

Before you remodel, get permission first

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Your home needs a new look. Maybe its a case of updating the aesthetics of a room. Maybe its something more significant, such as the need to reconfigure rooms inside the home. Or maybe it is something as considerable as the need to create new space on your property. Regardless of the reason, before you budget your project, before you pick your new windows or shutters, before you pry the first 2x4 from its position, and before you hire a contractor, remember that you may need to get permission first.

Permitting of a project is often overlooked and sometimes never discovered. In other cases, permitting is ignored and exposed at inopportune times – the sale of a home, the routine inspection by an official of a different project in the home, or worse still, when someone gets hurt. There is good news and bad news associated with the permitting process: the bad news is that there are so many eyes on your project, which analyze, critique, and yes, change your plans; the good news is that there are so many eyes on your project, which analyze, critique, and yes, change your plans. There is, however, a method to this madness.

I recommend speaking first with your local building department, which in most cases is the hub of the permitting wheel. Most building commissioners are also the local zoning enforcement officer, and can offer insight not only on the local and state building codes, but can also provide you with zoning advice. In addition, some building departments maintain records, which may offer insight into how your home was constructed, the date it was constructed, and the reasons for quirks in the construction of your home. This may be invaluable for those restoration projects, which seek true authenticity in the remodel.

Next, you should visit your local health department to determine whether any issues will be created by the changes you plan to make. Remember that your septic systems limit the number of bedrooms (not bathrooms) you use in your house. The changes you make to your home may be the difference between the definition of a living room and the definition of a bedroom, which may trigger a septic upgrade. Also, there are regulations that limit how close to septic systems new construction can be located. A review of your property's septic plan may reveal that the new wing you envisioned will actually be situated on the leaching tank in the backyard. Remember that it is better to find out now, rather than when the foundation contractor discovers your septic system the hard way – with a backhoe.

Is your property located in an historical section of town? This inquiry is crucial, as the subjective opinions of the local boards entrusted to oversee the historical style of homes may conflict with your plans for the new shutters, the color of those shutters, the front porch, and even the kind of replacement windows to be installed. Determining whether your property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places is a related issue. You may need to secure approvals from State and Federal Agencies, depending on what it is you want to do with your property.

