

Builder or Renovation Company? It's more than semantics!

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Your home is the place where your family has grown up and will continue to add to your lifetime of memories. And now you've decided that this is the time you are going to renovate that kitchen, bathroom or whatever space you feel could use a face-lift.

So here you are, thumbing through a magazine filled with pictures of beautiful homes. You see amazing fixtures and great craftsmanship and you envision the same thing for your home.

Unfortunately, not every builder, carpenter or construction company that professes to be a true renovation company actually is one. During your project, you will be inviting a virtual stranger into your home. Whether the referral is from a friend or family member, a TV commercial or a yellow pages ad, there are a few important things you should know before deciding between a builder or renovation company.

A builder creates where there was no previous structure. A renovator restores existing structures or adds on to a structure while maintaining the integrity of the building. It is important to know this difference if a renovation is your goal.

The housing market changes. If interest rates are low, builders will most likely stay busy constructing new homes. When the interest rates increase, new home builds decline and some builders may try to attract more renovation projects as a means of subsidizing their incomes. Renovation companies may try to do the same thing, but most renovation companies focus exclusively on restoring existing projects. Renovation companies are at a distinct advantage when it comes to quality of house restoration: it's not one of many things they do; it's all they do.

There is really no need to look further than their portfolio: their project history will clearly define what type of company they are. If the company you're considering cannot show you an example of a completed project which is similar to the one you are envisioning for your home, you may want to keep looking.

It only makes sense that a renovation specialist is more used to dealing with the most common renovation issues than a new-construction builder might be. When you're working with clients who are living in the home being worked on, it is a far different situation than a new-construction site. You need to find a renovator who will not only stay on budget, but also on time. Using an alternate bathroom, day after day, or eating

take-out, night after night, can "get old" quickly. And, do they have a solid plan for the inevitable discomforts of any renovation project, such as how they plan to keep your home as wood- and dry-wall dust-free as possible?

A final important question to ask: "Does your renovator 'get' who you are?" You want to find a renovator who can incorporate your personal style and your lifestyle. Are they aware of your likes and dislikes? Do they know (and care) if your family is growing or if your kids are leaving for college? These are all questions you are going to want to ask not only of your potential contractor but of their referrals as well.

A few final tips:

- Every morning brew a fresh pot of coffee for the crew. This small gesture will help in creating a friendly work environment.
- Do they have an office of trained professionals? When you visit their office, does the staff seem happy? If they are not, or appear to harbor ill feelings toward their employer, that attitude is likely to show up in their work.
- The use of sub-contractors is widely accepted in the construction industry. Find a company that uses in-house employees. In-house employees reduce communication conflicts, which often translate into missed deadlines and poor workmanship.
- Above all else: referrals! Call and speak to the people who have had work done before. Ask pointed and direct questions about how the process went. Think about things that you know will help the process run smoothly and make sure past customers have been satisfied in these areas.

The front-end time that you invest on selecting the right renovator for your project is time well spent. Any short cuts made in the selection process will soon show themselves in shortcomings in the results that you were expecting.