

Your kitchen: the heart of your home

It is often said the kitchen is the heart of the home so it's no wonder we all want a kitchen which we enjoy being in. If you're thinking of updating your kitchen the first thing to think about is how you use it now and how you would like to use it in the future. Is it the smallest room in the house in which you would love to have the family sitting round the table but can barely fit the pots and pans in let alone anything else? Perhaps now would be a good time to think about extending or remodelling? Maybe you have a dining room which is hardly ever used; knocking the two rooms into one would provide a lot more space in the kitchen and would help create a good sized multi-purpose family space. Or what about extending into the garden and using glass walls and roof lights to create a light filled space?

Once you've decided on function you can start to think about the layout in more detail. If you are planning a major re-fit, re-model or extension now is the time to find your builder and start talking to them about what is possible. You may also need an architect if you are planning a major redesign.

Brian Berry, Director of External Affairs at the Federation of Master Builders (FMB) has some advice for finding a good builder "Ask family, friends or neighbours to recommend a builder they have used recently or check the find a builder website (www.fmb.org.uk/findabuilder). And don't be afraid to ask for references or to speak to previous clients. Speak to at least three builders, explain as much detail about the project as you can and ask for a quote. When you are ready to decide, don't just go with the cheapest, consider communication and quality too."

Your builder will be able to advise you on what planning permission you will need. "Thanks to changes to permitted development rights in England and Wales you may not need planning permission to extend your kitchen but it is always best to check with your local planning office" said David Hill, Director of National Register of Warranted Builders (NRWB) a wholly owned subsidiary of the FMB who's members can offer warranties on their work. David is also a Chartered Surveyor. "Your builder will also be able to advise you on the building regulations that will apply to the project. If you are remodelling, your builder will also be able to advise you on whether any walls are supporting, although it may be worth checking with a structural engineer or chartered surveyor before knocking any walls down."

There are three crucial things that need consideration when planning a kitchen; drains, utilities and the kitchen triangle. More often than not the available drains will determine the layout of the kitchen. Outlet pipes for sinks and appliances such as dishwashers and washing machines need, wherever possible, direct access to external drainage. You also need to consider the capacity of the drains and whether they can cope with potential usage.

Although moving utility (water, gas, electricity) points is expensive, "now is the time to do it when the builder is already in your home plus it means that work can be done and fitted flush with the new kitchen" said David. If you are moving or installing a gas boiler or cooker, make sure the installer is Gas Safe registered. Gas Safe is the Official register of gas installers. Remember to check that the installer is registered individually not just the company he/she works for. It is a requirement of health & safety legislation that all gas work is carried out by a registered gas installer; not doing so may invalidate the product guarantees as well as being dangerous.

When you start planning the layout of the kitchen and appliances it is important to remember the triangle theory, which says that the oven/hob, fridge and sink should be linked through easy reach in an imaginary triangle. Make sure these are close together and incorporate worktops

between them wherever possible to allow food preparation and somewhere to place pots and so forth.

Another thing to consider is the energy rating of your appliances; switching to A+ rated appliances could save you money on the running costs. Also if you are planning to use your kitchen as a living space, bear in mind that appliances can be very noisy; it may be worth finding quieter appliances.

Once you've decided on the function and layout of your kitchen you can think about the style although remember to concentrate on the practicalities of how the room is used; having a beautiful silk blind next to the cooker or sink may not be the best idea as it's bound to get splattered or dirty quickly.

Tiling is difficult and requires skill so it is important that it is done by a professional; It is one of the most visible areas of the kitchen and done badly it can ruin your kitchen's new look.

It is especially important that the flooring in your kitchen is practical as it is inevitable that there will be some spills. It is preferable to get flooring that is specially designed for wet environments, particularly when it comes to laminate flooring as some do not cope too well in moist environments. It is worth getting a professional to lay the flooring as badly laid flooring can ruin a room.

If you are redoing the flooring consider asking your builder to put in under floor heating for you. This has the advantage of not taking up valuable wall space, it is inexpensive to install, economical to run, there is no maintenance and the heat distribution is even. It can be installed under almost every floor type, wood, tile and laminate making it ideal for refurbishment projects. Under floor heating also banishes the horror of treading on cold hard floor first thing in the morning!

Another thing to bear in mind when refurbishing your kitchen is the cost. It is important to spend proportionately to the value of your home. "All streets have ceiling costs and if your home and most of the others in your street are worth £150,000 then spending £50,000 on a new kitchen may mean you do not recoup the cost when it comes to selling your property" said Brian. If you fall in love with a very expensive kitchen why not ask your kitchen designer or local hardware store if they can recommend a similar design but for a smaller budget?

Finally, think about how you and your family are going to cope without kitchen facilities during the construction work. Most builders will work around your family needs but the hot water and cooking facilities will inevitably need moving at some point so get your contingency plan in place now before the building work starts.

Further Information:

- Federation of Master Builders (FMB): 020 7242 7583or www.fmb.org.uk
- Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA): 020 7580 5533 or www.architecture.com
- Gas Safe: 0800 408 5500 or www.gassaferegister.co.uk/
- The Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering (CIPHE): 01708 472791 or www.ciphe.org.uk