

HOW TO

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AVOID A RENOVATION DISASTER

Renovating can turn a dive into a dream home, but it can also destroy relationships and test your patience. This is one blonde's guide to do-it-for-me renovations that won't do you over.

WHO HASN'T HEARD AT LEAST ONE renovation horror story? How about the couple who commissioned their architect for a \$700,000 design but couldn't get a quote to build it for less than a million?

Or the couple with a four-month building contract that, in the end, took nine? Or the guy whose builder awarded the plumbing contract to his own brother, who then stole the fittings and threatened to break the owner's kneecaps if he didn't pay the exorbitant price that had been agreed without his authority? I'm not kidding.

And then there's me. A first-time Sydney renovator, I gutted and rebuilt my inner-city home, firing and suing the builder along the way. After an epic six-year slog – two years to renovate and four to get some of the money back – I sat down and wrote a book about it.*

On my path to disaster, I thought I must be the dumbest person in Sydney. That could also be what you're thinking about now – especially when I tell you I work in the building industry and have done for the last decade. Yep, and I'm blonde.

Of course, I'm referring (tongue firmly planted in my cheek) to the stereotypical joke that blondes aren't all that bright. And let me tell you, after so many things went awry in my renovation journey, I began to wonder if those jokes had an element of truth. (The book includes a lot of my Blonde Moments®!)

However, when I started chatting to my building consultant about his other clients, two things became clear: I wasn't the only person silly enough to have a renovation nightmare. Often our inexperience coupled with, at times, incompetent designers and shoddy, even unscrupulous builders, can all be causes of poor quality, and blow-outs in time and cost.

About now you're probably also thinking: "I deal with bigger things than this renovation every day of my working life. And I'm not actually doing it myself – I've got a team of professionals! No nightmare is going to happen to me."

Trust me, and think again. If you're about to start renovating and you've never done it before, then you do need advice – you just may not know it yet. Here are some of my top tips:



Be smart about your payments schedule or you could be waiting a long time for work to finish.

1 GET AN EXPERT TO HELP YOU DESIGN (BUT CHECK UP ON COSTS YOURSELF)

My failure to do enough research at the beginning of the whole project led to my first big shock – a quote for \$130,000 more than my \$200,000 budget – and a wasted first-round design effort.

My approach to design phase two was me all over – I thought I could do it on my own. When I hit the wall and realised I needed professional design help, I was nervous about asking an architect – I mean they're for the mythical elite, right?

An architect did help solve my space problem by developing a simple idea I'd never thought of in all my kitchen doodlings. Good design might be hard to value, but it's easy to recognise.

2 DETAILED PLANS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR TENDERING AND CONSTRUCTION

When my architect told me he'd charge me thousands to prepare detailed plans, I thought he was kidding. After all, the council only needed a floor plan and elevation for my DA. When I was told that the fee would also buy lighting and electrical plans, my reaction was a bit 'So what?'

I paid the architect for the concept and headed for the nearest draftsman. For about \$1,000, he gave me the minimum I needed for the council and the basis for my tenders. Looking back, this was one of my bigger mistakes. Underdoing the detail in plans had ramifications for both the quote and construction.

3 DON'T RUSH THE CHOICE OF A BUILDER

Uh-oh. Blonde moment 57. Fools rush in. When I came to get the quotes for my renovation, the first guy didn't have a builder's licence, and wanted me to be an owner-builder. The second guy never returned a quote. The third guy told me my plans weren't detailed enough and he couldn't even look at it for three months. (Clearly I should have waited for him!)

The last builder seemed all right when I met him and prepared a quote that wasn't too bad. However, he was busy at the time. It turned out that his dad was between jobs, so he thought that perhaps his dad could quote it for me. For a number of reasons, I should have called a halt right there.

In my defence: I was grittily enduring living in my pre-renovated dive and then, one day, I was over it. I just wanted it done, which added to the fact that I was very, very busy at work meant I ignored the warning signs and rushed my decision about the builder. It was a mistake that cost me a lot of time and money. ⇨



4 TREAT THE CONTRACT AS THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

I wanna start. I wanna start ... In my rush to find a builder and start building, I overlooked the contract as an area of negotiation that could be as important as the price. It was only when things went wrong that I realised how important the structure of things like a drawdown schedule could be.

What I should have done was agree in advance to a drawdown schedule that reflected the rough value of the work at each stage, and never let the builder get too far out in front. Instead, what I'd unwittingly done was let the builder take most of the profit at the beginning of the job, so I had no leverage when things started to go wrong.

Part of the problem was that I'm no builder! Well, duh. So how would I know what the cost of each stage should roughly be?

5 GET AN EXPERT TO HELP ASSESS THE BUILD QUALITY

If my dumbest act was to choose the builder I did, then failing to get an expert to check the quality of his work was the second dumbest! I mean how would I know the order of things or how to check whether something was done properly or not? Would you?

I take the view that building, like fixing cars, computers and teeth, is a job best done by specialists. Frankly, I'm more interested in going to work and getting paid for what I know how to do than I am in trying to speedily acquire skills I may only ever need once or twice in my life.

Given this, why I ever, ever thought I was capable of checking the quality of my builder's work is beyond me. Believe me, more can go wrong behind the sexy fittings than you would ever believe. (After spending more than \$30,000 fixing defective works before building could proceed, I have an idea what I'm talking about.)



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6 PLAN FOR THE WORST AND ENJOY THE RESULT

Finally, if things do go wrong – and with the right preparation they needn't – follow the letter of the contract as you attempt to resolve it, and make sure you keep good documentation.

Seek the right expert legal advice, but understand the risks of legal action (and really avoid it if you can). Taking legal action can be an expensive, lengthy process. In the end winning may not be clear-cut and you may need to take a pragmatic approach when it comes to settling.

Of course all of this could sound as if renovating's all doom and gloom. So now is probably the time to mention that I just love my finished result – so much I can hardly bear to think of selling. The house has a great energy, it's comfortable, and 95% of the finishes are just as imagined so long ago. Almost everything is a reflection of my taste, and for someone with very definite tastes that makes my living environment utterly restful! If only it hadn't been so painful getting here, but even that is becoming a distant memory. ■■

*The Renovator's Survival Guide will be published by Penguin in early 2009.