

# Interior design planning: Construction-installation

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"It's not for the weak," says South Bay homeowner Laura Kluge. "It's time-intensive, effort-intensive and money-intensive."

Kluge, who built her house from scratch, took the rather unusual approach of selecting her contractor first, then assembling her design team based on his recommendations.

"It made the process smoother...." and served to eliminate worries over potential teamwork or cooperation issues, she says.

Most homeowners, however, having survived the rigors of finding just the right designer, find themselves undergoing yet another painstaking search — for a contractor.

"Well, it's actually, I think, a more intense process [than finding a designer]" says Kathy Bate, owner of

Kathy Bate Designs in Walnut Creek, "because the contractor is [going to be] in [the client's] house all day every day...."

She recommends finding "someone who you really click with, who you communicate well with" and who is detail-oriented.

During the search, Bate suggests checking with the Contractors State License Board to verify licensing and inquire about possible past complaints. It's also a good idea, she says, to check references and talk to people who have used the builder.

Bate also offers a grave warning.

"Don't select the contractor with the lowest bid. Absolutely not. Unless they have glowing references." An unbelievably low figure might prove deceptive.



"[Some contractors] lowball it, so they can get the job, then they have lots of change orders. And change orders mean increased cost.

Whether you are renovating or building from scratch, here are a few considerations:

When it comes to the completion date, "Add a few weeks," advises Bates, "because something always happens." As an example, a contractor who knocks out a wall to open up a kitchen area, might uncover problems that could not have been antici-

pated, such as structural issues or mold damage.

You might be surprised at how long certain stages of the process take even when no problems arise.

"It took us seven weeks — 35 work days — to get a basement floor

before they poured the concrete floor,” says Kluge. “Seven weeks? That’s just the foundation!”

It’s a good idea to be flexible about your investment as well.

“I always tell my clients to have a 10 to 15 percent contingency fund just in case something comes up.”

In addition to unanticipated issues, last-minute homeowner changes can boost expenses. To avoid them, Bate suggests making all your decisions before tear-out and construction begin.

Yoko Oda of Yoko Oda Interior Design in Walnut Creek agrees, declaring, “Careful planning eliminates mistakes.”

Though an admirable ideal, finalizing selections in advance is not always practical, especially when it comes to new construction, according to Kluge.

“There’s no way to make all the decisions at the very beginning,” she says. “There’s no way to say, ‘This is it. I’ve made all the material choices,’ etc.”

As an example, she explains, “We had to pick the stone for our fireplace very early on in the process.... When we got to the process of actually putting [it] in..., we picked a more expensive stone.”

Homeowners that are new to building and installation may feel a



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little out of their depth at first.

“It’s sort of like you have to go function in this other realm that you don’t have any experience in,” muses Kluge. “You have to trust someone to sort of hold your hand and guide you through it.”

Communication among all involved parties — architect, designer, landscape designer, homeowner and contractor — can go a long way toward easing homeowner anxieties.

“Every discussion is copied to the

designer, contractor and the client,” notes Bate.

“We all have to communicate effectively and constantly,” states Oda.

And during project meetings, take full advantage of the chance to get information and offer input.

“My general contractor was very good at saying, ‘OK, we’re having a meeting every Monday,’” relates Kluge. “I asked a LOT of questions, a LOT...because I didn’t understand.”

It’s impossible to overestimate

homeowner commitment, in terms of time and mental energy.

“You think, ‘Oh, I did the floor plan, and I’ll just pick out the paint colors, and it’ll be fine,’” Kluge offers. “No... There are so, so, so many decisions. And things come up and the [contractor] wants to know, do you want it this way, or do you want it that way. And they only give you so much time to make that decision....So it’s a fulltime job.”

She suggests, “being onsite as much as you can. If there’s something wrong, then you can find it [sooner], and it’s easier to fix.”

Lengthy schedules — two years or more, in some new construction or total-home projects — endless decisions and the inconvenience of having workers in your home day-in and day-out can lead to battle fatigue. To succumb when you’re so close to your goal, however, would be a mistake.

“Even when we got to the end, and we were picking out knobs... Usually, I’ve heard by the time people get to knobs, they’re like, ‘I don’t care.’... Part of me felt like that. Part of me said, ‘No, you will feel better long term if you give each decision the attention that it deserves.’”