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**Maybe you want to put on an addition, add a second level or revamp your landscape. Or maybe your pipes burst, your heater died or something funky is happening with your outlets. In any scenario you want the best home improvement expert working on it. We found more than 200 who were reader-recommended and highly vetted by our staff in the hopes that we can put your mind at ease when you call on one of these contractors to come into your home. And to get you started on thinking of ways to fix up your space, we also asked them for the best design ideas, from home to yard, and ways to get the most bang for your buck.**

**By Jennifer Shapira**

**List edited by Lynn Norusis**

**Lenny Berger**  
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# HOME RENOVATIONS

## BEST DESIGN DECISIONS AND COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

**JASON HAMPEL** is a problem-solver. The co-owner of Moss Building & Design has listened as clients unload their laundry lists of problems they want to fix in their homes. They're all important. But one of the most frequent remodel requests is for an open floor plan. Homeowners assume they need to knock down walls, but often, Hampel says, homeowners have spaces in their homes that are underutilized: the formal living room that takes a backseat to the family room or great room, the dining room with its just-for-show heirloom table and chairs.

"People get used to using the rooms in their home a certain way," says Hampel. "And the thought of moving the family room—where you sit every day for however many years you've been there—to the other side of the house is a hard change to get your head around. So what I'll tell people is: Before we flip these rooms, bring a couch in there and just hang out there. See how it feels."

### EXPERT TIPS ON THE BEST DESIGN DECISIONS FOR YOUR HOME RENOVATION

#### WHOLE HOME FLOW

Allie Mann, a designer with Case Design, says their No. 1 reno request is for open floor plans. "Nine times out of 10, folks are asking us, 'Can we open up walls?' and 'How do we get connectivity of the space?'" That translates to taking down walls and removing those boundaries because clients "want the living room to feel connected to the dining room to feel connected to the kitchen."

#### STORAGE STASH

Everyone wants more storage, says Mann. They want to store big containers of laundry detergent, bags of dog food and oversized boxes of cereal. There's a thought process there that begins with these questions from Mann: "How do we achieve more storage? Is it a bigger cabinet? Is it a cabinet that performs better and has more bells and whistles?"

#### QUALITY JOB

Homeowners also want to know about the quality of construction and the quality of product. Mann says they want assistance and

assurance that they are making good design decisions based on materials that are going to perform and last for the next 20 or 30-plus years. They want a more functional home, a timeless kitchen design and a home that feels like it's theirs.

#### KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

It sounds simple, but experts say it's important to have an idea of what you want. If you see designs and layouts in magazines or online, professionals love it when you have an organized file of pictures you like. Whether it's a paper file of tear sheets or a Pinterest board, they can use it to get a good idea of your vision, your likes and dislikes. "I'm usually meeting with them in their homes, so I can see what their style is," says Marissa Jambor, a designer at Bath Plus Kitchen Design Remodel. "But I always ask people for inspiration that will give me more information to help them get a space that they're really going to love."

#### BE FLEXIBLE

Do try to be flexible and open-minded: Happy design decisions come out of conversations with the builder, with the architect, with the designer. It's their job to help you see the big picture. After listening to your laundry list of wants and needs, more often than not, Hampel says, they'll see a solution you hadn't even considered.

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## COMMON MISTAKES

### RUSHING INTO A PROJECT

Everyone wants to have their homes in tip-top shape for the holidays. As a benchmark, Jambor says, “I think you need to start planning for about six months in advance.” Proper planning includes a long lead time and ensures that materials will be ready and available. “I think that’s a mistake made very often where people are in a rush to get started, and they run into a demo’d bathroom that they can’t use for six weeks because they didn’t think about the lead time on the tile.”

### NOT BEING UP FRONT ABOUT YOUR BUDGET

Designers and experts say it benefits everyone when homeowners are honest about how much they can spend on a renovation or remodel. But understand that wiggle room might be required. For example, if the basic minimum for a job is \$15,000, homeowners often think they can choose any materials they’d like and still stay within that budget. That’s not the case. Jambor says, “When people are firm with their budget, it’s easier for us to gauge their expectations and say, ‘I know you like this \$10-per-square-foot tile, but that does not fit within your budget, and it will cost extra.’”

### WANTING TO BE TRENDY

Choose color palettes, materials and finishes that will be timeless, Jambor says. Even if you think a playful green accent tile might be cute in your kids’ bathroom when they’re very young, think about how they might grow into that space. Is it still going to be fun for them as teenagers? Remove that question entirely and make neutral decisions. Paint color is easy to change; tile is much more costly and time-consuming.

### FOCUSING ON THE DETAILS TOO SOON

Hampel understands that homeowners are excited about getting started on the project. But often, his job includes helping homeowners see the big picture rather than homing in on the details. For example, he says: They step into a showroom, and they’re dazzled by the display. They’re ready to start picking out new cabinets before a new design is in place. It’s OK to get excited, but it’s important to evaluate all options.

### NOT DOING YOUR RESEARCH

When you’re starting the initial discussions with prospective contractors and design teams, it’s important to be thorough. You want to feel comfortable with them, with the scope of the work and that they’re going to see the project through. “I think people need to spend more time up front evaluating a contractor and less time jumping into ‘Where does the refrigerator go?’” Hampel says. He and his team have been called in to rescue jobs of complete ineptitude and bad craftsmanship. So he tells customers, “We’re going to come up with a design that you love, but before we get to that point, let’s make sure we can solve your problem within your budget and we’re the right fit for you as a contractor.”



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## GETTING THE MOST FOR YOUR MONEY

**EVEN HOMEOWNERS** renovating the most high-end, extravagant kitchens and baths in our area still want to save money where they can. Responsible, attentive contractors and designers know that and are willing to work with clients to identify where to splurge and where to save.

In terms of overall best design decisions for a home renovation, Marissa Jambor, a designer at Bath Plus Kitchen Design Remodel, says most homeowners work with her to “maximize storage, create a space that’s easy to organize and then make it timeless.”

In a kitchen or bath, she suggests using tiles and countertops in neutral color palettes instead of bold colors. And if a pop of color is really important to the client, she suggests wallpaper, paint color or accessories—areas where color is easy to change with minimal expense or effort.

Even if you’re not currently thinking about your home’s resale value, if it’s a possibility in the future, experts say going neutral will be more pleasing to most prospective buyers. That can be an important consideration.

“This is something you’re allocating a ton of money to,” Jambor says. “If you’re renovating your kitchen, the rule of thumb is that you’re supposed to spend 10 percent of your home value on your kitchen renovation. So if you have a \$1 million home, theo-

retically, you’re spending \$100,000 on your kitchen remodel. You want that to be a timeless kitchen that’s going to last you the rest of your time in that home. You want to make design choices that work both functionally [and] aesthetically for the long haul.”

Jambor recalls a recent master bathroom reno in a tasteful gray and white palette. The oversized shower’s oil-rubbed bronze fittings are loaded with jets and sprays, and the white subway tile was done with a contrasting grout. Because her client “was open to something a little more daring and a little more unique,” Jambor did the floor in a cheeky faux wood marbled in gray and blue.

Allie Mann, a designer for Case Design, recently collaborated on a classic white-on-white master bathroom. In addition to a frameless, jet-powered shower, there’s a statement-making freestanding tub, cozy heated floors and toasty towel warmers.

The master bath mixes what Mann calls “high/low” features—a give-and-take of extravagant and economical materials. The quartzite countertops were a splurge; the choice of a porcelain tile floor was a cost-savings. If a client wants a pricey countertop, Mann and her colleagues work to trim costs in other places.

In a kitchen or a bath, cabinets don’t have to be custom. They can be semicustom or Ikea hacks. Existing cabinets can be rehabbed or repainted, or the doors can be removed for open shelving.

But “with cabinets, I think you get what you pay for,” Jambor says. From places like Wayfair.com, she says cabinets may not be the best quality, but they’ll do the job—and for less. And spruce them up with sleeker, more modern knobs and pulls.

In a kitchen or elsewhere, “we’re seeing a lot of traction in the market for LVT, which is a luxury vinyl tile,” says Mann, who employed the flooring in the laundry room she created for last fall’s DC Design House. Available in countless colors and plank sizes, Mann says, “it doesn’t require grout. It goes on top of pretty much most any existing floor.” It adds an extra layer of insulation and is impervious to water.

“So if I’m working with a homeowner and the budget maybe doesn’t allow for hardwood or tile in the kitchen because we’re splurging on other things, I might say: Let’s consider these LVTs,” she says. “You get a lot of bang for your buck. It looks great, and it’s one of the hottest flooring materials on the market.”

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## BEST THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN PLANNING LANDSCAPING

**LOCAL LANDSCAPE** experts hear a chorus of similar requests. Throughout the year, as they visit front and backyards and field queries from homeowners interested in amping up their gardens and outdoor spaces, experts say homeowners want low-maintenance, four-season landscapes that will serve as verdant backdrops for outdoor entertaining. From postage stamp-sized patios to multiple sprawling acres decked out with pools and outdoor kitchens, Northern Virginia landscapers are tasked with greening our surroundings, making them as pleasing and practical as possible.

How to get started? Talk to your neighbors about their curb appeal. If you like what you see, ask them for referrals. Either way, start doing some research. Spend some time online paging through their photo galleries and reviews.

No matter how green your thumb, if you're looking to redo your yard, it's a good idea to keep a folder of your likes from magazines or pin pictures to Pinterest. That will show potential contractors where your interests lie and get the conversation started.

Their biggest requests are for low-maintenance landscapes, but experts say if homeowners could ask for "no maintenance," they would. Truth is, some amount of upkeep—even if it's very little—is still required.

"We do a lot of paver patios," says Ali Hashimi, president of NOVA Landscape and Design. The square footage varies, but he might create focal points with a Japanese maple, its weeping

branches of burgundy foliage providing near year-round color. He'll add sitting walls and complement them with sensible, attractive plant combinations, using natives when appropriate. Hashimi likes the contrast of reds and yellows, selecting a brilliant dwarf shrub called Firepower Nandina and pairing it with a cascading Mophead Cypress.

"People are really looking to get outdoors and take advantage of that space that they do have," he says. Beyond the playful spring, summer and fall months of entertaining, Hashimi says, evergreens look great year-round, and a fire pit can add warmth and style even in late autumn and winter.

But because everyone wants their backyards in top shape for spring, Rob Groff, president of Groff Landscape Design, says it's never too soon to start planning. "For most companies, if you get ahold of them in January or early February, that gives you enough time to get through the planning process, figure out who you want to use and put down a deposit with somebody so you get on their early spring schedule," Groff says.

But if you miss that window, don't despair. "A lot of people think spring and summer are our busiest times, but it's actually spring and fall," he says. Summer can be a good time to catch contractors because they have fewer simultaneous jobs.

So do your research. Make sure you have the right contractor, and figure out what you like and what you don't, says Groff. "That'll really help in the long run."

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# WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO RENOVATE? EXPERTS OFFER THEIR SUGGESTIONS

## **E** WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO RENOVATE? EXPERTS OFFER THEIR SUGGESTIONS

**EXPERTS AGREE:** There isn't really a best time to renovate your home. Renovating is a process, often a very time-consuming one. Homeowners should be prepared and start planning as soon as possible.

Marissa Jambor, a designer at Bath Plus Kitchen Design Remodel, suggests planning at least six months out. Everyone wants to have their new kitchens completed in time for the holidays, but if you can be flexible, you can get on a designer's or contractor's schedule when they have a bit more wiggle room.

The New Year brings resolutions, and homeowners get serious about getting organized. That's a great time to start thinking about the changes you want to make in your home, says Allie Mann, a designer with Case Design. Set up appointments with designers and get the conversation started.

But if the cold winter months keep you in hibernation, rest assured: You haven't lost out. Because there is no perfect time to renovate, Mann suggests early summer, if you can be flexible. Once the school year has ended and family vacations are booked, the calendars of contractors might carry a lighter load.

Of course, weather makes a difference if contractors are moving walls. The days are longer and warmer in summer, and the weather is more reliable than during the cold winter months, when a snowstorm could cause delays.

But there are other benefits of being flexible on timing. Costs of materials can be lower. Choices might be fewer, but if a tile shop wants to move merchandise to make room for new stock, sometimes there's a deal to be had. But such sale prices aren't predictable, Jambor says. "It's more about the luck of the draw."

Appliances are a different story. Vendors stay in touch with designers all year, alerting them to sales. If you're considering a suite of the same make of a handful of appliances, additional promotions can help homeowners save money.

But back to those daydreams of a summer beach week. "People might think: 'Gosh, I don't want someone in my home while I'm



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## EXPERTS DISH ON BEST DECISIONS FOR KITCHEN AND BATH DESIGN

### KITCHEN

#### THE HIGHLY DESIRED ISLAND

Emre Kuzudisli, a designer at Dulles Kitchen and Bath, says aside from homeowners wanting to make their kitchens bigger, almost every redo they do includes the request for an island or peninsula. Adding more workspace and better flow to these high-traffic areas also increases a home's value, Kuzudisli says.

#### MAKE IT HIGH-FUNCTIONING

If islands and peninsulas seem like musts in new kitchens these days, experts say it's probably because they are. But done correctly, they should be high-functioning. They can offer seating, prep space, storage and cabinetry, and—if painted a different color or topped with a different counter material—complement the rest of the kitchen.

#### MAKE IT POP

Allie Mann, a designer with Case Design, says she's noticed more homeowners are asking for islands in custom colors. Consider a traditional white kitchen, she says. Paint the island in a pop of color and "it's beautiful; it's like a statement piece," she says of a current project that includes a bespoke blue butcher block. "It's this blue island in a sea of white."

#### CREATE MORE STORAGE

Seek out storage that works for you. For example, if you love to bake, think about creating cabinet space for those wide, tall cookie sheets. Think about easy-to-open drawers that can house big pots or oversized serving platters. Make sure frequently used items are within comfortable reach. Store a knife collection in a museum-worthy display, and add glass-front cabinets to exhibit favorite pieces stashed out of harm's way.

### BATH

#### FROM TUB TO TILE

To increase a home's resale value, experts agree having one standard tub in the house remains essential. That said, the master bath is open to interpretation. That's where more homeowners are swapping out their old-school tubs and whirlpool baths to build beautifully tiled frameless glass showers, generously sized and complete with multiple body sprays and a tasteful, well-placed bench.

#### VANITIES AND TUBS

Double vanities are vital to ensuring a happy shared space. And if square footage and budget allow, many homeowners like to outfit the master bath with a statement-making standalone tub in addition to the shower. Although that's also good for resale, that's more a matter of personal preference. But choosing a smaller freestanding tub lets you "eke out a little bit more space" for that master shower, vanity or even storage, says Mann.

#### LIGHT IT UP

A master bath can't have too much lighting, says Mann. If possible, put in a window or enlarge an existing one to bring in natural light, add sconces for drama, and include the all-important task lighting. In one recent bath Mann and her team did, light bounces off the mirrors and the bright, white finishes; a structural pendant hangs above the freestanding tub. They added a fireplace to up the spa-like ambience: "It's much more than just a bathroom space," Mann says.

#### GO NEUTRAL

Choose a neutral color palette, says Marissa Jambor, a designer with Bath Plus Kitchen Design Remodel. Use tasteful finishes on faucets and cabinets, and avoid anything too trendy. "What I like to do in design is make a space that's pleasing to most people," she says. "If you're planning to stay in the house, make it fit what you want. But also make it neutral enough and timeless enough that it will still be pleasing to future prospective buyers."

#### ADD A NICHE

A tiled cut-out in the shower is a convenience, providing immediate storage for shampoo bottles, body washes, razors—those all-important go-to items that need to be in arm's reach. "That's something we're doing more and more. It's just a cleaner, nicer way to store things in your shower. We do it whenever we can," says Jambor.

#### PAPER STASH

Be sure to have a stash of toilet paper rolls within sight and easy reach—especially if the bath is in a common part of the home. Designate an open shelf, or toss them into a pretty basket. Be obvious. Don't force guests to rifle around cabinets.



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