

# home edition

**R**enovation dreams are coming to a Home Show near you, and soon.

There are all those lovely displays of ways to improve your igloo, dramatize your domicile, paint your pied-a-terre. The Home Show is a place to dream, just don't forget that it's fantasy material: the results may be as wonderful as advertised, but even at its best the process can bring homeowner heartache.

Yes, yes, that's the voice of very recent (ongoing) experience. I will try not to whine – anyone with enough money (or credit) to renovate a house has no business whining about it.

We are, as of this writing, five months into a three-month job: expand the kitchen from a narrow galley into an actual room, expand the two small bedrooms upstairs, and put in an upstairs bathroom (after 18 years, those trips down in the middle of the night have gotten really old). Sounds simple enough.

Our contractor had done prior work for us – he's a good, "sensitive new-age" (straight) guy, nonsmoker, someone I feel comfortable having in my lesbian-feminist home. And he had done beautiful work on some cabinets, along with excellent repairs to water damage, insulating ceilings, and installing a floor. His work partner is cut from similar cloth. They clean up after themselves, no small consideration when you're living in the space being renovated.

Let me say right now that I'm convinced anyone else would have been worse, much worse. It's the process that's painful. Lesson one: nothing will go smoothly.

We had architect's plans, broad outlines really. We agreed to go on 'time and materials' and shook hands on it – the Vermont way. We got a foundation under the new part of the

kitchen and central heating: 20 percent of the budget gone. Getting comparison quotes on (Subaru) Andersen windows instead of (Mercedes) Marvin's took almost two weeks, holding up installation. We had to shrink the bathroom 10 inches so as to not drill a 6-inch sewage pipe hole through the major support beam.

And on and on like that – small changes and large ones.

Then there are the subcontractors: electrician, plumber, tiler, countertop installer, dry-wall taper, roofer. For about two months I was sure the plumber was God – I never got to see him or talk to him directly, and could communicate with him only through the intercession of my builder.

Our builder talked a few times about how hard it is for homeowners to live in a space being renovated. "I've made homeowners cry," he said early on. We nodded, remembering that renovation appears on lists of divorce-inducing 'life stressors.' Months later when we told him, "Oh no, we never said we're putting vinyl flooring in the bathroom," we almost made *him* cry. It's still a point of disagreement as to who said what, when about the bathroom floor (we compromised on tiles – he didn't have to change the depths of the fittings, and we don't have to have cheap plastic in our nice new bathroom). The heated discussion ended with a group hug.

We've been living for months with exposed floor joists

overhead; drywall dust; splatters of taping compound everywhere; and incomplete countertops (installer's faulty assumption, despite written instructions). We had to cancel vacation plans when the plumber decided it was more important for the small cellar (home to the water pipes, furnace and water heater) to be heated than our living space (can't leave in December when your only heat is a woodstove). Every day we wrapped in plastic and unwrapped everything in the house we wanted to use.

But now we're also living with beautiful kitchen cabinets; new, more efficient appliances; lots of light through new casement windows; new plumbing; central heating; and the increasingly realized vision of

how it will be when we're done.

So, lessons learned, as my partner says, though since we're never going to do this again, those lessons might have limited applicability. But here they are: take notes; write things down; ask lots of questions – especially about time-energy-availability implications of decisions, how one thing affects three others. Try to get timetables for pieces of the project, but be flexible. The finishing of the vent for the kitchen exhaust fan waited for a month while the temperatures were lurking below zero. The interior window trim waited because the weather was then warm enough to do the outside siding. The siding session was left incomplete when the temperature dove back into negative territory. The floors (sand, stain, polyurethane x 3) waited for the drywall taping-topping-painting to be finished.

In general, builders prefer to do what's standard, what's easy, what's popular, using what they can get at their favorite lumber yard or plumbing supply house. If you want something special or different (with us it was a particular size of shower base), you might have to fight for it, even though you're the one writing the checks. That's where a lot of the frustration comes in. And everything you order will take at least a month to arrive. Remember that electricians do electrical, even when it's in the bathroom.

Final lessons: keep your eyes on the prize, plan to spend more than twice the amount you thought and for the job to take twice as long as estimated, and be careful how often and to whom you vent all that frustration. Good luck! ▼



**OITM editor Euan Bear shares a cautionary tale of home improvement: "nothing will go smoothly!"**