

Renovation: How to Choose An Architect and Builder

OLDER AND HISTORIC HOMES have many advantages, including, often, good design and construction, not to mention charm. But renovating them comes with special considerations. Two of your most important decisions are your choice of architect and general contractor. And the most important factor in how things will go is something integral to any important relationship: communication.

"I truly believe it's about a fit because it's a personal relationship," says Cordelia Pitman, an architect who is director of preconstruction services at Wright-Ryan Construction and a Landmarks board member. "Most issues come from lack of communication or lack of understanding."

Before you can articulate to an architect or builder what you have in mind, it must be clear to you first. Collect pictures from magazines, even show the architect knobs or paint colors you've chosen. If you have a fat binder of ideas, you may want to cull it to a manageable thickness, Pitman says. The choices you've made help demonstrate your taste, says Board member and architect Carol J. DeTine of Carriage House Studio.

Architects and builders have distinct expertise, but you are the expert on your home and how you live in it, Pitman says. Think about how you will be using the renovated space, now and in the future. How many children do you have and how will they use the space? How much storage do you need? Will this renovation need to work for future owners or will it to cater only to your current needs? What steps should be taken to make the house more energy efficient? What historic details would you like to preserve or enhance? Write down all such considerations.

Talk to friends who have hired architects and contractors, get leads from Greater Portland Landmarks, and call the references of anyone you might hire. Find out what homeowners liked and did not like about the architects or builders on your list.

"References are critically important," says Dan Kolbert of Dan Kolbert Building and Renovations in Portland. In fact, he says, they're more important than initial competitive bids. "It's an essential question: Does the contractor

have a track record of bringing a project in on budget? Renovation work requires trust on all sides."

Another chance for communication with an architect is the proposal he or she will give you after discussing your project. It provides an early opportunity to speak up and clarify anything you don't agree with or don't understand, says Pitman.

"I do most of my work on existing houses, so I find that people need a proposal, and it's impossible to provide one without seeing the house," says DeTine. "Any interview would take place at the house, where I talk to the owner and find out what they're trying to do."

Be clear about your budget and your desires, and don't let politeness or your own lack of expertise get in the way of expressing any hesitations, say these experts. Ask questions and say so if something is not going the way you hoped or intended.

If you name a low budget figure out of fear of being overcharged, your architect may not draw what you want and your builder may not be able to deliver what you need, they say.

"It's okay to say, 'no, that's not what I want,'" Pitman says. "It's you paying for it and living in it."

In order to build up the trust and good working relationships required of a renovation, you, the builder, and the architect should be communicating together as early as the design phase, say Pitman and Kolbert.

Most renovation, even on an historic building, will not be much limited by preservation rules. Still, it's important to choose an architect and builder who have experience working with older and historic homes. They will know how to work with preservation boards and how to design a renovation that will match your home's historic features.

Finally, be prepared for potentially expensive problems to arise. Older homes often have code or maintenance issues that must be addressed before the project can go forward. "The most common issues are things that don't meet engineering codes, rot, and substandard wiring," says Kolbert. "A little bit of exploratory demolition is likely to unearth those things, but things do come up. The funkier the house, the greater the likelihood of unexpected problems." ■

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Historic Markers:

1. Thomas Burrage House, 53 Chadwick Street, Western Promenade Historic District, Portland; Tudor Revival, 1931; Gary Duford and Tom Hinkle, current owners
2. John H Davis House, 62 Bowdoin Street, Western Promenade Historic District, Portland; Shingle Style, 1883; Gene and Ruth Story, current owners

Replacement Markers:

3. The Shaarey Tphiloh Temple, 145 Newbury Street, Portland, 1904 (Maine's Oldest Synagogue)
4. The Charles Q. Clapp Block II, 135-139 Park Street, Portland, Spring Street Historic District, 1846

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