

LIVING LARGE

BY PAM LEVEN

The Zen of Kitchen Remodeling

For years you salivated over photos of brand-spanking-new kitchens in Architectural Digest. Now you've shared your dreams with the kitchen designer, who mind-melded with you to create The Perfect Plan. Together, you found the ideal general contractor for your Kitchen Remodeling Troika. You're mere weeks away from owning a Taj Mahal of a kitchen

Before the destruction begins, be aware that the owners of those sunny new kitchens in the magazines had to endure a construction process so dark and anxiety-ridden that no general contractor dare honestly describe it. But Pam Leven found one who would talk.

I'm not a cook. I took a cooking course ("Nutrition 101") in college and, I confess, cheated on the final because I forgot the recipe for baked custard. Bob, my honey, raves about the last dinner I made for him, a tasty rosemary-enhanced swordfish. That was in 1989, soon after we met and when I was trying to impress him. (He's a wonderful cook.) All this is to say that I care very little about the kitchen as a beautiful and functional room. But I was fascinated when licensed contractor and kitchen specialist Barry L. Schwartz explained to me the never-explained, turbulent process of kitchen remodeling.

"The kitchen is always the most expensive room in the house. It always takes longer and costs more than expected to complete," Barry says, adding ominously, "It's also the most marriage-rending room in the house."

A general contractor bidding for the job won't tell you this, he says. If he did, you wouldn't hire him.

In the construction and remodeling business, the kitchen is the most complicated room in the house because it involves trades people from every aspect of construction — carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and all the fine, specialized finishing work.

"The process is one of controlled chaos," he says. "When just one task is delayed, you get a quantum effect that delays everyone who follows." Say the plumber hits a snag and needs more time. The electrician, waiting to work next, can't afford to sit idly by, so he takes a job elsewhere. Now the original project is on hold until the electrician returns. When the work gets back on track, the possibility of delays begins anew.

"This happens from beginning to end, and it's no one's fault," Barry insists. "Owners also create delays on a routine basis."

That's because owners often lack the ability to visualize the kitchen before the project begins.

"At a certain point after demolition, an owner gets a new idea. Then we stop the job to make the change. This happens throughout, and it's the real wild card in the business. The fact is, nobody can think of everything beforehand. Nobody ever does, no matter how good he is. It's a normal part of the process — and another thing the general contractor doesn't tell you."

As an aside, Barry recommends putting in writing every variation from the initial contract. This "change order" should include the added costs, if over one or two hundred dollars, and the added time, and it should be signed by the owner.

The average kitchen project takes two months, usually three. "Six weeks would be a miracle. I've seen them go six to eight months — and that's at \$250,000, so money is not a factor in speed," he says.

Barry has been in the construction and remodeling business for more than 20 years. He recently got his general contractor license in California, but prefers to work as a subcontractor specializing in kitchens and baths. "I want to have a life," he says. "You'd be surprised at the varied backgrounds of the people on job sites."

Barry is a published writer, hoping to break into the extremely competitive children's book market. I think that side of his life gives him an excellent perspective on his profession and keen insight to its complicated interpersonal aspects.

He recommends, for example, that in choosing a general contractor, you consider each candidate's people skills in addition to technical skills. "Successful general contractors get along with clients and all the subcontractors. That's a big juggling act from beginning to end, particularly when the clients lack people skills or don't communicate well."

A key point: The aesthetic preferences of the client, the kitchen designer and the general contractor must be in sync. That's especially important because the client must make hundreds of big and small decisions, which the designer and contractor must be certain work together. Will the new dishwasher fit in the space between the counters, which must be the same height as the dishwasher? Are the electrical outlets convenient to workspaces?

"These are the kind of details that can drive owners around the bend," Barry says. "Towards the end of the project, little surprises can create hysteria."

Owners are often on the verge of hysteria anyway as the project grinds to completion.

"The job seems to slow to a crawl compared to the spectacular activity at the start," Barry observes.

At that point, finishing takes a long time and owners see no day-to-day difference. The main client contact, usually a woman, is worn out from dealing with strangers, usually men, constantly demanding decisions. She's also fed up with all the dust in her home and living without a working kitchen. Men, who are usually less involved, now get involved but find they lack the authority and control they like. The general contractor, who is running low on money, has to keep everyone focused and communicating and moving things along.

"By the end of the job, everyone is really sick of one another."

But kitchens inevitably do turn into showcases and owners do throw celebration parties and a small percentage actually do keep the promise that all clients make at the project start to invite every worker to the bash.

Barry says he extremely flattered to be invited to the parties. "I've been to some where everyone on the jobsite was invited — except the general contractor and the designer."

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