

Better Homes & Gardens®

**THE
STYLE
MAKER
ISSUE**

STYLE SECRETS

*LEARN
FROM THE
PROS*

**LILI
DIALLO**
TELLS US HOW
TO MASTER
THE ECLECTIC
LOOK



*JOY THE BAKER,
AT HOME IN
THE BIG EASY*



Her own bad renovation experience inspired Jean Brownhill, a trained architect, to launch a match-making business. She helps homeowners planning a renovation (many for the first time) find the right contractor and navigate trouble spots. A successful remodel starts with these seven tips.

1 Figure out why you are renovating.

First, Brownhill suggests you identify what's driving you. This includes what she calls technical motivations (*my kitchen is small and hard to cook in*) and emotional motivations (*my kitchen makes me feel like I'm still a renter; I want to feel grown-up*). Clearly stating your reasons helps prioritize must-haves.

2 Choose a contractor who knows how to communicate.

Interview three prospective contractors. Learn what you can expect

from them during the remodeling process, compare their project bids, and imagine yourself meeting with them weekly—or more frequently—during the project. “Focus on communication because that’s where projects break down,” Brownhill says. “Ask yourself if your communication styles are compatible.”

3 Don't just accept the low bid.

A contractor's bid that is significantly lower than the others is a red flag. There shouldn't be much variation among bids. If there is, ask why. “We have seen it so many times,” Brownhill says. “We’ve had to pick up the pieces after someone’s

friend's cousin said he could do it for half the price.”

4 Remodel for you, not for future buyers.

Homeowners often feel conflicted about whether they should build the kitchen or bath they want or one geared toward resale later. “Absolutely



Wallpaper and blue cabinets transformed this Brooklyn kitchen, above. It was the contractor's idea to display the homeowner's dinnerware collection on shelves and hide a dishwasher behind a cabinet panel to the left of the chair.

#BHGFIRST'S INSIDE TRACK

Remodeling can be scary. With her company Sweeten, **Jean Brownhill** lessens the stress by guiding homeowners and contractors. Her advice can make your project go smoothly.

WHAT IS SWEETEN?

This six-year-old company connects homeowners in the New York metro region and Philadelphia with general contractors. She plans to expand to other cities.

HOW IT WORKS

Post a description of your project (anything from a small bath renovation to a whole-house overhaul) on sweeten.com. You'll be matched with three to five general contractors who have been vetted by the Sweeten staff and who are well-suited to your project.

YOUR CHOICE

Meet with each contractor to discuss your project and request a bid. Then you decide which one to hire.

WHAT YOU PAY SWEETEN

Nothing. Once you've committed to a project, the contractor pays Sweeten a small commission.

ONGOING HELP

A Sweeten adviser is available throughout your project to make sure it all goes smoothly.

Keeping plumbing in its original location controlled remodeling costs in this bath, right. To avoid breaking into the wall, new shower fittings tap into the tub filler.



BEFORE



AFTER

build a space you'll be extremely happy with," Brownhill says. But keep in mind you may want to sell your home someday. If you love wild color or pattern, choose paint or removable wallpaper rather than cabinets or tile so it's easy to change.

5 Make decisions before the demolition begins.

You'll save time and money if you aren't choosing materials and changing floor plans once the crew starts working. "It's a myth that general contractors want to stretch the project out," Brownhill says. "If you have all the materials on-site and decisions made, they can finish quickly and go on to their next project."

6 Be smart about your budget.

Set aside 10–15 percent of your renovation budget for contingencies. Ask your contractor for ways to get a high-end look at an affordable price. One example Brownhill cites: installing custom doors on stock cabinets to make them more special. What's worth the splurge? "Anything you're going to touch on a daily basis, which includes faucets and door handles," Brownhill says.

7 If possible, move out while your home is being renovated.

"Small children especially should not be living in an active construction site," Brownhill says. "There is so much

construction debris—fine particles in the air that you should not be inhaling." If you are staying put to save money, be aware that having your contractor work around you costs time, so you may not save money in the end. If you must stay, Brownhill recommends using a good-quality dust barrier—a plastic sheeting system that seals rooms under construction—and spending a few nights in a hotel during the worst of it (read: no running water). ■

**#BH&G
Firsts**

Tag your first remodeling project and other achievements on Instagram.