

Kitchen Makeover: How to turn reverie into renovation

"I feel like I have a new house," I said to my husband as I walked into our newly renovated kitchen.

"Well, I'm happy you're happy," D.C. said, a comment that, as anyone who is married knows, carries the subtext for all you've put us through.

"Seriously," I said, "every time I walk in, I can't believe it's my kitchen. It's light, it's open, it's updated, it's..."

"... expensive," he says, finishing my sentence. "After this, we are done with home improvements for a long time."

I probably could have picked a better time to express my kitchen bliss, as D.C. was, at that moment, in the middle of paying bills. "Well, it's totally worth it," I said. "And be glad it was just a renovation and not a remodel," I said, implying somehow that being married to me is a bargain.

For the uninitiated, a kitchen remodel involves changing the footprint, relocating appliances, putting in new everything — in other words, a total gut. With a renovation, the footprint remains, and changes are more cosmetic.

I had been wanting to transform our home's 20-year-old kitchen since we moved in five years ago. However, like many homeowners who wish their homes were different in some way, my plans never went past the daydream stage.

When I thought of all the decisions I'd have to make, the time, the disruption, the money, the spousal conflicts, the Pandora's box of trouble, and the uncertainty that I might not like it in the end, I froze like a glacier in Greenland.

Then, a few months ago, for reasons unknown, my desire for a better kitchen grew to an obsession. I called interior designer Sally Ward and asked her to come by "just to



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talk" about what I could maybe, possibly, probably not, do to refresh my kitchen.

Ideally, I wanted to make a few small moves to net big results. (Who doesn't?) However, I worried the advice would be to gut the place, mortgage the house, and start over.

To my delight, Ward was on board, and, within an hour, we had a reasonable (though D.C. had another word for it) game plan:

- Cabinets would stay but with new hardware. That right there saved thousands of dollars. The dark brown walnut cabinets were in good shape and matched the cabinetry throughout the house. We'd leave them but replace the vintage satin-nickel hardware with transitional knobs and pulls in a shiny polished-nickel.

- Cut down the tall, bar-level counter to make all counters one

height. This would open site lines and give the kitchen a cleaner, more modern look.

- Replace the counters. I would look for a light cream stone material to replace the brown Santa Cecilia granite that seems to have followed me to every house I've owned since the 1990s.

- Replace the old, stainless-steel sink and small, worn faucet with a

larger, white, cast-iron sink and more distinctive faucet, also in polished nickel.

- Update appliances that need replacing. In our case, that was the cooktop and dishwasher. We can live with our refrigerator and oven a while longer.

- Last, replace the backsplash. We'll do that right after the holidays, as Ward advised us to wait (that four-letter word) until the counters were in place, so we could see how different backsplash options looked against the counters in the actual light.

With Ward's clear-eyed direction, I could see not only the vision but also the path to get there. We agreed, I would GC the project, that is, serve as general contractor, but she would serve as a sounding board and point me to the right resources and professionals, includ-

ing where to go to find stone, fixtures, appliances, sinks, and installers. Off I went.

Several weeks later, once I had my materials purchased and workers lined up, the bedlam began. For a few days, the hub of our home was a loud, messy, dust-filled trench harboring strange men carrying heavy artillery.

And then... bliss.

For those looking to turn their home improvement reveries into reality, here's some advice:

- Find a designer you click with.

I am good at making decorating decisions, but for something this big, permanent, and expensive, I wanted back up. Ward, who charged by the hour, provided ideas, validated my good instincts, and protected me from my bad ones.

- Do what you can do. The more you can do yourself, the more you'll save. Don't do what you should hire a pro for, but absolutely do the legwork and the projects that require

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