

Remodeling Tips

No one likes to cut a budget, especially when it's his or her own. But when it comes to planning a remodeling project, homeowners must establish a realistic budget . . . and actively manage it.

Preparing for a remodeling project is a lot like preparing to buy a car. You may know the room and style you want, but the options you choose may drive the price higher than you can reasonably afford. But there are ways to stretch the remodeling budget and end up with stylish results within budget.

Getting Started

- The most important step is finding a professional remodeling contractor for your job.
- Hire a professional contractor who is familiar with the building codes in your area. Updating work that does not meet code can be extremely expensive.
- A well-written contract can prevent costly mistakes or additions to the scope of your project. It is a critical step in maintaining your budget.
- Save money by planning ahead. Go through the design process first and choose everything you want to include in the new room(s), from appliances to light fixtures, etc. This will define your budget and prevent hasty (and costly) decisions later in the project. Be sure to include all your product and material selections in the contract to avoid confusion and unnecessary change orders. Include the model, size, color, and other specifications. It is also wise to save 10–20 percent of your budget to allow for items added to the scope of work.
- The number one way to decrease the cost of your remodeling project is product choices. Look around to determine whether you can achieve a similar look with a less expensive product.
- In addition, pay attention to how labor intensive some design features may be, for example laying ceramic tile on kitchen countertops and the backsplash.
- Compare products and their prices carefully before you make final decisions. And keep an open mind when you discuss product and design ideas with your contractor.
- Make decisions based on value and quality, not just price.
- Think about staging the work being done to minimize the initial financial impact. It is often easier to create a more manageable budget by starting small and adding to the project at a later date. This will break the work into several jobs instead of one large project. The down side of staging a remodel is that you may end up paying more in the long run.

General Remodeling Tips

- Be creative. There are often multiple solutions to accomplish a design objective, some more expensive than others. Discuss various options with your contractor.
- If all the room really needs is a facelift, make the most of changes with paint, as opposed to structural changes. Changing the color of a room can revitalize it. This is the easiest way to bring life to a room on a budget.
- Heavy or textured wallpaper can work wonders as well. You can save money by wallpapering a slightly damaged wall rather than replacing it. If the wall has grass cloth wallpaper on it, consider whitewashing it for a totally new look. Several layers of whitewash (in various shades of white) produce a clean, sophisticated look in any room.
- Faux finish painting or other textured decorative painting techniques also can hide minor damage or irregularities that flat paint won't.
- Attempt to keep windows in their existing places during a remodeling project. Moving windows is not a cost-saving endeavor.

Finding Space

- Creating more space can be a big budget buster. Once you add square footage to a home, the price increases significantly. One alternative is to borrow space from a neighboring room (called space reconfiguration). A great place to steal space for a bathroom expansion is from the linen closet. You can make up some of the lost storage by finding small spaces in between wall studs for small niches or built-in shelves.
- You can also try borrowing space with optical illusions. There are many ways to make a small room appear larger. To transform a small bath, install a bow window or a skylight. Vaulted ceilings can be a nice touch, too.
- If you are going to expand outside the existing home, consider a small bump out of two to four feet. This may allow you to cantilever the floor joists and eliminate the need for excavation and foundation. If possible, be careful not to extend beyond the roofline, which might require a new roofline to your job.
- Whenever you are adding on new space to a home, have a heating/cooling contractor determine whether your existing heating/air conditioning system can accommodate and heat/cool the extra space. If the heating/cooling system is damaged, you will be forced to replace the existing units.

In the Kitchen

- If at all possible, reuse existing appliances, and build your new cabinets around them. This could save you anywhere from \$1,500–5,000 easily. However, be aware that appliances, like anything electrical, are sensitive to change and may develop problems if they are moved. Should you decide to avoid potential appliance "burn-out" and purchase new appliances, choose energy conscious models for a reduction in your utility bills.
- Maintain present location of major fixtures, appliances and utilities relative to the plumbing, gas and electrical outlets. This could even apply to the location of the telephone. Moving plumbing, wiring and jacks can be extremely expensive.
- The faucet can be a costly item. The least expensive selection is chrome. Even a high-end chrome faucet is considerably less than a mid-range brass or porcelain version. A standard two-handle faucet generally costs less than single handle. Faucets and handles are sold separately, so you may want to choose a chrome faucet with brass or porcelain handles for a different look. Faucet caution: The price variances in faucets reflect the various internal and external features. Always choose a faucet with replaceable internal parts. You won't want to have to replace the entire faucet if it breaks – it's simply not cost-effective.
- Choose neutral colors in fixtures, appliances and laminates. They are less expensive initially and won't look dated when the color trends change. White and almond sinks are much cheaper than color varieties. And neutral laminate colors for countertops are less than custom colors or textures.
- Good floor covering is important. It ties one room to another and provides visual consistency. Familiarize yourself with the prices of the various flooring materials to make the best decision for your home. To get you started, vinyl or laminate flooring is less expensive than wood, tile or slate.
- Use the existing floor covering if it is still in good condition. If the kitchen has old vinyl flooring, there may be a hardwood floor underneath that could be sanded and refinished, avoiding the need for a new floor entirely.
- If you currently have a vinyl floor covering and wish to update with a newer version, you can install synthetic floor leveler material over the existing vinyl floor and lay the new vinyl flooring on top, rather than tearing the old flooring off to install the new.
- Consider your cabinet options carefully. Those choices will drive the overall price. You can add some options at a later date to defray some of the initial cost. Some that are easy to add include tilt front doors, spice racks and slide out wire baskets. However, if you decide to wait, make certain that the option you want will be available and can be added after installation. Note of caution: Waiting will cost you more in the long run. Adding new cabinets often requires installing a new floor. Refacing existing cabinets not only eliminates the need for new flooring, countertops and appliances altogether, it is a major savings in any kitchen remodel.

- Go with a simple design in the kitchen employing single height wall cabinets, blind corner cabinets rather than those with Lazy Susans, and other standard options. Watch your upgrades.
- Use standard cabinetry instead of custom cabinets, or use a combination of the two if they are compatible.
- Choose cabinets that can be operated without the addition of hardware (those that are finger-pulled).
- Install cabinets without soffits to decrease the labor cost. Also consider cabinets without trim moldings or with simple trim.
- If you are going to put in new wood trim (in your crown molding, trims, and door casings) to match the new cabinets, order pre-finished trim instead of having the painting or staining done on-site. This will decrease labor cost. Ordering finger-jointed vs. clear vertical grain also will save you money.
- Consider stenciling on the backsplash instead of using tile.
- Laminate countertops are the least expensive choice among solid surfacing, tile and granite. You can dress it up with wood or tile trim for a more innovative look.
- Connect fluorescent light fixtures to the existing ceiling fixture box instead of installing new recessed lighting, which may require a new ceiling because of the recessed features.

In the Bathroom

- Consider reglazing a tub instead of replacing it, especially if it is still in relatively good condition. This can save you more than half the cost of a tub replacement and minimize the dust at the same time.
- Cultured marble sheets are a good choice for tub surrounds, instead of ceramic tile. You will save considerably on labor costs and the marble sheets are much easier to clean.
- Fiberglass surrounds are also less costly than tile.
- Examine how you are utilizing space. You may be able to steal some space from a neighboring room or closet. If your overall space is limited, purchase a jetted tub and shower combination or install a pedestal lavatory instead of a vanity cabinet with a sink. Understand that while pedestal lavatories do eliminate the need for vanities and save space, some models may cost more than a separate vanity cabinet and sink.
- Cultured marble lavatories can be a great budget choice since it is an integrated sink bowl and countertop sold in one easily installed unit.
- Define what is truly needed in the bathroom. Sometimes an extra bath is planned when installing a double sink in an existing bath would meet the need.
- If you are going to add a large jetted tub to your project, consider adding a water heater dedicated to that tub. A large jetted tub can hold up to an average of 75 gallons or more, which can easily overextend your existing water heater and cause problems in the future.