



by Mark Cooper

RECIPE FOR A GREAT KITCHEN RENO

For thousands of years, the hearth was the centre of every home. Today, more people are recognizing the importance of their kitchens as gathering places and entertainment areas, as well as just somewhere to cook meals.

So, when you're considering a renovation, the kitchen is a key room to focus on. And whenever we have a job that includes a major upgrade to the kitchen, my first call is to Barry.

I know Barry Payne will provide invaluable advice about kitchen furnishings and finishings. And even more important, I get Barry involved in the planning and design from the outset. He learned the craft from his father in England, did a lot of construction there, and returned to this career when he retired from corporate life 20 years ago and started XL Kitchens and Bath Design Inc. Since then, he's built some of the most impressive kitchens and baths on the North Shore.

We agree on a lot of the fundamentals. Such as recognizing that it's better to be happy with the room layout than to try to work around existing door and window placement. If you're doing a real renovation, it's not very hard or expensive to move a door or window.

Much of the cost will be to make sure you get quality cabinets. Cheap materials won't stand up to time. And you can put new faces on old cabinets, but faces are the most expensive part anyway, so you might as well get good, solid, well made boxes behind them.

Barry notes there's big difference between cabinets with solid backs and those you often find in stores that just have a hanging strips

covered with a thin sheet of melamine. Install those and the cupboards will tend to warp over time, causing hinges to go out of alignment and doors to stick...

There's also a big advantage to buying locally manufactured cabinetry because the wood is already acclimatized to our moist air, so you won't see the problems created by expansion and shrinkage that you can get with pieces imported from dryer climates.

"It's amazing how many new homes, especially spec houses, have base cabinets with doors instead of drawers," Barry notes. From my point of view, homeowners should be planning well ahead. If you're an empty-nester in your 50s, you want to have deep, full-extension drawers so you won't be down on your hands and knees searching for pots and pans when you're 70 or 80.

The same thinking applies to bathrooms. As well as putting in heated floors for \$10 or \$12 per square foot, and considering things like a steam shower, think about including things like a shower seat...

I like to think I know a lot about wood finishings. But Barry's a specialist, and it's well worth getting his advice on what finish will stand up so you can be sure it's going to last. He has cabinets in his demo kitchen that still look like new after 10 years of daily use.

If you're surprised by the cost of new cabinets, be prepared for a real shock at what high quality countertops will set you back – five to eight thousand, maybe more. But they're worth it. They're a fundamental part of your investment

in your home equity, and you want all the quality you're going to be paying for. I especially like the new quartz pieces Barry has been showing me.

If you have a kitchen layout that allows for an island, great. We've had very positive feedback from homeowners who go with a big island – one was five feet by 10 feet, for a large family that entertains a lot and uses it to set up smorgasbord-type meals. It really helps the kitchen become the heart of the house. But get good design advice, to be sure its going to be functional as well as an entertainment feature.

With any reno, lighting is key. Under-cabinet, pendant or pot-lights can be planned in to ensure you have light to work by and to show off your kitchen design.

Finally, despite Mike Holmes's advice to "always get three quotes," Barry and I agree that this seldom works well, especially not with kitchen renos. "I could always be the low bidder," Barry says. "I would just have to modify the quality to suit the bid, and it's almost impossible to create specifications so that all bidders are required to provide the same quality. The only way to get a really good job at a fair price is to have confidence in the individual you hire."

I couldn't have said it better.

As you read this, I'm on my way back from Britain. Running a company called Shakespeare Homes, I just had to visit Stratford... As always, feel free to e-mail me with your renovation questions and topics for future articles.

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