensive items, but still want a lower price, then you need to shop around for major sales or supplier discounts.

You can also search for excess inventory on eBay or Craigslist. Occasionally, a homeowner will purchase more tiles for a home improvement project than they need, and they sell their leftover supplies at a deep discount.

You should also be wary of any purchasing clubs that claim to offer significant savings for your kitchen renovation. Those clubs tend to be hit or miss, and they can be quite expensive to join. Make sure you investigate them on your own by talking to people who've used them before you decide to join.

Appliance Options

Back in 2007, when I was renovating my first home, I bought all of my kitchen appliances during a Black Friday sale. I saved hundred of dollars, and was able to postpone the delivery of those appliances until May of 2008. When I purchased them in the store, I was required to provide a delivery date within 30 days of the purchase. A day or two before the scheduled delivery, I would get an automated phone call to confirm or reschedule the delivery. I rescheduled it for another 29 or 30 days later, and then kept repeating that process until the kitchen was ready in May!

Now that was back in 2008, so I don't know if some of these appliance companies have caught on to that trick by now. No, I don't recommend you purchase your appliances six months in advance, unless they will fit with your kitchen design and you have a place to store them. However, you may want to keep a sharp lookout for major appliance sales events, and be open to lower cost appliances.

Another option you have to try and save money on your appliance budget is to shop at scratch and dent stores. They might have the particular appliance model you are looking for, and it may be in perfectly OK shape, but with a ding or a scratch in an inconspicuous location. You can also investigate the price of replacing the scratched piece if it's repairable.

CHAPTER 12

THE DIY KITCHEN RENOVATION

In the last chapter we talked about saving money on the material budget. Now it's time to talk about saving money on the labor. Even though the material is 70% of the total budget, if you can renovate your own kitchen, you can potentially take 30% or more off the total cost of the renovation. You had to know that a book written by a DIY blogger would cover a DIY kitchen renovation, right? We'll break this discussion into the various areas of the renovation, and talk about what skills and tools you'll need to accomplish those tasks yourself.

I've also made an attempt to estimate your potential savings for each job, but these savings will vary widely. Once you know the tools and the skills required, you can determine for yourself if you are capable of performing the work. This section is not going to be an in-depth tutorial on each renovation job. You could literally write an entire how-to book for each of these topic areas, so we'll just skim the surface and discuss the important points. I'll leave it up to you to look into those tutorials on your own. Let's get started.

The Demo

Potential Savings: \$300-\$500

The demolition of your existing kitchen is an ideal DIY project that about any skill level can accomplish. If you can borrow the help of some friends and family, you can demo a whole kitchen inside one day. You'll

probably want to rent a dumpster, and have a large garbage can on wheels to haul everything out of the house. You'll need some hammers, a pry bar or two, some hard hats, and breathing masks.

A lot of homeowners will opt to have the GC perform this work instead if the price is right. Some GCs will come in around \$300-\$400 for this work, and it may not be worth the savings to you for that price point. If the GC's price gets closer to \$800 or \$1000, and you can rent a dumpster for \$400, that's a very nice savings.

The Electrical

Potential Savings: \$2,000 - \$4,000

The electrical work will be broken out into two separate phases as we discussed in Chapter 7. There will be the rough-in work and the devicing-out stage. The rough-in work will consist of running various Romex cables from the breaker box, and locating them at the correct positions in the kitchen. Electricians can do this very, very quickly and often in one day. It may take you several days if you're not super experienced with running cables.

If you are thinking about performing the electrical work yourself that doesn't mean you can skip the permits. You still need permits for everything. If your township or city doesn't allow homeowners to pull permits for electrical or plumbing work, then you're stuck hiring somebody. If you're not super skilled electrically, but you still want to do this work yourself, consider borrowing a friend or family member that knows their way around the breaker box, and let them do that portion.

If you thought that maybe you could run the cables yourself, and then let an electrician tie it into the breaker box, I think you should know that most electricians won't want to do that work. Aside from avoiding lower paying jobs, they're responsible for whatever they connect, and they'll have no idea how your cables were ran. Did you accidentally cut a

cable? Do you have a splice somewhere they can't see? They typically won't want that kind of liability, and it will be an all or nothing proposition.

Your best bet, in addition to using a skilled friend to help, is to pick up an authoritative book on home wiring and read it cover to cover, then watch some YouTube videos. After that, put together a drawing of all the devices and locations you're planning on running electricity to. You can submit that drawing to the township or city, and talk to the inspector about what they'll be looking at in the rough-in inspection.

A lot of people will DIY their entire kitchen and still hire out their electrical work. It's really dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. Skipping this step is nothing to be ashamed of; it beats getting shocked or killed, and you can get shocked or killed if you make a mistake with this kind of work.

The Plumbing

Potential Savings \$1000-\$3000

Working on the plumbing for your kitchen renovation is a great DIY project, especially if the scope of the work is limited. I would advise against doing any natural gas work since it's also very dangerous. Plumbers are a little more amenable to smaller jobs, so it's a little different than electrical work, in that respect. If your kitchen renovation is part of a whole house remodel where the entire plumbing system is being replaced, then I'd highly recommend you hire someone.

However, if the plumbing work for the kitchen remodel only involves adding a couple water supply lines or relocating a drainpipe, those are projects that most DIYers can handle with some limited training. In the last ten to fifteen years, plumbing supplies have grown to include some very easy to use products that make joining water supply lines incredibly easy. You no longer need to worry about soldering or working with torches.

On water supply lines, you can use O-ring fittings that push together to form tight seals, or PEX, which can be run like electrical cable, and uses crimp fittings. Despite the fact that plumbing has become much easier, it can still be challenging if you don't know what you're doing.

Flooring

Potential Savings: \$2000-\$4000

Hardwood flooring or tile is very easy to install, at least technically. It's laborious and exhausting, but there's not a large technical learning curve. To install hardwood floors, you'll need an air compressor, a pneumatic floor gun, and a finish nailer. The first board gets nailed in from the top and the rest of the floor gets installed with the floor nailer.

If you plan on installing your own hardwood floor, be sure to enlist the help of at least one other person, preferably two. One person can work the floor nailer, one person can work the miter saw, and one person can pull out and select the appropriate length boards. If you try to do this by yourself it will take a very, very long time.

Tile is also pretty easy to install. The best method to install it is to lay out the entire floor with tile in a dry run. Cut all your pieces to the appropriate size, and then go back and install them in a bed of Thinset. You'll then need to go back and grout the floor after the Thinset has cured.

The Drywall

Potential Savings: \$2,000-\$4,000

If you aren't skilled at installing drywall and smoothly applying the joint compound, then I suggest you skip it altogether. This part of the renovation is dependent upon the skill and experience of the person finishing the joints. It's inherently different than every other part of the renovation. For example, if you connect a wire to an outlet and it looks ugly no one will notice as long as it works safely. Your electrician may

connect that wire and have it look nice and neat, but at the end of the day no one can tell if you made an ugly connection or a pretty one.

If your drywall isn't done well, everyone will notice. Some people have asked me about hanging the drywall themselves, and then having a pro come in and finish the joints. That's an absolute waste of time. Don't bother. A skilled drywall team can hang the sheetrock in a ten by ten kitchen in half a day. It will probably take you a few weeks. Plus, the drywall pros will want to make sure those gypsum boards are installed properly. I recommend you try to save money elsewhere.

If you absolutely insist on finishing your own drywall, then you should practice first. Get to know the process really well. Read a book and watch some videos. If you have a basement that isn't finished, then consider hanging a small section of drywall, and trying out the process before you try to finish the kitchen. You'll need to apply at least three to four coats of joint compound, and if you do it right, you won't have much to sand when you're done.

Cabinet Installation

Potential Savings: \$500

Installing your own kitchen cabinets doesn't require any special tools, and is something that can be done by your average DIYer. The hardest part is holding the upper cabinets in place while they get secured to the wall. Be sure to use a couple helpers for this job. Even if you install a 2x4 under the cabinets for them to rest on, it's still an awkward job with one person. You'll need a couple packs of shims to keep the cabinets square to the wall if your floor isn't perfectly level.

Priming and Painting

Potential Savings: \$1,000

If you've ever gotten a quote for a professional painter, you know that it's a little pricier than one would imagine. The only time I've ever hired

a painter was when I needed my two-story vestibule painted. I'm not a fan of heights, so it was worth it for me to hire someone to climb a huge ladder. Priming and painting your kitchen is as much of a no-brainer, for DIYers, as it gets. You can choose to paint the room whenever you want. You can wait until the very end, or you can paint it as soon as the drywall is done. Both options have their advantages and disadvantages.

The only thing you need to remember is that the walls and ceilings will require multiple coats, which will end up taking a few days. I recommend a coat of paint per day. Start with a coat of primer on day one, and then repeat that on day two. On day three and four, you can apply two coats of the finish wall paint.

For the finish wall paint, I recommend either an eggshell or satin finish. Flat paint works too, but it doesn't clean well if you splash food or dirt on it. Eggshell usually cleans up very easily. Semi-gloss paint is best for the trim, and will be too glossy for the walls. The ceiling should be painted with a flat paint.

If you are going to be living in your home while you paint, I recommend a low or non-VOC paint. That type of paint is available from most brands, and it really cuts down on the odor. Expect to pay around \$30 to \$60 for a gallon of high quality, low or non-VOC paint. It's absolutely worth spending the extra money on the better quality stuff. The cheaper paints won't level out or apply evenly. Spend the extra money!

Trim and Molding Installation

Potential Savings: \$1,500-\$3,000

Trim and molding installation is a great entry-level project for DIYers. This work will include baseboard molding, window and door trim, crown molding for the cabinets and the room, and any quarter round or shoe molding on the floor. There are tons of tutorials online that will cover just about everything you need to know. You should plan on using both construction adhesive, and brad or finish nails for installing the trim.

You can borrow, rent, or buy a pneumatic nailer for this project. Pneumatic nailers make this job considerably easier than a hammer and nails. With a nail gun you can hold the trim in place with one hand while shooting a nail into the board with another. If you use a nail and hammer, you quickly run out of arms to do all the work. Some pros will prefer the hammer and nail method, but it's worth the time and aggravation to use the gun.

You'll also need access to a miter saw aka a chop saw. Yes, you can make trim cuts with a handsaw, but you won't be able to make tight precision cuts. For example, if you need to trim off 1/8" from some door trim, good luck making that cut by hand. With a miter saw and the right blade, you can make whisker thin slices with relative ease.

CHAPTER 13

THE BIGGEST MONEY SAVING PROJECTS

We've discussed how to save money on both the material and the labor side of your kitchen renovation. Now it's time to talk about the two absolute biggest ways to cut your renovation budget in half or more.

Unfortunately, these two projects are not for the faint of heart, and require a greater level of home improvement skill than we've discussed so far. Let's take a look at your biggest cost drivers for the renovation: the cabinets and the countertops. If you could reduce the price of these items by 70%-80%, or more, would you do it? Let's talk about how we're going to get those savings.

DIY Cabinets

As I mentioned in the introduction, back in 2008, I built my own kitchen cabinets from scratch. It took about two months of nights and weekends, here and there, to get them completed, but when the project was done, I probably saved \$10,000 or more compared to buying similar cabinets. All told, I probably spent around \$2,000 for lumber and hardware.

If you think I must've been some super skilled woodworking magician to pull that off, you'd be wrong. Up until that time, I hadn't built so much as toy box. What I did have though was some experience working with a miter saw and a table saw, so I wasn't afraid to use them. I gained that experience working with hardwood floors and basic molding around

the house. Aside from the fact that this project will save you a ton of money, it's especially rewarding on a personal level to build something this significant.

I have a feeling that most DIYers would never consider building their own cabinets because they think it's too hard or too much work. I'd like you to know that the hardest part of building kitchen cabinets is not the woodworking portion. It's the planning. It's always the planning. Cabinet building is pretty easy. Cabinets are boxes. Anyone can build a box.

What's involved with building kitchen cabinets? What tools are required? I'm not going to get into depth on how to build them here, because that would literally take a whole other book or a course, but I will go over some basic requirements so you can determine if this project is something you would consider. If you're interested in learning more, visit my cabinet course website: www.CabinetsFromScratch.com for both free and subscription based training options.

The first thing you'll need to build an entire kitchen's set of cabinets is space. You need a lot of room to store the lumber, cut the wood with power tools, and assemble them. You'll also need a space to finish them with stain or paint. An unfinished basement or a garage is an ideal location for this type of work. When I built the cabinets for my first home, the whole house was undergoing a renovation, so I built them in the living room. If you don't have some open space for this project, it's probably not doable. This isn't an ideal project if you live in a small city apartment for example, unless you are able to rent out some shop space temporarily.

You'll also need time to work on them. You should plan on a month or two of evening and weekend work to build and finish the cabinets. If you are under a time crunch to remodel your kitchen, then building them yourself may not be the best option. On the other hand, if you build your cabinets in the months leading up to the remodel you may be able to get them finished ahead of time.

As far as tools go, you'll need a contractor grade table saw. They tend to run in the \$200-\$500 range. A miter saw is also a requirement along with a circular saw and a workbench. Additional smaller tools include some cabinet clamps, a brad nailer, and a pocket hole kit from Kreg. If your table saw doesn't handle dado blades, then you may also need a router, although it's good to have one anyway. If you can get your hands on a jointer and a thickness planer, you'd be in a better position. You're looking at maybe \$1,000+ in tools, but you can certainly find some used power tools on Craigslist, or you may be able to borrow one from a friend to get that price a bit lower.

As I mentioned before, the hardest part about building your own cabinets is the planning stage. You'll need to know what cabinets and cabinet sizes your kitchen will need. Then you take those dimensions, and come up with a cut-list and material-shopping list. You also need to know how you're going to build the cabinets before you can determine how much wood you'll need. Luckily, there are a number of free or inexpensive software tools that can help you pick out cabinets, and then generate the cut-list for you. Refer to the Resources section of this book for links to those tools.

The construction method I recommend isn't particularly difficult. You cut out your parts from the cut list on the table saw. Cut your hardwood to length using a miter saw. Add some grooves to the plywood with a router or a dado blade. Assemble the cabinets using wood glue and pocket screws, and you're mostly done. The doors are a little trickier to build, but you can always buy the doors separately if you want. If you're pretty handy, building your own cabinets is worth considering.

DIY Countertops

The other big kitchen DIY project worth considering is countertops. I'm going to focus on two types in particular: concrete and butcher block. They are both going to cost you around \$500, but both will save you several thousand over quartz or granite.

Concrete

As we discussed in Chapter 4, concrete countertops can either be poured into place or poured into an upside down form made from melamine. If you hire someone to do this work for you, you're looking at around \$75 to \$100 per square foot. For a 30 square foot counter that's going to set you back around \$2,000 to \$3,000. It only costs \$40 for the concrete. Throw in the dyes, the mold material, and the wet grinder rental, and you're talking about saving around \$1,500 to \$2,500.

The best part is concrete counters are in high demand, and it's a heavy-duty, solid countertop. It requires a little more maintenance than granite. You will need to wax it occasionally. There are no special skills required to build the forms. You'll need around a week or two to build them, and you need to be mindful of the weight. Don't go building 4-inch thick counters, and be surprised if you can't lift them or if they buckle your cabinets. It might be in your best interest to try making a small rectangular countertop section first before you go gung-ho and attempt to build the whole kitchen's worth.

Concrete is really the only solid countertop that you can DIY. You can order granite or soapstone counters online with the intent of installing them yourself, but they are much less forgiving than concrete.

Butcher-Block

Butcher-block counters can either be purchased and installed right off the shelf, or you can build them yourself. There are a number of butcher-block counter manufacturers including Boos Brothers and Ikea that you can either purchase them online or at a local distributor. Boos is a higher quality and higher price option. Ikea isn't quite as expensive, but should still hold up fine over time and look great doing so.

To install these countertops, all you need is a circular saw with a high tooth count blade, a straight edge like a level, some clamps, and a cordless drill. The counters will get attached right to the cabinets using some pocket screws.

To make a professional cut, all you need to do is clamp down the straight edge to the counter, and run the side of the circular saw along that straight edge. You'll get a clean, straight cut every time.

Building your own butcher-block counters will be a little more time consuming, but will lower your cost even further. You'd need to purchase some rough stock wood from a lumber mill, preferably in maple, and then joint and plane the boards down to the same width and thickness. Then it's only a matter of gluing and clamping the boards together. They'll install the same way as the Ikea and Boos counters. You'll need access to some more woodworking tools than if you bought them commercially, but it's not a terribly difficult project to attempt.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I hope after reading this book, you feel more prepared and informed regarding your upcoming kitchen renovation. A kitchen remodel is a big deal in the life of your home. If it's done properly, it'll make your home that much more enjoyable. I wish you good luck and success on your upcoming project.

If you find yourself getting stuck on a decision, need some advice, or would like to bounce some ideas off me, I'm available for home improvement coaching sessions through my book's website. You can purchase a block of coaching time, and use it in small increments throughout your renovation process.

You are also cordially invited to join our [Facebook Group](#), the Our Home from Scratch Home Improvement Group for discussions with other home improvement enthusiasts. You can post a question, a comment, or even share before and after pictures of your home renovation project. It's free to join. Hope to see you there!

RESOURCES:

1. [My Experience with Concrete Countertops](#)
2. [National Kitchen and Bath Association](#)
3. [Angie's List](#)
4. [Ikea Kitchen Planning Tool](#)
5. [Cabinet Planner Kitchen Cabinet Design and Cutlist Program](#)
6. [Cabinets from Scratch Video Course](#)

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