



# partners in grime

A couple of hard-core renovators share their wisdom about how to survive the mess—and stress—of remodeling together

When we bought our 1914 bungalow, we thought we were both looking at the same house. There were the same doors, walls, and windows in front of us. We walked through the same rooms. Only after we signed the papers did we realize that two people can look at a place and have completely different notions about what they see: the scope of the renovation, what to tackle first, how much it would all cost. We stood in the same place at the same time, but our visions were rooms apart.

That's especially problematic since we're living in our fixer-upper, funding projects as we go, and doing much of the work ourselves. So any difference of opinion can quickly become A Very Big Deal. While not everyone may dive in as deeply as we have, no couple can avoid this universal truth: If you embark on home improvement together, you'll eventually hit choppy seas.

Read on to see what we've learned from navigating some of the everyday challenges a renovation can dish out. ➔

By AARON AND JEANNIE OLSON  
Illustrations by RYAN HESHKA

**Redo Dilemma #1\_ You overestimate your ability to do it yourselves.**

We plunged into demolition on day one, tearing out plaster and drywall, and made a huge, satisfying mess. As we stood there covered with dust and dirt, grinning from ear to ear, we slowly realized that we had taken out the walls surrounding our only shower.

**He says\_** "That first day my sledgehammer was flying. We had the bathroom demo done by lunch. Putting things back together? That turned out to be a little more complicated."

**She says\_** "At first he said we'd just demo one wall. Before I knew it the entire room was dust and rubble. Three months later it was still dust and rubble."

**Survival tip\_** Don't even commit to a fixer-upper unless you've talked to someone who's done it already. Invite them over, open a bottle of wine, and ask them to tell you the entire story of their renovation in excruciating detail. If you're not scared off by that, then take a workshop, help out on someone else's house, or volunteer for a Habitat for Humanity build. Only then will you know what you're getting yourself into...sort of.

**Redo Dilemma #2\_ Contractors and suppliers only want to talk to the man of the house.**

We were picking out stock trim at a local lumberyard, and Jeannie was explaining to the salesman what she needed. She would talk, and the sales guy would look at me as if she were speaking a foreign language. After a fair amount of silence, I would repeat exactly what she said, and the sales guy would nod and get us our pieces of trim.

**He says\_** "When contractors or salesmen focused more on me, I felt sorry for them. If they'd only realized how often my wife is the decision maker, they would have made more sales."

**She says\_** "This makes me so crazy I want to challenge them to dueling routers at twenty paces."

**Survival tip\_** Ladies, don't back down. Research the type of work being done to bolster your confidence and your ability to ask informed questions. Stay calm and be firm. Use thoughtful silences to gain the upper hand in conversation with contractors and suppliers by pausing before you speak. You're the one spending the money, so speak with your pocketbook and reward the ones who "get it" by giving them your business.



**Redo Dilemma #3\_ Differing standards for safety.**

The first time Aaron volunteered to crawl out onto the roof, I ran to get my old rock-climbing ropes and harness. By the time I got back, he'd already walked out onto the roof in his tennis shoes and trimmed the tree branches overhanging the gutters while leaning over the edge holding a Sawzall. Just in case he wondered how I felt about his feat of daring, I painted a graphic picture of what could have happened had he not been so lucky. And how my second husband would be much more cautious.



**He says\_** "If accidents don't get you, guilt from your spouse will. Can you ever really justify not doing everything in your power to make your home safe for you and your family?"

**She says\_** "I went out and increased the amount of life insurance we have on him. That got his attention."

**Survival tip\_** Talk about how to manage the job site before any work actually begins. While working, protect your eyes, use a dust mask, handle power tools appropriately. Don't cut corners when it comes to proper setup and cleanup—and don't work when you are overly tired or stressed out. You can replace a drill, but it's hard to find an extra set of fingers at the hardware store.

**Redo Dilemma #4\_ Unexpected problems just keep cropping up.**

We were prepared for a few leaks and some wood rot. Maybe some crazy wiring or funky plumbing that we'd have to fix. We weren't prepared when things also began to fall off the house—all within the same week. A door. A storm window. The knob in the shower. A gutter. Part of the bedroom ceiling. The house was expressing itself, and what was it saying? It wasn't going to submit to any renovation without a fight, even if that meant hurling its shingles at us from the roof.

**He says\_** "I like to think we are performing a public service by letting our project serve as a warning to the uninitiated."

**She says\_** "It became a game to guess what was going to go wrong next. When we came back from a trip to the hardware store and the front door-knob fell off in my hand, we were sure we were doomed."

**Survival tip\_** You need two things when unexpected problems arise: padding in the budget—and a good punch line. If a change in plans or a hiccup in your daily routine puts you in a panic, be wary of buying a fixer-upper. Once you're committed, the only thing routine about the next few years will be the every-other-day trips to the hardware store.

**Redo Dilemma #5\_ The mess.**

One night we went to bed after a hard day of work and woke up with grit on our teeth from the plaster dust in the air. The dust barrier we'd made out of plastic garbage bags duct-taped together didn't quite do the trick.

**He says\_** "I assumed the mess wasn't that bad. Working on projects together made me realize my standards were low—really low."

**She says\_** "I pleaded for more barriers. Finally I just boarded off the work area



Has remodeling put your relationship to the test? See how other remodelers are coping at [thisoldhouse.com/shortcuts](http://thisoldhouse.com/shortcuts)

with plywood. I haven't heard any complaints. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him since I boarded up that room. He could still be in there."

**Survival tip** An ounce of prevention is worth not having to chew on a pound of construction debris. If a couple's idea of what constitutes "messy" differs, defer to the person who is most responsible for cleaning the house. Use sheets of plywood to block off construction areas or create an "air lock" out of multiple layers of heavy (6 mil) plastic sheeting. If you can, budget a once-a-month cleaning crew to lessen the work—and the stress.

### **Redo Dilemma #6\_ You've obliterated the budget.**

Before buying our fixer-upper, we created an elaborate spreadsheet with all of our project costs. We designed it with automated calculations to track our renovation expenses and estimate the future "sweat equity" we'd have after we had finished. These days, we open it up not so much to track costs but to get a good laugh at how naive we were about the real costs of renovation.

**He says** "Budgets are a good starting point."

**She says** "Budgets are sacred."

**Survival tip** Do your research ahead of time and be as realistic as possible. Then forget the conventional 10 to 20 percent overrun—add 50 percent. Write out a plan, start a spreadsheet, and keep on keeping track. You'll want to know where the money went.



### **Redo Dilemma #7\_ Your kitchen is out of commission.**

The floors in the kitchen had to be refinished before the baby was crawling, so the appliances had to be moved out. Then work was delayed when the guy we hired to do it couldn't start right away.

**He says** "Having the fridge in the living room just means that it's closer to the TV. Great!"

**She says** "Is it wrong that I'm happy the kitchen is out of commission? Phone calls for delivery are the best things that I make in the kitchen anyway."

**Survival tip** Buy a used electric stove from the want ads and set up a temporary kitchen elsewhere in the house. Alternatively, you'd be amazed at what

you can do with a hot plate. Renovating in the summer? Embrace your grill. It's not just for burgers—we even found a grill-top wok at a local store. Stick to a limited amount of dishes and silverware to keep cleanup to a minimum.

### **Redo Dilemma #8\_ You have to live without a fully functioning bathroom.**

Did you read our demolition story at the beginning of this piece? In the end, a well-placed tarp protected our gutted bathroom walls from the shower, and we turned the water on and off with a wrench for six months.

**He says** "I held on by imagining how great our custom shower would be...but daydreaming didn't get me any cleaner."

**She says** "This is why I love the gym. Nobody seems to notice when I go there in street clothes to shower."

**Survival tip** Sear every detail into your memory bank in order to craft a good war story. Every morning shower might be awful, but every cocktail-party anecdote can be glorious.

### **Redo Dilemma #9\_ There are half-done jobs everywhere.**

For us, imagining a finished project is much easier than actually doing the work. After four years, we have a drawer full of brushed-nickel bin pulls waiting to be put into place. Unfortunately, that drawer is a bit hard to open since it doesn't have a handle.

**He says** "I remember visiting friends who had a little piece of trim missing in their bathroom, and wondering, 'Sheesh, how much work could it be to get that done?' Fast forward to the present—our own bathroom has had missing trim for over a year."

**She says** "The ability of human beings to adapt to changes in their environment, especially the lack of outlet covers, is amazing."

**Survival tip** Plan a big party to show off your finished space to give yourselves a deadline. Invite people who will gossip about you. If this doesn't motivate you to finish, you never will.

### **Redo Dilemma #10\_ Burnout.**

Just like a thermometer reflects the temperature outside, paintbrushes can act as an indicator of the energy level inside. After painting our very first room, those brushes were well cleaned and hung neatly in rows on the pegboard in the shop. By the fifth room, they'd often lie dried and crusty in an empty paint can. Our stairwell has waited six months with only a coat of primer. Thankfully the lighting there is dim.

**He says** "We started out highly motivated. Then we kept moving based on guilt. Eventually we relied on denial to keep from being depressed."

**She says** "I don't know what he's talking about. I always clean my brushes."

**Survival tip** Taking regular breaks every few months is important for your mental health—we try to go away for a week twice a year. Keeping a scrapbook of our progress (and our renovation blog) helps us keep going, too.

But perhaps most important is to keep a sense of humor. Because the work will seem endless. Because every day something will go wrong. The front door will fall off or you'll uncover an ant infestation or the cat's head will get stuck in that hole in the wall. When it happens, you can either collapse in a heap or you can laugh about it, grab your camera, and record it for posterity. The faster you can laugh about it, the faster you can get past it and keep moving on the renovation. In 20 years you'll wonder what all the fuss was about. At least we're hoping so. ■

*Aaron and Jeannie Olson are amateur renovators in Chicago who blog about their experiences weekly at [HouseinProgress.net](http://HouseinProgress.net).*