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Renovation

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To renovate your house or move to one that better suits your needs — that's the choice facing many homeowners. A number of economic factors in today's marketplace such as interest rates on mortgages, the soaring cost of land and fewer new housing starts mean that people are choosing to renovate older homes more than ever before.

How does the homeowner facing the task of a renovation prepare for the project and reduce the possibility of running into problems?

Builders who specialize in home renovations stress that careful planning is the first essential step. Whether the job involves the kitchen, the bathroom, an addition, or simply upgrading windows or insulation, the key to success starts with the care you put into your decisions.

Get down your ideas, and be as specific as possible. It can be costly to alter plans after work has begun, so know exactly what you want before work is started.

Decide early just how much money you want to spend on the project. That way builders can advise you of alternatives if your plans and your pocketbook aren't in agreement.

The kitchen is the first choice of most likely renovation area in the home. New cupboards, rearranging the appliances and adding new ones, moving the sink and putting in modern energy-efficient windows are among the changes most often made.

A simple kitchen renovation includes new cupboards in the same location as the old ones, minimal new wiring, new sinks and a basic tap, with the old plumbing, valance lighting and venting a stove hood. But kitchen jobs can involve much more. It could include 100 amp electric service, removing walls and installing drywall, removing old radiators and installing baseboard heaters, dropping the ceiling, adding valance and pot lighting, vented hood fan and oven, cutting a new door opening and adding new windows.

Visiting some kitchen specialists will help you decide on what you want. Using the dimensions of your room they will design a working area for you, based on the cupboards and appliances you want. Some kitchen specialists sell appliances and floor coverings, others refer you to different outlets for these things.

Shifting the location of appliances is not costly, but moving the sink is, as it requires one to two days work for a plumber. The job also may require a plumbing permit, and means that the work must be inspected twice during the project to insure that it meets building standards and is properly vented.

Many older homes have 60-amp electrical service. When renovations are underway, particularly in the kitchen upgrading to 100-amp service is often done because the most energy is used here. New appliances such as cook-tops and ovens, microwave ovens, dishwashers and garbage compactors may be added and make the existing wiring inadequate.

Upgrading the service involves installing a 32-circuit breaker panel with a main switch instead of fuses, new wiring and split plugs so that each one is independently wired. That way if each plug has a high energy-using appliance, each one is independent and will not be overloaded.

Builders say that electrical upgrading is difficult to sell, perhaps because the improvement isn't highly visible, but the added safety makes it worthwhile.

Bathroom renovations involve mostly plumbing and tile work. Fixture prices vary widely. So shop around to decide what you want. Some fixtures require unusual fittings, such as sinks and tubs which use

special taps.

Because the high humidity of the bathroom can play havoc with tiles, causing them to fall off, it is vital to have a qualified person install them. This is not a place to cut corners.

Bathroom renovations don't involve much electrical work except perhaps new lighting fixtures.

Before consulting a builder, make sketches of your plans so the contractor can have a precise idea on which to base his estimate. Substantial additions probably warrant hiring an architect to do the drawings. An architect has the full responsibility for the job, and hires and supervises the contractors and sub-contractors, and pays them when the work is completed.

Finding a reputable contractor can be done in many ways. For a major job such as an addition or an involved kitchen renovation you may want to visit houses that have been renovated and inspect the work carefully. Look at the drywall and the trim, the quality or material and note if the walls are straight.

Other good sources to tap for the names of reliable builders are friends who have had home improvements, the Better Business Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, municipal building inspectors and licensing commissions or your local lumber yard where builders deal regularly. Find out the reputation of firms you are considering. Ask contractors for a certificate of qualification which shows they are skilled tradesmen.

Obtain three written estimates based on identical specifications.

"A signed estimate becomes a contract, so don't sign an estimate or make a deposit until you have carefully reviewed each one you've obtained," warns Roberta Allan, chief consumer services officer for the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations.

Estimates can vary because of hidden costs, such as the amount of insurance and compensation carried by the builder, as well as obvious differences in the job, such as materials used, a builder told us. Understand the estimate before making your choice.

Payment procedures should be outlined in the contract. Usually a contractor asks for a deposit initially, with the balance due on completion of the work.

You may want to hold back 15 per cent of the total for 37 days after completion plus any amount claimed in a written notice as owed to the subcontractor or employees by the contractor. Full payment should be made after this period if no notices have been received. This requirement, under the Mechanics Lien Act, protects you against possible suits against you if the contractor fails to pay his workers or suppliers.

You should advise the contractor before you sign the agreement if you plan to follow this action.

The most common complaint handled by the consumer services branch regarding contractors involves delays in completion of work. Make sure the date is in the contract to back your case if problems occur.

Many home improvements require a building permit under municipal law, and the responsibility for obtaining it usually rests with the consumer.

If problems occur in spite of all precautions, legislation exists to protect the consumer.

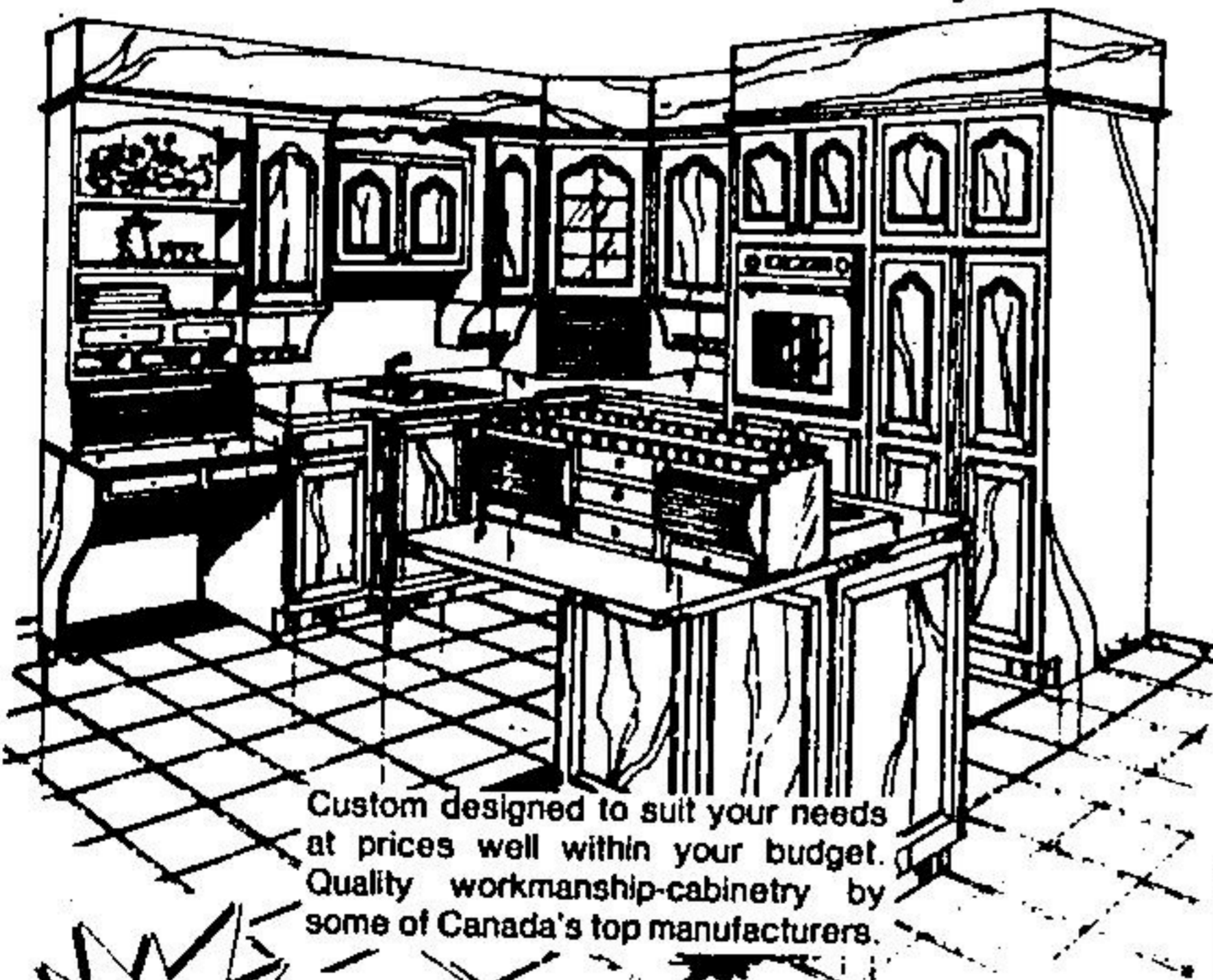
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