

# Managing the reno budget

Photo / Getty Images

When considering a major renovation, it's always best to employ an experienced builder or project manager, but for smaller renovations there's no reason you can't do it yourself. By **Raewyn Court**



**L**ouise Court is a mum of three young boys, works part time and has managed to fit in renovating two family homes and four rental properties in the past 10 years. She's an accomplished self-taught renovator who is happy to share her tips on how to stick to the budget.

Court starts by listing absolutely everything in a diary that needs money spent on it, and then estimating the cost. "I always overestimate costs, and I update them constantly as quotes and bills come in. Last renovation, I also used an iPhone app, Renovation Budget Tracker. I allow for a 10 per cent contingency as, without fail, something crops up or is more expensive than anticipated. It's very easy to get accurate prices for hardware – online shopping is a huge help and those figures are fixed, but labour costs can be very hard to estimate and can easily blow out."

Renovators are often advised to get three quotes for a job, but Court says the Auckland market is such that it's very hard to get one tradie, let alone two or three for a quote.

"I ask friends and I use builderscrack.co.nz a lot – it's a great website to load your job and get quotes through. I'm now at a point where I can tell if a tradie's quote is reasonable, so if they come recom-

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mended I just book them in."

She adds that it's important to get a fixed-price quote rather than an estimate.

When Court is renovating for tenants or for profit and needs a quick turnaround, she sticks to things that don't require Council consent. This saves time and cost, but she stresses that for something like adding on a room, consents are a must.

"Take the time, do it right the first time and save any future headaches."

Louise preps and does her own painting, gardening and some demo.

"You can bust down non-structural walls and run around being a lackey for tradies so they don't waste their expensive time going to hardware shops to pick up bits and pieces."

She recommends YouTube videos for finding out how to do things that

don't really need a tradie.

"I recently YouTube'd how to lay vinyl tiles, but things like major building work, electrical and plumbing should only be done by qualified tradespeople, as well as the things you want looking good. I always leave tiling to the professionals as it's so hard to fix if you get it wrong. And wallpapering – it looks easy, but it's not!"

Renovators may be tempted to cut corners to save money, but Louise says people should never underestimate the importance of prep work. "A painted wall will only look as good as the prep work underneath it. Never go for cheap paint – you'll end up having to do twice as many coats. When quality paints are on special you can get them for a good price."

However, there are areas where

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big savings can safely be made by going with a cheaper option. Court always shops around, often online, for tiles.

"A white subway-style tile can vary in price from \$20-\$110 per sqm. There is very little difference in the look they create, but a more expensive tile can blow the budget out by thousands."

Likewise, she finds bathroom fittings, taps, vanities and baths to be of a similar quality anywhere but says the difference in price can be extreme. "I never go to a bathroom store – why pay \$1000 for a tap and \$2000 for a vanity when you can get the same item at a hardware store for a fraction of the price?"

Sometimes though, spending more on an item can add thousands more in value. "I recently did a kitchen for

a rental property. I was desperate trying to keep costs down at just going to give the old kit good tidy by replacing the benches and handles and some kickboard as it was water damaged. But when I stripped it down it was very waterlogged and I was saving. I didn't want to waste on it, so I ordered a simple assembled kitchen from an improvements store. It was really cheap and very good and, wow, it made the house million bucks."

"I spent an extra \$6000 but tens of thousands to the value of the property."

Last time Court staged a house for sale she was on a super-tight budget so to save money, she used IKEA furniture and artwork from her own home and says it's surprising what you can throw together.

"I borrowed a queen-size bed from a friend but couldn't find one, so I made some cardboard up into a bed size and dressed it with duvets and pillows and a couple of kids jumped on the bed and it held up perfectly. We prayed our dirty little secret!"

"Our own house was in a bit of a state for a few weeks, but he doesn't enjoy camping with kids!"



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