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KITCHEN MATTERS:

Here's how to plan a kitchen remodel that really cooks

By Jane Healey

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The time has come to renovate your kitchen. You've made the decision...so now what? Who do you call?

The first step is figuring out what's important to you, and what you ultimately need from a new kitchen. Start by looking at photographs of kitchens in magazines or online for ideas about layout and design.

"The Internet is a great place to start," says Ron Drouin, designer for Kitchens by Hastings, Inc., in Saugus. "Most people don't have time to go from place to place for ideas. There's so much you can find by just sitting at your computer. You can really get a feel for what kinds of options are out there."

File away the pictures and ideas that you like best, then start jotting down notes in a format that works for you. "I highly recommend that people write things out in lists or narratives, particularly if they don't think that they're adept at reviewing three-dimensional plans," says Greg Graham, one of the owners of Graham Contracting, Inc. in Wayland. "If you make a list of likes and dislikes, this gives the person designing the kitchen a framework."

Florencia Donaghy, a homeowner in Lexington who recently had her kitchen renovated by Villandry Contracting, Inc., in Arlington, used graph paper to map out everything she wanted to do. "I think it's helpful if you come up with some good ideas on your own before you start meeting with contractors," she says. Living in her garrison Colonial home before jumping into the renovations also helped. "Until you live in the house awhile, you really don't get a good idea of traffic flow in the kitchen," she says.

Remember that there are limits to what a kitchen renovation can accomplish. It can help you use existing space more efficiently and update the look and function of your kitchen, but it won't necessarily give you more square footage or change the way you cook and clean. If someone lives their life completely cluttered, a new kitchen won't change that, says Graham. "I've learned that most of the time [people live in their new space similar to how they lived in their old space]," he says. "They should design the new space around the way they live, and be realistic with themselves about that."

TIME AND PATIENCE

Take your time to figure out what you really want, and allow yourself enough time to screen several professionals to determine who is right for your project. "I would tell people they're not going to see their kitchen come together for at least six to eight weeks," says David Villandry, owner of Villandry Contracting. "People think it can be done in a couple weeks. It doesn't happen that way. There's far too much planning involved in a kitchen project."

Just researching and deciding on the right contractor can take months. Donaghy looked for three years before finding Villandry for her project. "We contacted fifteen different contractors," she says. "Some never came; many just didn't follow through." Then Donaghy met Villandry. "He was very organized and had great ideas," she says. "In less than two weeks, he sent me a very detailed proposal and customer references."

CHOOSING RIGHT

The scope of your project and your budget will determine what kind of help you need. Options include everything from a full-service company that handles design and construction to stock cabinetry companies.

If your project is complex and you really want someone to walk you through the entire process from start to finish, consider working with a designer/builder. "We are full-service. We provide the architectural designs, help people with all of their selections and provide the construction crew," says Peter Feinmann, owner of Feinmann Remodeling, Inc., in Arlington.

For Sarah Hancock, a homeowner from Belmont, working with Feinmann "took away a lot of stress involved in the process. You might pay a little more for this level of service, but you get so much more," she says. "It was worth it."

Another possibility is working with a contractor who has a longstanding relationship with one or more kitchen designers. In this scenario, both the contractor and designer work with you on the project from start to finish.

Villandry has been working with Packard's Kitchens, Inc., a design company in Burlington, for more than 18 years. "I'm the architect. I create three-dimensional photos and pictures to help the customer visualize what I see in my head," says Villandry. "Then the customer takes the plans and meets with the designer at Packard's. They refine my plan, incorporating more details regarding cabinet configuration and countertop measurements."

This arrangement worked out perfectly for Donaghy's kitchen project. "[Villandry] is a good businessman, very organized, and he's worked with Packard's for years," she says. "There were no delays and no setbacks or headaches."

Many kitchen cabinetry shops offer custom, semi-custom and stock cabinetry at every price point, as well as professional services. If you have already chosen a contractor, or if your project is straight-forward and you're looking for on-stop shopping, working with a kitchen cabinetmaker might be your best option.

"We can take a project from start to finish, or we can work with a builder that the client has chosen already," says Drouin. First he asks potential clients to come to the showroom, where he explains the projects and services and helps them figure out if Hastings can meet their needs.

PUT IT ON PAPER

The next step is measuring the kitchen and creating computer drawings. If Drouin handles the complete project, he will work with an install manager to arrive at a cost estimate for the project. "If we're working with a client's contractor, there might be a few forks in the road," he says. "The contractor has to review the design, and that may bring up other considerations."

One caveat: If you chose to work with a kitchen cabinetmaker and contractor who have no prior relationship, it's important for them to communicate. "I've done kitchen projects where the homeowners just purchase their cabinets from me, but their personal contractor won't even take the time to meet with me," says Mary Packard, owner and designer of Packard's Kitchens of Burlington. "That is ultimately when you end up running into problems."

AND IT BEGINS

Once you've chosen the right professionals and the renovation gets underway, it's time to take a deep breath and put your faith in the experts you've chosen. If you have taken the time to figure out what you want and worked through all the details, it's only a matter of time before your dream kitchen becomes a beautiful reality.

This picture of the above referenced kitchen was not a part of the article, but was added by VCI

