

## The Reno Coach

# Making the most of your team

The key to the best possible remodel? For Cambridge, MA, real estate agent and renovation coach **Bruce Irving**, it comes down to how you orchestrate the players



WE'RE USED TO breaking work into a series of steps. First we scrape, then we prime, then we paint. Lather, rinse, repeat. Wipe on, wipe off.

But when it comes to the complex task of home renovation, I recommend that homeowners consider a less linear approach from the start. Traditionally, an architect or designer is hired, a plan finalized and put out to bid, a contractor chosen. Later, a lighting specialist, an interior designer, or a landscape person might come on board. Call it the choo-choo train method, one player brought in at a time, perhaps in an effort to keep the payroll under control, perhaps out of a mistaken belief that you can cross that bridge when you get there.

But there are costs to this method, mostly in lost opportunities and relative chaos, which can be largely avoided by what might be called the parallel-processing method (as opposed to the one-after-the-other method). It adheres to the tradition of starting with the design talent but brings in other experts as soon as possible.

Let's assume that the project is sufficiently complex to require an architect or architectural designer. In my experience, it doesn't take too much for a job to rise to that level. There's a result that comes from these folks spending time in graduate school: They've learned how to design things. And since things inevitably cost more than you'd expect, you better pay for the right thing to be built rather than the wrong one, and that takes professional design.

When it comes to architects, local is good, as you want someone familiar with the zoning and building codes in

your town and the officials in charge of enforcing them. After that, choosing one requires liking the work (see it in the flesh if possible), doing some vetting (ask for names of the last three clients—because you're only as good as your latest work—and contact those folks for a read on how those projects went), and connecting well. And ask if your

what kind of project you're going to conduct—and yes, as the homeowner, you are ultimately the conductor. The basic choice is how much professional management you want. On one end of the scale, a sole-proprietor or small-scale builder takes the architect's construction drawings and completes the project. On the other, a well-staffed general contractor works with the architect and subcontractors and assigns a project manager. That person keeps order on the job site, buying materials, scheduling the subs, and checking with the architect when questions arise.

Given the business model, the smaller outfit's price may very well end up less than the bigger firm's. The risk is that the schedule can go awry more easily, and as a result, the budget; people end up standing around or needing to come back another time (provided they can find a new slot in their calendar). A company offering management expertise mitigates that risk. And yes, you'll pay for it. Sarah Lawson, owner of S+H

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potential design partner agrees with the approach I'm outlining here before making the hire.

Then start the design work. Paper's cheap, as they say, so look at several schemes before going too deep into the details. When you're liking where it's going, STOP. Now is the time to decide

Construction in Belmont, MA, estimates that professional management adds 10 to 20 percent to the initial pricing.

Get input on the decision from your architect—who has likely seen many ways of skinning the cat—after asking for names. Having chosen your level of management (and attendant risk), meet



with a handful of candidates to discuss the scope and get ballpark estimates, then bring your chosen builder to the table. Hopefully (because a bond will develop), your builder will remain there, contributing experience-based input to every step of the remaining design process, becoming a fully invested and respected team member, involving subcontractors at key moments, and putting specific numbers to the design as it comes together, so you'll know what costs are looking like and can make decisions accordingly.

But, you say, "What about bidding the job? That's traditional too, and I don't want to get screwed!" Again, in my experience, there's less to this than you might think. Cambridge, MA, architect Maggie Booz, who has been putting together projects for over 30 years, explains it this way: "The financial part of

the bidding process is likely secondary to what the initial meeting and estimating phase actually yields: the getting-to-know-you between prospective builder and owner. Who showed up on time, who brought pertinent subs along, who did you just simply like? And then you

subcontractors and materials make up 60 to 70 percent of a job, the ultimate cost of your project is likely to be similar among equal-quality competitors."

And if your project calls for them, bring in those other disciplines early too—interiors, lighting, landscaping.

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get to bring that person on and listen to more good advice!"

Lawson concurs that, among comparable contracting businesses, there's less pricing variation than you might imagine. "Contractors who do managed, high-quality projects will have similar margins," she says. "And since

Having them on board early won't cost you much extra, if anything at all, since the same amount of work will get done, though over a longer period of time, and the forethought and planning (as opposed to course-changing and backtracking) that can accrue will almost certainly pay off in the end. ■