



Your Sparkling Bathroom: Remodels ... Not Regrets

Emily Hart

When Curtis Roberts and his family moved into their rambling fieldstone home in Berwyn several years ago, the main bathroom's construction, layout and decorative tiles were high-end and chic ... for 1927.

The Roberts' Main Line house was solid—built nine decades ago for a prominent Philadelphia architect. But with a toilet in a separate closet, an outdated layout, and aging plumbing, renovating the bathroom seemed like the perfect start to their home make-over.

Several steps and a few months later, the bathroom was transformed into a sensational space for relaxing, as well as bathing. Today, a spectacular claw-footed

soaking tub—in the expanded room with a separate steam shower, fireplace and custom bookshelves—provides the ultimate haven for reading in a bubble bath while a cheery fire warms slippers and robe.

And, according to Roberts, a renovation project working with architect Tom Weston and builder Corbett Hall is something he'd repeat—the ultimate compliment! And not one that every homeowner can bestow after the dust settles.



From Big Headache to Big Bathroom

Headaches—leaky pipes, cracked tiles or countertops, and shoe-box-sized storage drawers—aren't the only reasons for renovating a bathroom. Remodeling can help you enjoy your home now and be an investment for the future.

With proper planning, the process can be accomplished painlessly. Well, relatively painlessly. (Without planning, prepare for new headaches.)

Here's some advice from the pros for steps to a new bathroom:

1. Take stock. Assess current space, needs, limitations and budget.
2. Create a vision. Merge dreams with practicality—constraints and resources.
3. Select an architect and contractor. Get recommendations and references. Conduct site visits.
4. Get it in writing. Review proposals. Read contracts and revise, if necessary.
5. Ready, set, go! Prepare for workers to arrive. During construction, monitor progress. After completion, take a final walk-through.

1. Take Stock

Measure your current space. Determine priorities. Bear in mind: a bathroom doesn't have to possess gold-plated details to add value. Aim for durable fixtures installed with high-quality workmanship.

Set your budget. To determine what you can afford, use resources like the National Association of the Remodeling Industry's (NARI) Homeowner's Budget Worksheet (check NARI.org). It reminds you to con-

sider factors including the length of time you'll stay in your home and walks you through financial calculations.

Bob Connolly, owner of Con-Lyn Home Improvement Co. LLC in Avondale, recommends, "See what's out there—tile, toilets and vanities. It will make it easier for everyone involved in the process—architects, designers, contractors and homeowners."

2. Create a Vision

"Have an idea of what you want to do," suggests Roberts. "Improvising could leave you without anything to fall back on. [The project] might work out great, but it might not."

He and his wife discovered their dream bathroom in Edinburgh, Scotland. They photographed it from every angle, Roberts says, and phoned the hotel later to learn where to find the same tiles and accessories.

Bring architects and contractors on board early to help a plan take shape.

3. Select an Architect and Contractor

Ask trusted friends who've recently completed renovations and ask realtors for recommendations. Then, winnow the list of referrals by checking references, credentials, registrations and insurance certificates. Visit completed project sites.

Corbett Hall, president of C.D. Hall, builder of distinguished Philadelphia region homes, offers some sage advice: "Ask for several references and actually contact them. Many people do not actually call references, which can lead to problems since websites alone can be misleading."



Determine whether a general contractor is a member of professional associations, such as a Home Builders Association chapter, NARI or an association that is relevant to your specific project, Hall continues. "If you have an older home, make sure the builder is certified by the Environmental Protection Agency in the safe renovation and repair of buildings with lead paint." (For residences built before 1978, see "Renovate Right," at EPA.gov.)

Pennsylvania's Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act requires contractors who perform at least \$5,000 worth of home improvements per year to register with the Attorney General's Office. Verify your prospective contractor's registration (AttorneyGeneral.gov/hic.aspx; 888-520-6680). Request that the contractor's insurance agent send you a copy of the certificate of insurance.

For architects, says Tom Weston, principal at McIntyre Capron Architects in Paoli, ask about membership in the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Membership isn't required, but it "shows a level of professional commitment." Architects must be licensed and registered with the state. Drawings for renovations must comply with local codes for safety and be submitted to the township, then approved.

Roberts says he obtained half a dozen references and then put together a checklist of important questions to ask. He looked for answers that were positive and consistent, then visited completed projects. (See "Checklist" at CountyLinesMagazine.com.)

Roberts, Hall and Weston emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication early on. Architects can help

realize designs for dreams; builders will provide a realistic perspective about walls, heating ducts and plumbing that will inform blueprints, the building process and timelines.

4. Get It In Writing

Carefully review all quotes, proposals and contracts.

According to Weston, his architectural work—after conversations with homeowners—begins with a proposal incorporating rough costs and time estimates. Once accepted, like many architects in AIA, his firm uses a standard contract that's about 2½ pages long and written in plain English.

Pennsylvania's Home Improvement Consumer Protection Act is specific about home improvement contracts, required for work over \$500. Dive into the scintillating 14-page law at AttorneyGeneral.gov. Or consider NARI's guide for a well-written contract, which includes:

- Contractor's name, phone number, address and registration number.
- Details for what the contractor will and won't do, and specific products to be installed (including brand, model numbers, colors, etc.).
- Approximate start and completion dates.
- Financial terms, including total price, deposit, payment schedule, and any cancellation fees.
- Warranties, including workmanship for one year, and details about manufacturers' or vendors' guarantees for products (specific to the product and maker).
- Details for dealing with disputes and contract cancellation.

(For the full document: NARI.org/pdf/

Expect the Unexpected

"Hiccups can occur with any project," says Thaddaeus Fisher, general contractor. "You won't know the extent of damage from a leaky shower until you explore beneath the floor. So make sure your contractor is experienced and can handle anything discovered during the demolition phase."

For any changes to the original plans and contract, Fisher uses an addendum to the contract—or change order—signed by homeowner and builder.

Hold money in reserve to cover unanticipated items and to avoid disruption of work flow. According to NARI, it's "wise to save 10–20 percent of your budget to allow for items added to the scope of work."

Timely and open communication help keep surprises to a minimum.

For more tips, including a "Checklist for References," go to CountyLinesMagazine.com.

NARI_How_To_Select_A_Remodeling_Pro.pdf). Get signatures and copies.

5. Ready, Set, Go

Not every family has the opportunity to be away from their home for six to ten weeks during renovation, as the Roberts family did. But you can aim for the regular, ongoing communication with your contractor to which the Roberts attribute their renovation's success.

Families should prepare for altered routines and for workers to arrive. According to Thaddaeus Fisher, owner of T.P. Fisher General Contractors/Remodelers, LLC, routines during a renovation can feel very disrupted. Do-It-Yourself home improvement shows can lead homeowners to believe that projects can be accomplished stress-free over a weekend. "It isn't possible," he says. "But a good builder or remodeler will help set realistic expectations."

When work is finished, do a final walk-through with your contractor. Ensure the room is what you expected and fixtures work smoothly.

Then go ahead ... make a splash in the bath! ♦

Photos at left of before and after project, by Thaddaeus Fisher, T.P. Fisher General Contractors.

Other photos of the Roberts bathroom, by Tom Weston, McIntyre Capron & Associates.

