



The Kitchen & Bath Insider[®]

Paul Bookbinder, M.I.D.

Should You Pay for a Design?

The blizzard has finally ended, and soon many people's thoughts will turn towards the traditional, yearly ritual of home improvement. And, of those contemplating this upcoming, seasonal compulsion, many will focus on their kitchen. Like the swallows returning from wherever they went, this need is not something to be ashamed of, our species simply has no control over it.

If you are facing the uncontrollable urge to remodel your kitchen, you will probably need some help. But don't despair; you don't have to do it alone. There are many qualified kitchen designers available to create a functional, as well as aesthetically pleasing, kitchen to satisfy your desires. Look for a firm that is associated with the National Kitchen and Bath Association. This is the largest organization in the industry and it sets the standards for kitchen design. But don't expect to get something for nothing because, (if I remember my Shakespeare), "nothing will come of nothing".

Most successful kitchen designers charge for their initial work, however their charges and pricing structures vary greatly. I know of companies that charge anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000 or more, for this service. Usually, this sum can be applied towards the purchase of cabinets, and I wouldn't recommend contracting with a firm that did not adhere to that policy. After all, a good design takes a great deal of time, effort and creativity, so why should they give this away for free?

An argument could be made that if you don't like the design and/or estimate you've wasted your money. I don't entirely disagree with this, and that's why I recommend finding a firm with a minimum initial design fee. This smaller expense certainly does not compensate the designer for all the time he must spend creating your dream kitchen, but it shows a commitment on your part, indicating that you are serious about the project.

Some firms have a staged design fee, which includes a minimum initial design charge. If after reviewing the design, you wish to pursue the project, they have a secondary fee (sometimes called a retainer) for additional work on the design or releasing the drawings to you. This seems to be an equitable compromise. The designer charges a minimal fee, confident that they will create an exciting design, within the budget that you specify. You get a chance to review the design and see how much the renovation will cost, before laying out a lot of money.

At that point, assuming the design fits your budget, you have to ask yourself three questions. The first is, do you like the design? It doesn't have to be perfect yet, but it must show promise, and you have to be convinced that it can be modified to your satisfaction. The second question is, do you like the company's products? This includes the cabinets, countertops and accessories. The final question is, do you trust the designer and his support staff? If the design or designer is not to your liking, or the cost is out of line, you have the option of ending the relationship without incurring additional costs.

If you answer, "yes" to the three questions, you're ready to move to the next step in a "staged design fee" program. If any of your answers were "no", look for another firm.

Once you find the right company to work with, and a design you love, at a price you're comfortable with, you're ready to proceed to the next step, which I'll cover in an upcoming article.