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Toes's Townhouse Renovation Tips

Posted by [Christine Toes](#) on January 4, 2008 at 3:32 PM

A while ago, I wrote about the [2 family townhouse I bought in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn](#); after [searching & searching](#). Although I wasn't sure whether I was going to move there or not, after contemplating my commute & the fact that I don't need the space right now, I decided to stay in the city in my alcove studio.

I had a contractor renovate my kitchen and bath in my current co-op, so I thought that since I had been through a renovation before, I sort of knew what I was doing...Not so much!

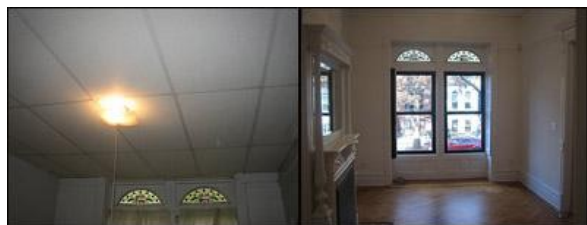
So what have I learned about renovating a three-story, two-family townhouse so far?

1. **I Firmly Believe That You Get What You Pay For:** I interviewed three contractors and only one gave me a detailed, professional estimate. It also happened to be the contractor who my neighbor in Bed Stuy (who is also a real estate agent) highly recommended. Generally, we ("we" being "real estate agents") are told not to recommend contractors because **no one** loves their contractor and it will come back to bite us in the arse ("Oh, my broker recommended him and he was TERRIBLE"). However, I am willing to go out on a limb here because my contractor, Mike Zych of Mike Zych Construction, was fabulous. He finished on time, and he would have been on budget had I not decided mid-project that I wanted to do a few extra things in the house. Although the other two contractors came in slightly lower than Mike, there is nothing like having a very detailed estimate so there is no confusion about exactly what you are getting for your money. I am sure that if I had gone with the lower estimates, that the costs would have ballooned to more than what I paid for Mike's team to do the work. And despite the hundred annoying questions I probably asked him, he and his assistant, Renata, kept me sane during the process.

2. **Ikea Cabinets Actually Look Nice:** Considering I knew that for part of the time I would own the house, either all or part of it would be occupied by renters, I didn't want to spend a mint on cabinets. I was pleasantly surprised that the Ikea cabinets look great. How long they will last is another story. I'll get back to you in a few years. Bottom line: **About \$3K for two Ikea kitchens**. Here is the kitchen BEFORE & AFTER:



Oh, and I took out the dropped ceiling to make it loftier and more open. Here is the BEFORE & AFTER, look at the glass at the top of the door to see the end result:



3. **Countertops Take Forever:** If you are a renovation rookie like me, you bring in a floorplan and sit down with the guy at Home Depot. He draws a sketch of your kitchen & you pick out what countertops you want. You think you're done? Hardly. It turned out that the smaller of the two kitchens didn't have enough counterspace to even justify its own order. So I had to order the same countertops for both kitchens (which thankfully looks ok). All of the cabinets AND appliances need to already be installed before the countertop people can go to measure the kitchen and make sure the floorplan you gave them was correct, and they need to make sure they cut the countertop to fit the sink and faucets correctly. THEN, they order the damn things, which takes another 10 days. Then they have to come install the countertops. God forbid you also get the 4 inch backsplash (a good idea so water or anything tenants might spill doesn't drip down behind the cabinets & start rotting stuff) and then they have to come back AGAIN to install that. **Toes' Tip: Get those cabinets & appliances in early so you can get started on the lengthy countertop process. It takes WEEKS.**
Bottom Line: Silstone will survive virtually any tenant but you will pay out the wazoo for it. Budget \$3K for two kitchens.

4. **The Small Things Add Up!:** When estimating the costs of doing a renovation, don't forget the small stuff you are going to have to purchase. Like doorknobs. And light fixtures. And did you know that almost no one makes a 24 inch over the range microwave, and the only one out there is like \$350 bucks!? I must admit that I didn't realize how much these things would add to my bottom line. I priced out the countertops, cabinets, and appliances before beginning this process, but not the smaller items.


Doorknobs: My dad poked fun at me for ordering \$60 doorknobs since there are renters in the house. Yes,

he is right - maybe I shouldn't have spent the money. But crystal/glass doorknobs keep with the period of the house (it was built in 1899) & they look beautiful. Unfortunately, they are also expensive. But I didn't want to buy \$20 doorknobs only to turn around in 3 years when I want to move in and then spend another \$60 on doorknobs. I'm pretty sure doorknobs last a long time. I searched about 7 websites for the cheapest crystal knobs out there. After they were installed (and look fabulous), my mom told me a story about people who stole the doorknobs out of her friend's house because they were being evicted and they were mad that they had to move. THANKS, MOM! Luckily, I know some of my tenants personally & I have a great renter's insurance policy, so I think I will be ok. If not, lesson learned! Bottom line: in a 3 story house, I had 22 doors. That's \$1,320 for doorknobs.

Light fixtures: I wanted to keep with the style of the house & there are gorgeous ceiling medallions throughout the house. Since I plan to move in at some point, I wanted to spend the money on a few nice light fixtures in the highly visible areas and try to buy less expensive ones for the hallways and rooms where the fixtures wouldn't be as noticeable. Despite my strategy, nice light fixtures are about \$120 each. There are 20 lights in the house! I spent about \$120 on 6 of the fixtures, \$80 on 6 of them, and \$30 - \$50 on each of the rest. That's \$1,600 on light fixtures. Ouch.

5. **Most Dryers Do Not Run On 110:** After I purchased the washer/dryer for the basement, my contractor's electrician informed me that the dryer I bought only runs on 220. When I called PC Richards & Home Depot to discuss dryers that run on 110 (it actually doesn't say on their websites, even in the detailed information about each dryer), I found out that there are few 110 dryers available and they are not very effective. Basically, you can dry, like 2 pairs of jeans at the same time. This is the only thing I was a bit perturbed with my contractor about. It would have been nice to get a head's up about this. The issue hasn't been resolved yet. Evidently it can be a nuisance to deal with Con Edison to have them run 220 into the house (even though the electric in my house was upgraded during the renovation). So I may need to return the electric dryer and order a gas dryer, in which case my contractor will need to vent the dryer to the outside. Either way, I foresee this costing me more money, which is annoying. But considering that this was a big renovation job (2 gutted kitchens, a gutted bath, two walls/doors being moved, new windows, new electric, 2 upgraded baths, dropped ceilings being removed, etc.etc), I think it was a pretty minor mishap.

After my tenants get all settled in & I see what the heat and hot water really cost, I will give an update on how my investment is turning out!

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Comments (11)

Christine,

The place looks great. You have me thinking about going with the Ikea cabinets for my rental unit in Maryland.

Posted by [Matt](#) | [January 4, 2008 3:51 PM](#)

great post Toes! Good advice for any rental property.

Posted by [Noah](#) | [January 4, 2008 4:10 PM](#)

"...you will pay out the wazoo for it. Budget \$3K for two kitchens."

3K, for two kitchen, is paying out the wazoo?

Well, i guess for bed sty...

Posted by [Anonymous](#) | [January 4, 2008 4:55 PM](#)

Toes, I've used IKEA cabinets in two renovations I've done (installed myself) - and I've really been happy with them. I've just bought a condo with IKEA cabinets AND appliances (who knew?). I have a renter also - but I think they will hold up well under use - if that "use" is by someone who is considerate!

Good luck, and lovely work. I especially like the fact that you removed the dropped ceilings.

Susan

Posted by [Susan](#) | [January 5, 2008 10:11 PM](#)

So that's \$3000/kitchen for the ikea cabinets and the counter tops. Does that price include appliances also (Ikea brand or otherwise)? Thx!

Posted by [curious](#) | [January 7, 2008 8:40 AM](#)