

The Designer's Kitchen Renov

In an open, minimalist room, inaccuracies are glaring. Working with large tiles, getting the pitch and niche placement in the steam shower took extremely detailed advance planning. Project managers worked with the designer to keep grout lines seamless and clean, placing the steam generator within a bench inside the walk in shower.



Role in & Bath ations

A team leader, an expeditor, a project coordinator, a communicator and a client advocate...when it comes to renovation projects, these are all responsibilities that an interior designer undertakes...and many more. The role of the interior designer continues to evolve and reveal itself as integral to the success of any project team. When it comes to renovation projects, specifically kitchens and baths, the interior designer needs specialized expertise to deliver the desired results and forge a long-lasting client relationship.

In a do-it-yourself world, the best service a designer can provide is catching clients before they try to do a kitchen or bath renovation themselves. Overwhelmed with options and aesthetic possibilities and unaware of the technical and code compliance issues, the role of the designer is to guide and educate the client.

“As kitchens and baths are the most expensive rooms in the house to renovate, they are the two worst projects for a non-professional to tackle on their own,” comments Marc Schlessler, Chief Design Officer for MyHome, LLC.

Like many areas of design, these two project types have their own unique set of challenges. Examining the working relationships, key moments in the design process and the typical challenges will reveal the intricacies of these renovations and the importance of enlisting the right team to successfully complete kitchen and bath projects.

A small New York City kitchen was renovated to 5 times its original size in a zig-zag configuration. During demolition, gas pipes were found in the walls. The pipes could not be moved so the designer and contractor decided to enhance the dazzling wall tile scheme and the blue green palette using iridescent pearl tiles surrounding the pipe. The tiles dematerialize the pipe.



Photo courtesy of MyHome

NEW YORK METRO

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Teamwork is important for the success of any project and when it comes to kitchen and bathroom remodeling, it is no different. The designer needs to be a communications chameleon as they work to develop strong relationships with all of the parties involved. They need to enlist a strong team in order to achieve success. This is part of the value the designer brings to their client. The team necessary to complete a successful kitchen or bath remodel may vary, but seamless communication as well as trust and mutual respect are important components for all those involved.

Communication is key when working with the architect, and it begins with clear direction from the client. It is important that all parties understand their responsibilities and who controls the design integrity of the project. Clarify where the architect's involvement starts and stops and how the interior designer will collaborate with the architect on the design concept. This relationship will vary based on experience levels, technical and structural issues as well as the client's direction. If everyone understands their roles, then the process runs smoothly and the design phase moves closer to construction.

Aside from working with an architect, designers may also work in conjunction with kitchen and bath specialists who are in tune with the product offerings, manufacturers and the intricacies of planning these spaces. The kitchen and bath specialist can support the project with the necessary technical drawings utilizing specialized software to create the proper documentation. Plumbing drawings are critical, so if the interior designer does not typically create this type of documentation, then the kitchen and bath specialist offers another level of detail that can alleviate problems later. With all of the products available and all of the circumstances to be prepared for, the interior designer can offer these additional experts to the success of the client project.

“Kitchen and bath design is very technical and repairing mistakes is very costly,” describes Schlessler. “If an interior designer does not specialize in kitchen and bath design, then involving a kitchen and bath specialist will bring tremendous value and give the client the best service possible.”

“Have patience with all parties,” advises Allan Linder, Director of New Business Development for MCK+B. “Allow each party to follow through with their expert knowledge. After all, that is why the client hires an interior designer, architect and a kitchen and bath designer.”

This team works together to create the best solution on paper, but then it requires another level of team work with a contractor to make the design a reality. “It is important to keep a list of good contractors as a designer must count on high quality craftsmanship to maintain the design integrity,” comments John Buscarello, ASID of John A. Buscarello, Inc.

It is crucial that everyone understands their roles and responsibilities in the construction process and that one point of contact is established. Whether it’s the interior designer or a project manager, there needs to be one contact giving direction to the contractor to avoid confusion.

Other relationships prove to be important throughout these renovations. Buscarello believes building relationships with the building management will serve the designer well. By respecting the managing agent and the other tenants in the building, the designer will maintain peace. Other support staff such as a good expeditor is also important. Remodeling projects are full of surprises, such as bad plumbing and crooked walls, so the better the support team; the better the designer can handle these surprises.

From the managing agent and expeditor to the architect, kitchen and bath specialist and contractor, it is important to work with reputable professionals and have a mutual respect for all parties involved. Still, in the end the client is the priority and when everyone else walks away from the kitchen and bath remodel, the interior designer has a long term relationship to keep in mind.

THE DESIGN PROCESS – THE CHALLENGES

Like any design project, the first step in a bathroom or kitchen remodel is to listen to the client’s needs and work with them to develop a solution that suits their home, their lifestyle and their budget. Understanding the client’s daily routine, the limitations of their physical environment and budget constraints require listening and research skills that prepare the designer for their problem solving task.

“Understand the client needs,” comments Linder. “Kitchen and bath designs are based on only two things: function and aesthetics. One is usually more important to the client than the other. Know which one.”

As the design team works with the client’s needs and wants, they also need to adhere to accessibility and building codes and understand the intricacies and restrictions placed on their client’s home by condo or community boards and building by-laws. Building by-laws may restrict the duration of renovation projects which can impact the project timeframe and design details.



John Buscarello created a hearth area around the stove – a major focal point. The stone he used is Jerusalem Stone with Vermont Green Marble.

The by-laws may also restrict the type of work that can be performed. In some cases bath tubs and other fixtures may not be permitted to be removed. Amperage issues may also dictate the types of appliances that can be specified. Ventilation issues and building by-laws preventing walls from being moved may restrict design options. ADA requirements need to be considered when a construction permit is necessary and in many cases the required space is difficult to accommodate, once again challenging the designer.

The ultimate challenge is how to make the codes and rules work within the design intent. As part of this problem solving stage, the designer may need to work with an architect to develop a design concept or partner with them to gain proper approvals and permits for the floor plans. When square footage is of enormous value, the planning stage takes time. In kitchen and bath renovations every inch counts, so exact measurements are of the utmost importance. Designers can spend three to four months planning the space prior to construction.

As the design plans are being developed, the designer works with the client and coordinates with all appropriate parties to make educated product, finish and material selections. The role of the interior designer is once again that of a guide and educator.

With numerous options available in cabinetry, hardware, countertops, appliances, lighting etc., the designer helps the client navigate through the maze of possibilities and select items that best suit the budget, the building conditions and the timeframe as well as the lifestyle of the client and overall design intent. The designer also assesses stair and elevator conditions to make sure all of the selected materials can travel to the work area and is informed on product availability and delivery issues.

“The choices are overwhelming and the designer becomes an editor who helps the client work through the choices,” comments Buscarello. “Consumer stores and showrooms tend to be sales focused and concentrate on the narrow scope of the sale, while the designer is focused on the client’s needs and the big design picture.”

Many designers find that enlisting the services of a kitchen and bath specialist is in the best of interest of their client, and it allows them all to work through this process smoothly and expeditiously. The collaboration between the interior designer and kitchen and bath specialist throughout the design phase will insure that the client is receiving all of the appropriate product knowledge that will support the decision making process without losing sight of the big picture.

As these product decisions are made and orders are placed, taking the time to review the details and double check the documentation helps to prevent issues from arising later in the process. “The extra time spent up front is time well spent,” advises Benjamin Huntington, ASID, CID, FSIA and ASID President-Elect New York Chapter. “Keep your eye on the present, but impeccable links to the future. This will allow you to follow a paper trail and provide speedy resolutions if problems arise.”

With the design finalized, the selections made and the orders placed, the designer’s role takes on new meaning. “Once the drawings and specifications are complete, the designer’s role becomes that of acting as the client’s agent. Our responsibility is to make sure contractors understand everything, and that their prices reflect the quality of their work,” describes Huntington. “We act as the client’s protector; we are the first and last line of defense between the client and the contractor.”

It is in the best interest of the designer to be involved in selecting the general contractor. Both the client and the designer need to establish a level of comfort and trust with the contractor. The designer needs to communicate the project aesthetic with the entire construction team and not assume they will understand the intent from the plans. Organization, communication and documentation will help to create a good working relationship throughout the construction phase.

“Don’t assume the contractor will know how to position things because once it is in, it is too late,” comments Schlessler. “Think about if you have told them everything they need to know, and inspect the inventory of materials immediately to make sure it is right.” Cabinetry, appliances and countertops are all expensive components of the design, staying in tune with the delivery and inspection of all of these details will help eliminate any surprises.

When issues arise, the role of the designer is to be a problem solver. “Mistakes happen, (and) it’s how you approach the resolution to the problem and interface with the people involved that makes it successful or not,” describes Huntington.

While your documentation may prove who is at fault, Buscarello advises to use communication and reason to work through the issue. It may be an opportunity to rethink things rather than to just fix it.

Designers experienced in this type of work cannot say enough about the importance of time management and documentation. Schlessler creates a spreadsheet in Microsoft Project that outlines the roles, responsibilities, tasks and deadlines of everyone involved. Regular site meetings are held early in the morning on the job site to keep everyone on the same page. This allows time to address issues that arise in a timely manner. When the project is complete a final inspection will help resolve any lingering details and insure that everyone is satisfied with the final product.

SMART DESIGN

While there is already enough to think about in a basic kitchen or bath renovation project, technological advancements continue to challenge clients, designers and contractors. Some of the buildings in New York may not be ready to handle some of the more advanced technology or the building by-laws may have restrictions that prevent certain types of technology from being incorporated.

Products that are energy efficient and address ergonomics are what Schlessler finds to be the “smart” features more frequently incorporated in today’s kitchens. Refrigerators with the freezer located in the bottom position and sound features that indicate a door is open are typical amenities he is including. Wall ovens and separate cook tops versus ranges that protrude into the typical galley kitchen are preferred and induction cook tops are being introduced more readily. Touch controls to simplify cleaning, touchless faucets and light switches, as well as “very quiet-to-silent” appliances are Manhattan friendly technological advancements that Schlessler finds worth the investment.

Linder also finds induction stoves and ultra-sanitary soap dispensers with built-in motion detectors to be frequently used smart design features. In addition, he highlights microwaves that cook food perfectly by scanning a barcode on the food package and kitchen multimedia centers that control lighting, entertainment and email. He references smart range hoods that disappear into cabinetry and countertop materials with built-in antimicrobial product protection that safely fight the growth of odor-causing bacteria.

While the kitchen technology focuses on function, the bathroom technology is all about the experience. Designers are working with clients to create a space that will pamper and relax - a simulated spa experience. While the plasma screens or integrated television mirror technology is available, it is not frequently incorporated. Steam rooms are a more sought after amenity as well as aromatherapy in bathtub installations. Shower jets that give people the carwash shower experience typically come with a lot of valves and controls, so Schlessler recommends digital valves that allow the client to program their shower experience. This makes the controls easier to use and more aesthetically pleasing. Multi user controls – *his and hers* – also simplify and enhance the home spa experience. Medicine cabinets with anti-fogging mirrors are user friendly and more sophisticated lighting applications enhance any project.

When considering these technologically savvy options, designers need to research both the product and the building capabilities to make sure the product is usable in the client’s space. If the

water pressure in the building isn’t right, then the water in the carwash style shower may just trickle out.

There are pros and cons to integrating these features into the overall design. According to Huntington, “Smart design can often be more expensive and contractors tend to have less experience with the installation. Encouraging the contractor and building management to use new materials can be difficult.”

Still, Huntington finds that in some instances state-of-the-art technology may perform more efficiently and help resolve complex design issues. Furthermore, Linder believes, “These features enhance the quality and simplicity of life while beautifying your surroundings and hiding the processes that make them smart technology.”

Manufacturers continue to experiment with technological advancements; still some designers consider smart design a work in progress. While clients are enjoying the convenience of warming drawers and espresso makers, they are not always sold on more cutting edge technology.



Photo courtesy of MyHome

This bathroom renovation illustrates two distinct challenges that demonstrate the critical need for close collaboration between designers and contractors:

- 1.) The freestanding tub with center drain mandated re-setting of the drainpipe, a difficult task in New York City apartments.
- 2.) The floor tiles are oversized with aluminum accents. Without a designer’s input, they might have been oriented incorrectly and therefore upset the balance and harmony in the bathroom

KITCHEN AND BATH DESIGN EXPERTS

“Kitchen and bath renovations are not easy, they are complicated and different from a typical project,” comments Buscarello. “Tackling this type of work without experience can be a good way to ruin a client relationship.”

Long term relationships are the foundation of many designers’ businesses, so it is important to understand the unique challenges of these projects and the advantage of creating a team of trusted and experienced professionals. The right team will deliver the best possible kitchen and bath solution for your client, their trust in you will grow and your most important role will continue to be “their preferred designer.” ■