

Renovation can be a costly business, so plan carefully before bringing in the experts, writes **Suji Owen**

# Ceiling the deal

Whether you're planning a major renovation or a minor makeover, it's crucial to enlist the right people to help you. Get it wrong and months of misery may await. Get it right, however, and you can look forward to seeing your ideas take shape and evolve into something even better than you'd imagined.

But how do you ensure your renovations aren't left in the hands of "cowboys"? Even fully accredited, highly recommended professionals can prove disappointing if communication lines break down. Success comes from knowing what you want and recognising which skill sets provide the best fit with your home improvement project.

Once you have made key decisions at the outset—your main requirements, a realistic budget and a rough time frame—you can look into your options. You may require the services of an architect, interior designer, project manager or engineer, as well as a contractor and a team of subcontractors. For the first-time renovator, it can be difficult to know which of these you will really need and whether you can afford to skip on anything without regretting it later.

Identifying your priorities and assessing how much you want to be involved will help you decide who should manage the project.

Wolfgang Dierler, of WP Engineering, is a builder who is most comfortable working directly with clients. He's unconvinced about the value of designers on a project, his experience of working with them having been less than satisfactory.

"Ninety-nine per cent of our clients know what they want anyway," he says. "They spend a long time searching the internet

magazines to show us exactly what it is they want."

Neither does he feel the absence of an architect. "For what we do, there's no need."

Typically, Dierler is hired to "gut and build from scratch", sourcing all materials and even furniture as requested by clients.

Carol Ip, half of Ip Interiors design team, also seldom works with architects when managing renovation projects, only employing a structural engineer when major structural issues arise.

Should major renovations like this take place without an architect? Edward Bilson, of MAP (Metropolitan Architecture & Planning), says: "To a certain extent, yes. There's no question that it happens every day in Hong Kong.

For apartment renovations, the ability of an architect to contribute is extremely limited because there are so many limitations imposed, first by the building's management ordinance, the deed of mutual covenant and the Buildings Department, and then by physical constraints such as fixed plumbing.

When it comes to renovating houses, however, Bilson doesn't recommend going ahead without an architect.

"Architects are trained to look at the whole structure holistically," he says. Planning a building's optimal layout means not just looking at where the walls are but also asking: How thick are those walls? What are they made from? What's on the other side? To obtain structural statutory approvals for home renovations, an Authorised Person (AP) is required to ensure standards are met. As architects are also APs, structural standards are already a part of an architect's design.

This isn't always the case for non-

architect designs. Stripping back to the "architectural shell" and visualising unusual features tailored to the needs of a client is where an architect can truly add value. By anticipating a client's needs, even if they're not sure how to express them, a talented architect will incorporate designs that cut utility bills for example, or substantially raise the value of the property.

"We consider things like ground conditions, sound pollution, the weather, the views and the best way to integrate outside space," Bilson says. "The cliché is that architects talk about 'the space' while interior designers deal with 'rooms' and that's right—we're not bound by the same disciplines. Having said that, I couldn't do what a good interior designer does. They have an incredible depth of knowledge."

Inge Strom-Jepsen, an architect-turned-interior designer, couldn't agree more. "Interior designers, of course, are better at the 'soft' things—textures, fabrics and so on—but they're also capable of a much higher level of detail than architects and they have to deal with the end user, who often has a lot of input."

Once you have decided the renovation approach best suited to your home, it is important everyone is clear about their role. Most owners have specific ideas about the lighting fixtures or kitchen cabinets but what about spots for screws or electrical sockets? Airtly telling the contractor to "get whatever is standard" could result in some maddening choices, such as 12 electric plug sockets in a tiny kitchen or brass screws holding up a white light fixture.

Payment terms can also vary considerably among service providers. An architect will usually charge 15 per cent to 25 per cent of

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the whole renovation cost, although Strom-Jepsen says most of her fees are recouped through trade discounts and better design.

Some interior designers also negotiate payment on percentage terms, but Ip considers this to be a conflict of interest, pointing out that "a percentage just encourages people to sell you more expensive items". Instead, Ip prefers to estimate the number of hours she will allocate to a project within a given time frame and charge accordingly for "the fairest deal between designer and client".

Contractors usually calculate a lump sum price for the entire renovation, based on industry rates, or they will charge a flat fee on top of estimated renovation costs.

Reputable contractors, designers and architects can be found through professional organisations such as the Hong Kong Institute of Architects and the Hong Kong Interior Designers Association, which provides contact details of accredited members. Accreditation usually requires five to seven years of relevant training and should guarantee professional standards of ability.

Features in architecture and decor magazines can be fruitful because they offer a glimpse of the kind of work they do, and property

agents can be a good source for renovation contacts. Naturally, the best method of finding the right people is by personal recommendation. Strom-Jepsen only takes on clients who have been referred in this way and there are many others with long-standing reputations who never advertise.

Finding good service providers may be straightforward, but hiring them is another matter. Reputable individuals and firms are always in demand. Many of them are also small businesses unwilling to serve more than a few clients at a time.

Chances are you'll have to stand in line or jostle for position. "I often turns down jobs, but admits to "making room for larger or high-profile projects". Dierler has also had to turn down invitations to bid, opting where possible for "the more interesting cases".

If your home is small and nondescript, you can still edge your way into the queue by persuading your targeted contractor or designer that you're a perfect client. That means you've already done a lot of research and know precisely the look you want—ideally something different from the usual, and professionally challenging.

The perfect client is also available to discuss issues as soon as they arise and isn't prone to making unreasonable or frequent changes. Naturally, this type of customer also pays promptly and refers a handful of like-minded friends.

Your initial approach is quite important, adds Dierler. "If a guy calls me up with a job, but every other word he says is 'cheap', I know that that job will be like and I will decline." But how does one decline gracefully? "Oh, I just draw up a particularly expensive quote," he says.