

ALL THINGS HOME®

MINI RENO GUIDE

How to Keep Your Reno From Going Off the Rails

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About the author



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Anita is co-founder and president of All Things Home®. A career journalist with more than 25 years as an editor and writer at the Ottawa Citizen, she was Homes Editor for five years, reporting on the new and resale home markets, renovations, design, architecture, gardening and more. She has covered the Ottawa housing industry since 2011.

Who is this guide for?

Anyone planning a home renovation who wants to keep their spouse, sanity and bank account.

Why read it?

Knowledge is power. With this guide you will learn important information to plan and complete a successful renovation that minimizes delays and helps you stick to your budget.

Several renovation pros, from celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler to top Ottawa companies, share their expert advice.

It's all packaged in an easy-to-read, step-by-step format to guide you through your project.

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INTRODUCTION



The nature of renovations is such that you can pretty much guarantee something will go wrong.

Renovators will never know exactly what they're going to find behind your walls until they open them up. If they're experienced, they'll have a good idea of typical things they might find, like knob and tube wiring in an old Glebe home, but they can still hit obstacles with the unexpected.

A good example is celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler. He's had several shows on HGTV and one of his most recent, called [Island of Bryan](#), shows how a project can go spectacularly off the rails. In his case, he knew what he was getting into and chose to dive in anyway, but still...

A year behind schedule

For close to two years, Bryan and his wife, Sarah, restored an abandoned boutique hotel resort in the Bahamas, an adventure chronicled on the show. Their initial plan was to take six months renovating enough of the property so that they could open in the fall of 2018. A year after that target date they still hadn't opened. They eventually did open for business in late 2019.



Bryan and Sarah Baeumler, *Island of Bryan*, on HGTV.
Photo courtesy HGTV Canada.

Their journey is an example of how problem after problem delayed progress, chewed up their budget and forced a rethink of many of their plans.

If someone as well known and experienced as Bryan Baeumler can have a project go off the rails, does that mean you're doomed to the same fate?

Not at all. It just means you have to be prepared.

“There are always surprises, but part of doing a good project is knowing they will happen and how you react when they happen.”

Norm Lecuyer, Owner, ARTium Design Build & Just Basements

Keeping your reno from going off the rails comes down to 7 key things, and the responsibility is on both you as the homeowner and whoever you hire to do your project. Those 7 keys are:

1. Plan, plan, plan
2. Hire pros
3. Budget well
4. Get it in writing
5. Be flexible
6. Communicate
7. Stick to your plan

So, what does it mean to have a reno go off the rails?

It can mean several things, but typically involves going over budget and/or blowing your timeline. And those two issues usually crop up thanks to hidden obstacles and something referred to as scope creep.

Scope creep is when the defined parameters of the job increase or balloon because after the project has begun, you think of other things you want to add, such as replacing all the flooring on your main floor when you were initially planning to just renovate your kitchen.

Let's take a closer look at those 7 keys.

KEY #1: PLAN, PLAN, PLAN...



...and plan some more.

Celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler would be the first to tell you that the best way to keep your project on track is to plan, plan, plan. Part of the reason his resort project went sideways is because they jumped in so quickly.

He admits that it would have been better to take two years to plan it out first (instead of just a couple of months), but that kind of timeline was not part of their business plan for the project.

“We knew what we were getting ourselves into,” he says. “It was chaos trying to plan and manage a project as you’re into it.”

Ottawa’s top renovators emphasize the importance of planning. It’s the cornerstone of every successful project, from a simple DIY to a major overhaul of your home.

“Prepare, prepare, prepare — I can’t stress that enough. An hour spent up front saves three or more down the road,” says Brent Young, president of Carleton Kitchen & Bath.

“How many times do we hear that projects are months behind schedule and thousands of dollars over budget — and it’s all preventable. A successful project is all about planning.”

Herb Lagois, Lagois Design-Build-Renovate

What does planning mean?

First, it means defining your goals, says Steve Barkhouse, president of [Amsted Design-Build](#), Ottawa’s 2021 renovator of the year winner. “Really know what it is that you want to achieve.”

Ask yourself:

- What works in your space right now and what doesn’t?
- What are must-haves and what are nice to have if your budget allows?
- What’s the future of your home? Is your family growing? Are kids moving away? Will you be downsizing? Is it your forever home or will you move in a few years?

Be sure to write all of these things down, adds Norm Lecuyer, owner of ARTium Design Build & Just Basements. Once you’ve done that, you can take a look at the scope of your project to help you determine whether you have the budget for it and what kind of renovator you’ll need. (More on budgets and hiring in a bit.)

And once you have your team in place you can start on the design. For all but the most basic remodel, it’s wise to have it professionally designed, whether that’s through an independent designer or architect you’ve chosen or through your renovation firm’s in-house design staff.

“The biggest mistake people make is seeing design as a luxury service and they really need to realize it is an essential service,” says Moneca Kaiser of Moneca Kaiser Design Build. “It’s the only way to control cost and ensure value.”

It also makes it easier for you and your team to choose all your features and finishes before construction begins, which is a crucial step in keeping things from going off the rails. Specialized materials, in particular, can slow things down if they get back ordered. But even regular materials are taking much longer to deliver, thanks to the pandemic.

And having all of these decisions made ahead of time means there is one less thing to have to remember once construction has begun.



Porcelain slabs are a specialized product now available in Ottawa. They’re seen in this shower by Amsted Design-Build and StyleHaus Interiors.

Don't jump in too soon

When it comes to construction, don't be in a rush to jump into this stage, says Young. Rushing into things before they are properly planned out is a recipe for going off the rails.

Often a renovation is spurred by things happening in our lives, like a baby on the way or wanting a project done before Christmas so you can host the family for dinner, adds Lecuyer, but these are not good reasons to start prematurely. You'll just cause more grief in the end.

"You're better to delay that start date and start when everything is ready than to start it early and have delays in the project because things aren't in yet or not prepared," says Young.

Bumps in the road

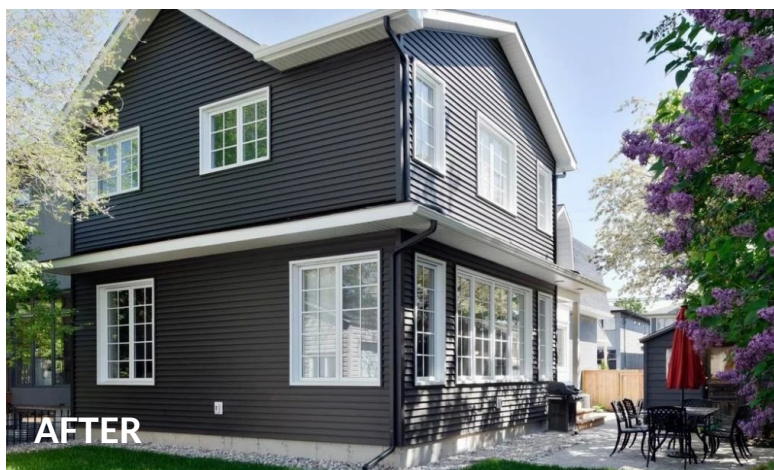
It's also important to plan for bumps in the road, says Lecuyer, because you're almost guaranteed that something will come up to slow down your project. But if you're working with a good company, they will draw on their experience to anticipate and see patterns to plan for what they can, he says.



For instance, for the past five years or so, ARTium & Just Basements have not found any cast iron piping in Ottawa homes that is still viable. That has prompted the firm to recommend to its clients that if they have cast iron piping to budget for replacement because if the company has to break up the slab to connect new plumbing, they will invariably find that the old piping is no longer holding up.

Experienced firms will do as much investigation as they can ahead of time to determine what they're dealing with in a home. That includes cutting holes in walls to peek inside and bringing through their electricians, plumbers and other trades to identify red flags.

This is an example of a complex project that finished on time, thanks to careful planning before construction.



The project by [Lagois Design-Build-Renovate](#) involved demolishing a poorly done old addition and failing deck and replacing them with a much more functional two-storey addition that respected its neighbourhood.

It was a five-month project that did have hiccoughs along the way such as discovering after construction had begun that there was some incorrect plumbing that had to be fixed, but Lagois says that in their exit interview once the job was done, the clients gave the company a 10 out of 10 score on the experience.

In another example, this project by Carleton Kitchen & Bath is a good illustration of preparation versus execution.



This renovation took 12 weeks to complete, but the planning stage was closer to two years, Young says. That was partly because the homeowners needed almost a year to decide how much of a renovation they wanted to do, but then there was another 10 months of designs and revisions before they were ready to go.

It's a good example of why it's so important to thoroughly plan everything out before you start.

“People always underestimate the amount of planning that a renovation takes.”

Josh Zaret, vice-president, Gemstone Corp.

Harmful substances

Something else to be aware of in your planning is what's known as the [Designated Substances Report](#). Many in the industry either aren't aware of this or choose to brush it off as insignificant, says Barkhouse, but it can not only derail your project, it can end up costing you a lot of money.

Here's what you need to know:

- The property owner is responsible to ensure their home is free of certain designated substances, such as asbestos, before a renovation or repair begins.
- Specific designated substances found in many Ottawa homes can be hazardous to occupants and workers when disturbed during construction. They need to be identified before work begins.
- Any Ottawa home built before 1994 needs to have a report done before work begins. A reputable firm should bring this to your attention and many will facilitate getting the report done for you, building the cost into their estimate.
- If you don't get the report done, the Ministry of Labour can shut down your project and possibly fine you. You also leave yourself open to a potential lawsuit from a worker claiming adverse effects from a hazardous substance.



Research sources

When it comes to planning your renovation and your initial research, the [Canadian Home Builders' Association](#) (CHBA) and the [Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Association](#) (GOHBA) both offer helpful tips and advice. The CHBA even includes worksheets to help you plan.

You'll also find lots of helpful advice on [All Things Home](#).

KEY #2: HIRE PROS



Another sure-fire way to have your reno go off the rails is not hiring the right person for the job. We've all heard the horror stories of a reno gone south because of a contractor who skipped out or because the work was so shoddy that it had to be ripped out and done over again.

But if you take the time to carefully vet your renovator, you shouldn't have a problem.

Celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler [likens the process to choosing a spouse](#) because it really is a relationship you're creating and since you're trusting that person with your biggest asset and your haven, you want to be sure you do trust them.

“You want to make sure you’ve hired someone that you can talk to, someone that you trust, someone you have a good relationship with,” he says.

There are different routes to go when choosing someone for your project, depending on your needs and resources. Not everyone can afford an architect or a designer, for instance. Or maybe you want to manage the project yourself, or you just need a small contractor for a small job rather than a big design-build firm.

So, how do you find someone?

Referrals: Many of the good firms, whether a small contractor or a big design-build company, get most of their work through referrals. So, start with friends and family you trust who have had work done and ask if they’d recommend their contractor.

GOHBA/RenoMark: The local housing association is another option. Members have to follow a code of ethics, providing some assurance to homeowners. Within the association is a program called [RenoMark](#), which provides even stricter guidelines for participating companies, who are pre-screened and must meet strict guidelines for things such as insurance, workers’ compensation coverage and credibility.



All Things Home: This site is, fundamentally, a resource site for homeowners. It includes curated directories of professionals that you can turn to when you’re starting your search. Although we don’t specifically endorse the companies listed in the directories, if they have been included then they have at least had a first-level check to make sure they are reputable.

Baeumler Approved: Baeumler started the [Baeumler Approved](#) program as a way to help homeowners navigate the home improvement and building industry. The companies included have been vetted, although you still need to do your due diligence.

BBB: The [Better Business Bureau](#) is helpful not only for the big guys but for some of the smaller ones, too, and the BBB is an impartial way to check on a company.



For some of the small firms, it can be more difficult to figure out whether you can trust them, says Norm Lecuyer, owner of ARTium Design Build & Just Basements, particularly since anyone can create a good-looking website these days, not just the ones with big bucks. If they don't have a portfolio and don't mention how long they've been in business, be wary.

[OakWood](#) vice-president of operations Patricia Liptak-Satov points out that you also need to pay attention to how long they've been in business.

“Many simply total up the number of years of everyone in the company to come up with an impressive number — so 10 people with three years' experience translates into 30 years of experience.”

Checking them out

Once you have a shortlist of possible companies or contractors, you need to research and interview them. The CHBA has a great [list of questions](#) to ask on their website, but one you'll definitely want to ask is for a list of references and whether or not you can visit a current job site to get an idea of how they work.



And don't neglect to check out the references, including visiting the clients' homes. “It's not a guarantee that their next job will be great but it's better than nothing,” says Lecuyer.

If you're researching renovators in the fall, there's a great annual opportunity to both see their work and ask them questions. Every October, several of Ottawa's top renovators, who are all RenoMark members, take part in a house tour

showcasing some of their recent renovation projects. Since the onset of the pandemic, the tours have been done virtually. Get details at renotour.ca.

Choose your team based on your project, your personality, your needs, and your budget, says Steve Barkhouse, president of Amsted Design-Build.

“Choose carefully – people don’t do that, they rush into choosing someone, but that’s not the way to choose.”

Steve Barkhouse, president, Amsted Design-Build

If you want to try hunting online for someone, you can try an online forum like the Facebook group [Find a Contractor Ottawa](#), but keep in mind that those folks have not been vetted and you need to check them out very thoroughly.

KEY #3: HAVE A REALISTIC BUDGET



If you are hoping to budget \$20,000 for a kitchen renovation, you can't expect to get a kitchen like this Astro Design Centre project, which cost more than \$40,000 for the materials alone, never mind the labour.

If you've never dipped your toe into renovations, you may have no idea how much a renovation should cost you. There are a lot of variables and you really won't know until you start getting estimates from renovators, but it's good to have at least a ballpark idea.

So, it's helpful to come up with a realistic budget and that means doing some research. One place to start is the annual [Cost vs. Value Report](#) put out by Remodeling Magazine. Although it has U.S. pricing, you can extrapolate to give you an idea.

Then it's a matter of being forthcoming with your renovator, says Brent Young, president of Carleton Kitchen & Bath. Many homeowners don't like to reveal just how much they're willing to spend because they fear their renovator will try to find ways to use up the whole budget, but if you trust your renovator and are honest with them, they can help you find ways to get the most out of your budget and stretch how far it can go.

Your contingency fund

It's also important to plan for contingencies. That means setting aside a portion of your budget to deal with those unexpected surprises that come up, like finding wonky wiring behind your walls. Your contingency fund is not for extras like switching to a marble backsplash after already deciding on porcelain tiles.

We often hear celebrity contractors say your contingency fund should be 25 or 30% of your budget, which is a huge amount. Most good local companies recommend a 10% contingency fund, saying that they should be able to effectively anticipate likely issues that will come up so that you don't need an overly large contingency fund.



Making comparisons

Homeowners assume contractors are all essentially the same and based on that, they assume the lowest price will give them the best value and save them money, notes OakWood vice-president of operations Patricia Liptak-Satov.

“But often the lowest price costs them the most. If a contractor's price is significantly lower, there's a reason. They haven't included something in their proposal, which isn't discovered until the project starts, or they have quoted on much lower quality options.”

If it sounds too good to be true, it likely is.

KEY #4: GET EVERYTHING IN WRITING



One of the best ways to protect yourself as a consumer and help keep things on track is to make sure you and your renovator have a signed contract that details everything, including:

- scope of work
- materials to be used
- schedule of work
- when payments are to be made
- what happens if a product needs to be substituted

“Everything needs to be planned very clearly, everybody needs to understand it and it needs to be documented so that everybody understands it, and then it needs to be signed,” says Steve Barkhouse, president of Amsted Design-Build.

One way to put yourself at risk of your project going off the rails is to be tempted by a lower “cash only” offer, which means you have no protection, or by

automatically opting for the lowest offer. Make sure you're choosing someone reputable and make sure you have a signed contract.

Written agreements and contracts are important even if you're DIYing, says Brent Young, president of Carleton Kitchen & Bath. There will be some professionals you need to hire, like an electrician or a plumber. If you have only verbal agreements it can lead to conflict and miscommunication, while a written record helps everyone involved to "remember" what's been discussed and decided on.

There are different types of contracts that can be used. The CHBA [explains them in detail](#).

KEY #5: BE FLEXIBLE



The cabinetry in this project had to be reconfigured when a hidden structural beam was discovered during demolition.
Photo courtesy Amsted Design-Build / StyleHaus Interiors / Irpinia Kitchens

“(A reno) requires as much planning as a new home and it requires way more flexibility,” says Josh Zaret, vice-president, Gemstone Corp.

We need to be flexible because no matter how much we plan, something will come up to disrupt that plan.

“100% of the time you will find things you don’t expect,” says celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler.

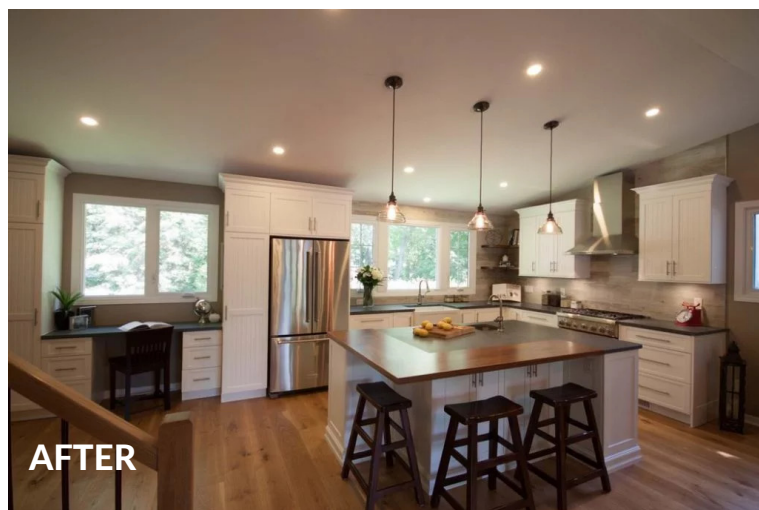
That means you need to be prepared to shift gears, make changes and adjust.

In the above project by Amsted, StyleHaus Interiors and Irpinia Kitchens for instance, a structural pole was found within the millwork during the kitchen

demolition that required an adjustment to the cabinet layout. The team was able to come up with a way to integrate the pole seamlessly while avoiding extra costs and without compromising storage.

It becomes a balance between planning and having some flexibility as the process unrolls so that you can roll with the punches.

And in this main-floor renovation by OakWood, rodents were discovered in the ceiling. Fixing the issue meant having to take down the ceiling, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise, says vice-president of operations Patricia Liptak-Satov. Since there were no rooms above the kitchen, dining room or living room, OakWood was able to create a cathedral ceiling to join all three spaces.



Another way you can help to minimize disruption, particularly when it comes to materials, is by writing down a plan B when you're in the planning stage, says Brent Young, president of Carleton Kitchen & Bath. That way if a material you want – like a particular tile – is no longer available or will be delayed too long, rather than going back to square one, you can easily transition to the next option.



KEY #6: COMMUNICATE



Communication is key to a successful project and one that top companies will not shy away from. Your renovator needs to be in regular contact with you to ensure a smooth project, says [RND Construction](#) owner Roy Nandram.

At the same time, as a homeowner, be involved and ask questions, says Josh Zaret, vice-president, Gemstone Corp. “Don’t be afraid to go and see what’s happening. So many people are intimidated by a renovation.” If you’re there every step of the way, you’ll likely come out more satisfied and things won’t pile up as a surprise.

When you’re interviewing potential renovators, find out what their process is for communicating. If it’s something they do not put much stock in, that should be a red flag. “The key is constant communication,” says Nandram.

KEY #7: MINIMIZE CHANGE ORDERS



Change orders is the term most in the industry use for things that need to be altered during construction. They are not part of the original contract and typically require extra planning, time and money.

Change orders are one of the quickest ways to go over budget and probably occur about half of the time, says Brent Young, president of Carleton Kitchen & Bath. Even if it's something simple, like asking your renovator to paint an extra room, that extra time will interfere with the contractor's schedule since they'll already be booked for the next client. It might also disrupt the schedule of trades that your renovator has arranged for your project.

An easy way to keep your project on track is to minimize the number of change orders required.

At some point, says celebrity contractor Bryan Baeumler, you're going to feel like your renovation has gone off the rails.

"It's a dirty, messy, invasive, expensive endeavour full of blood sweat and tears. That being said, the best you can do is plan for it – plan, plan, plan, plan, before you do anything.

"If houses and renovations came like Lego in a box, where every piece had its place and you just click them all together... then that would be great. But that is not how we build and renovate."

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