


{ green home remodel
healthy homes for a healthy environment } 

hiring a pro





green

What is a Green Remodel?

It's an approach to home improvement with the goal of not only making your house look better, but *work* better—for both you and the environment. Want a healthier home? Lower utility bills? Reduced maintenance? A cleaner planet? A green remodel helps you realize a range of far-reaching benefits from a single smart design. With careful planning, you can create a home that combines beauty, efficiency, comfort and convenience with health and conservation.

Cover photo: VELOCIPEDA architects
(photo © Michael Moore).

why

Why Consider a Green Remodel?

SAVE MONEY

High-performance designs that save energy and water can reduce the day-to-day costs of living in your home. Often, the initial expense of professional design services can be quickly recouped with a multitude of benefits. For example, a skilled designer can help you better utilize your existing space, sometimes reducing or even eliminating the need—and expense—of adding more square footage.

MAKE A HEALTHIER HOME

By selecting green building materials and finishes, you can minimize—or avoid completely—the introduction of toxic compounds into your home. You can also protect and enhance indoor air quality by using proper construction, ventilation and weatherproofing techniques. Health-conscious professionals can help you safely navigate any hazards you may encounter during your remodel.

REDUCE ECOLOGICAL IMPACT

Resource-efficient materials and designs lessen the depletion of our natural environment. A green designer or contractor can help you identify designs and products that will help your home perform better ecologically, as well as economically.

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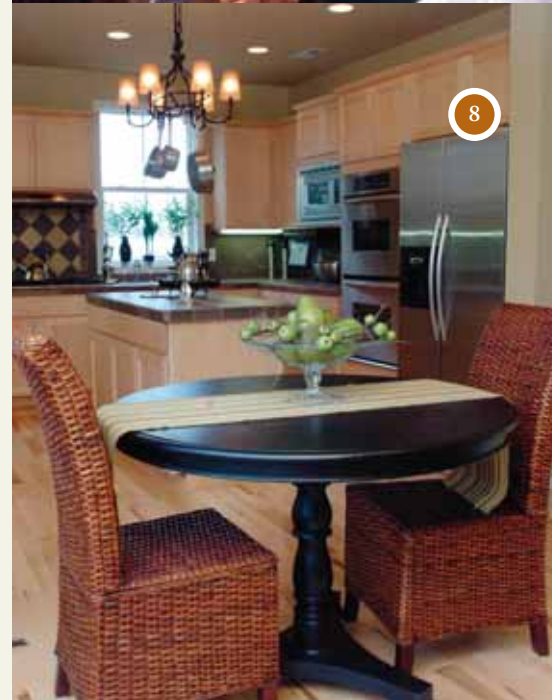
A major home improvement project can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, sometimes rivaling a house's purchase price. With such a significant investment, it makes sense to carefully consider not only your remodeling design, but the professionals who will execute it. In fact, who you hire plays a key role in the success of your project—especially with a green remodel.

Your architect, interior designer, or contractor will require special skills and experience, depending on the specific goals of your project. The ideal green remodel professional offers direct experience with a project scope similar to the one you're considering, plus plenty of knowledge and enthusiasm for green concepts and practices. To increase the likelihood of your project's success, learn to ask the right questions, and research the abilities and approach of the professionals you're considering.



contents

- 01 Rethink Remodel**
Green remodeling uses up front planning and research to create a design with wide-ranging benefits.
- 05 Design Professionals**
Knowing how design professionals work and the special areas of practice in green building will help you identify criteria for selecting a designer.
- 07 Selecting a Design Professional**
Once your criteria are set, evaluate your prospective candidates.
- 08 Built Green™**
This local green building tool can make it easier for your designer and contractor to create your green remodel.
- 09 Contractors**
Learn about the home improvement contracting process, and special skills needed by a contractor to build a green remodel.
- 11 Choosing a Contractor**
As with design professional selection, careful evaluation of the candidates will help you choose the right contractor.
- 12 Resources**
Additional help for creating your green remodel.





*Looking for help on your
specific project? Look to the
Green Home Remodel series.*

*You'll find them online at
www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swdl
greenbuilding or*

*call 206-296-4466 for
paper copies.*



rethink remodel

Green remodeling requires a new approach to the home improvement process, with more up-front planning to take advantage of opportunities that might otherwise be missed with a conventional approach. This includes expanding your list of objectives as well as the way you compare the value of products and services—taking wide-angle and long-term views of decisions. It also means being willing to invest time and energy to find solutions that best fit your needs. Finally, a green remodel requires that you approach home improvement tasks with health and safety as priorities. This advance planning will pay large dividends in terms of long-term satisfaction with your project and cost containment.

Be aware that your relationship with design and building professionals will differ in green remodels, as well. Some designers and contractors are accustomed to relatively limited interaction with the client and others involved in the remodeling process. In order to capture every opportunity, the green design approach encourages much more frequent conversation between the homeowner, architect, contractor, and occasionally specialists in renewable energy, human health, or engineering. Professionals involved in green remodel projects must be open and willing to spend time on these additional conversations and incorporate new “green” ideas.

Collaboration is key. If you're hiring out the design and construction, as most homeowners do, the ideal green remodel requires:

- a committed, educated and involved homeowner,
- a design professional with the skills and willingness to capture your vision in a design,
- a contractor with the experience and abilities to make that design a reality, and
- the ability for all three to work together as a team.

Once these elements are in place, you'll be well on your way to a successful green remodel!

Photos, above and opposite left: JAS Design Build (photos © John Granen).



Decide What You Want

Just thinking about a remodel can elicit equal parts excitement and terror. Reduce the terror factor by allowing sufficient planning time. One year is usually ideal for coordinating a major remodel, although not always possible. Regardless of your timeline, the first step in the planning process involves defining your priorities and then considering all options carefully. For help in determining your project goals, refer to the following King County Green Home Remodel guides, available at no cost to you.

- Kitchen,
- Bath & Laundry,
- Roofing,
- Painting,
- Landscape Materials, and
- Salvage & Reuse.

To read or download, go to www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/greenbuilding/documents.asp, or simply call 206-296-4466 to order paper copies.

Determine Project Scope

As a general remodeling rule, extensive projects translate into expensive projects—both economically and ecologically. So if you stick with existing walls, cabinetry, plumbing and electrical layouts, you'll spend less. You'll also use fewer resources, and create less waste. Therefore, it's critical that you discuss your project's scope with your architect or interior designer. Make scope limitation a priority, and identify strategies for accomplishing your goals with minimal structural modification to your home. Beyond the environmental and financial benefits, this approach also helps minimize disruption caused by a remodel—an especially pertinent concern when you're trying to live in a space under construction.

Adding space to a home often costs \$200 per square foot or more. Managing your project's scope can save money and benefit the environment at the same time.





A project focused on energy and water efficiency can help pay for itself. Simply replacing a toilet that's over ten years old with a new, efficient model can reduce water and sewer use by 10%.



Expand Your Definition of Cost

Focus on long-term savings, ease of maintenance and conservation. Initial price only gives a peephole view of the true cost of a product or design. A higher purchase price can mean a better deal in the long run. For example, you can actually reduce the cost of living in your home by choosing resource-efficient fixtures (lowering monthly utility bills) and durable materials (requiring less frequent replacement). A low purchase price may simply mean a good deal—or it may signify a lack of quality or durability, or even that some environmental, health, or social costs are not reflected on the price tag.

The cost of design and construction services can also be misleading if you only consider initial price. The collaborative nature of the green design approach requires more up-front time (which usually translates into billable hours). But this early planning stage can reap tremendous benefits later: design solutions that better meet your needs or reduce the project scope, fewer construction materials and expenses, or features that save energy, water, or maintenance.

Do Your Homework

Research helps you ask the right questions of retailers, your designer and/or contractor—or avoid costly mistakes if you are doing some of the work yourself. Start early to look for design ideas and businesses that carry the green products you like.

Photo, above left: Geoff Belau (silo ARCHITECTURE+DESIGN) and Lauren Woodward. Photo, above: Robert Harrison Architects. Photo, opposite left: © Jacqueline Koch.



Keep a file of contact names and businesses, as well as magazine and newspaper clippings. Help your design professional or contractor access these products quickly and easily, by providing them with the names of manufacturers and suppliers. In addition to helping keep your project on schedule, this extra effort will reduce the likelihood the materials and products you've selected will be replaced with something you don't want.

Homework will also help you converse better with your hired professionals. Knowing enough to discuss the pros and cons of a design or material will increase your participation in the remodel, and enhance your ownership in both the process and final product.

Respect Your Neighbors

Major remodels are often noisy and disruptive, and even exterior painting can affect neighbors. Keep the peace in your neighborhood by making sure your neighbors are up-to-date on your remodeling plans, especially any elements that may impact them during or after construction. Whether it's an addition that affects their view or access to sunlight in the yard, or lost privacy due to workers that may be in your back or side yards, discuss these issues with your neighbors well in advance. Find tips from the National Association of Home Builders for a neighbor-friendly remodel in the news release, "Homeowner Remodeling Etiquette" at www.nahb.org (click on *Resources*, then *For Consumers*, then *Remodeling Your Home*).



Design/build companies combine architectural and construction functions in one firm, helping coordinate a remodel project. Each design/build firm should be evaluated on their own merits; use the suggestions in both sections of this guide to help.



design professionals

Architects and interior designers receive specialized training that gives them insight into building and space requirements, while landscape designers gain similar insights as they relate to the outdoor environment. Because of this, hiring a design professional can quickly pay for itself with reduced hassles related to permitting and the design process—you can also avoid costly construction mistakes or poorly conceived designs that won't function well over time.

The first step in choosing an architect or designer? Learn how their professions work. Architects, interior designers, and landscape designers all have various associations that help explain their professions and certifications to identify qualified individuals.

Next, find a pool of candidates. Start your search by surveying friends, family and coworkers with recent remodeling experience. Visit websites of local architects and designers. Then narrow the field of potential designers to those who meet your personal criteria. *Green design* is a relatively new and quickly evolving field. Not all designers are well versed in its various elements. One resource for finding local green architects, interior designers and contractors is the Northwest EcoBuilding Guild, an educational nonprofit promoting environmentally responsible building. To find a directory of EcoBuilding Guild members, go to www.ecobuilding.org and click on *Green Pages*. Keep in mind that inclusion in the *Green Pages* does not assure any level of expertise in green building. Verify for yourself if the professionals you're considering meet your requirements.

design choices

Once you tap into the local design community, you'll find a variety of firms with green reputations. Upon closer examination, you'll discover that most companies pick a particular specialty within the green building arena. Some firms, however, take a more general approach, becoming well versed in multiple areas of green focus. The following table describes some of these specialties.

green design specialties

small home design

With the success of Sarah Susanka's *Not So Big House* book series, many are questioning if bigger is truly better when it comes to housing. Smaller is inherently greener, in that it means fewer construction materials, and less space to heat and maintain. Money not spent on additional square footage can then be used for green upgrades and superior craftsmanship. If this is one of your goals, look for a designer experienced in making the most of smaller spaces.

healthy homes

Increased incidence of childhood asthma, allergies, and even *multiple chemical sensitivity* (a phenomenon where a person becomes highly sensitized to a variety of chemical irritants) emphasizes the need for healthy indoor environments. Airtight houses save energy, but without proper ventilation and careful avoidance of toxic and irritating building materials, they can compromise indoor air quality. Designers well versed in healthy home practices can create efficient remodels that also protect occupant health. The American Lung Association of Washington offers several *Healthy House* programs, including training for design professionals and homeowners. See www.alaw.org/air_quality/healthy_house_programs/ for details and resources.

energy-efficient & solar design

Concerns about rising energy costs and global warming focus attention on home energy efficiency. Professionals skilled in energy-efficient design can help you create a home less susceptible to future shocks in energy prices. Some designers boast a sub-specialty in solar design, both *passive solar* and solar electric. Passive solar design uses strategic window placement, shading, and other strategies to take advantage of free energy from the sun and reduce your home's reliance on electricity and fossil fuel heat sources.

natural landscaping

Conventional landscapes use lots of water, produce large amounts of yard waste, and overuse chemicals that are bad for the environment and our families' health. A natural landscaping approach can save money and time, while protecting the health of people and the environment. A growing number of landscape designers and landscape companies are using natural landscaping practices. To learn more about natural lawn and garden care, go to www.metrokc.gov/dnpr/swd/naturalyardcare.

barrier-free design

Often called *Universal Design*, this field focuses on creating spaces that welcome users of all ages, sizes and abilities. A green strategy in that it allows us to use the same space even as our abilities change, Universal Design reduces the need for costly space modifications. Examples of Universal Design in action: lever handles, countertops of varying heights, adjustable showerheads and curb-free shower entries. The key is to elegantly integrate these elements. Professionals experienced in designing for those with limited mobility will likely be best at incorporating Universal Design seamlessly into your project. Go to www.aarp.org/life/homedesign/ to learn more about Universal Design from the American Association of Retired Persons.

salvaged materials

Salvaged materials offer one of the greenest material choices, since they extend the life of products already produced. Be aware however, that integrating salvaged items can turn the design process upside down. Found materials very often dictate a project's design—rather than the more customary process of choosing a design and then manipulating materials to fit it. Some designers are more adept at this approach to design than others. For more, refer to the Green Home Remodel *Salvage & Reuse* guide; see *Resources* on page 12.

natural building

This green building sub-specialty prioritizes traditional and indigenous building practices, as well as the use of stone, mud, timber and straw. Examples of natural building techniques include *straw bale*, *rammed earth*, and *cob* (a mix of sand, clay and straw); many of which prove challenging to incorporate into an existing structure. Also note that obtaining permits for these projects often requires careful interaction with permitting agencies. Designers experienced with natural building techniques can evaluate their applicability to your project. Other natural building techniques, such as plaster wall finishes, are more amenable to remodeling projects. *The Art of Natural Building* edited by Kennedy, Smith, and Wanek (New Society Publishers, 2001) is an excellent introduction to various natural building techniques.



selecting a design professional

When evaluating your design candidates, state your green goals and priorities up front, then gauge reactions. Your ideas should generate a positive, if not enthusiastic, response. Of course, realism counts, too. But the design professional should take your concepts seriously, and show an eagerness to help execute them. Hesitation or doubt on a candidate's part indicates that your priorities are in conflict—which ultimately could result in a rocky working relationship.

Evaluate Education and Experience

Schooling, and more importantly, direct green design experience is key to identifying a designer that can meet your needs. As you interview prospective designers, consider the following:

- Ask about specific green building training (see page 6 for examples of specialties, or use the priorities you've identified for your project), including continuing education through design organizations.
- Look for green design books, product information, or sample materials in the office. Inquire about subscriptions to green design journals, or access to online environmental design and construction resources.
- Request a tour of the designer's materials sample library, and ask for examples of green materials. The designer should be able to produce multiple examples of low-toxic, recycled-content, locally produced or otherwise green products.
- Look for direct experience in the green building areas that are most important to you. Can the candidate identify past projects with clients who had priorities similar to your own? Ask for—and check up on—references, specifically from projects like yours.
- Ask to see *specifications*, or *specs* from previous jobs that incorporate green principles. Specs are boilerplate contract language that spells out the marching orders for everyone involved in building/remodeling a house, down to which paint to use and how it is applied to the brand and exact stain on the cabinets. Architects usually customize general specifications for their office, and then further modify them for each job. Examples of green specs include construction recycling and reuse, indoor air quality assurance during construction, requirements that you must personally approve any materials substitutions, and specifications for green materials and products.

Identify Green Business Practices

The most experienced green design professionals employ green principles in their office too. Look for green building materials, and energy- and water-efficiency features. Office practices should include recycling, double-sided copying, and reusable kitchenware. An added bonus is encouragement of alternative transportation (such as showers for bicycle commuters or reimbursement for bus-riding employees).

Respect the Social Element

The interpersonal element between client and designer is frequently underestimated. Do you *like* the design professional as a person? Do you communicate well, and feel heard when you voice concerns or ideas? This doesn't mean you have to be best friends; in fact maintaining a businesslike relationship is advisable. But you should sense a mutual respect.

Remember that the most successful green remodels include an actively involved client throughout the entire process. Maintain regular contact with your design professional, and keep tabs on the design as it develops. Even with the best communication, plans can veer off track. Early identification and correction of elements that don't meet your needs will cost less and cause fewer disruptions, while keeping the project on its timeline.

Take notes when interviewing prospective design professionals. This will help you compare skills and services and make an informed decision.





BUILT GREEN™

A green remodel can baffle homeowners, architects and builders alike. With so many elements to consider, how to be sure you're not missing opportunities? Luckily, you'll find a local tool to help. Built Green is a program developed by the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties*, featuring checklists and rating systems for homes (both new and remodeled). Offering over 200 health and environmentally friendly building strategies, the system is flexible enough for just about any remodeling project.

** in partnership with King County*

Built Green allows for a designer's creativity while simplifying the green remodeling process by providing practical design strategies, as well as materials and product suggestions. Built Green also offers specific strategies to the contractor to protect health, reduce waste, and safeguard water quality and the building site.

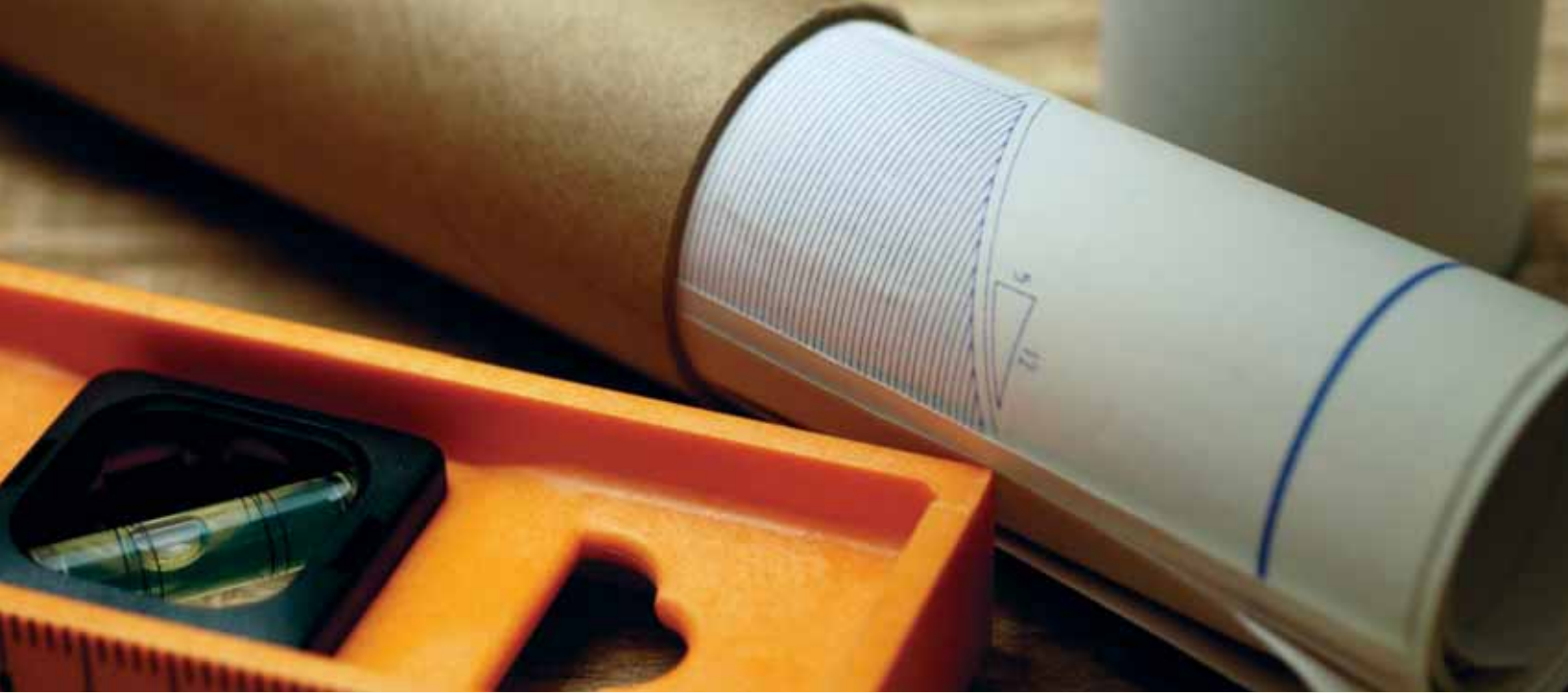
The system covers all areas of a green remodel, including:

- complying with green codes,
- site - and water-quality protection,
- energy and water efficiency,
- healthy indoor air, and
- materials efficiency.

Visit www.builtgreen.net to learn more about Built Green™ features, find builders that use the system, and take virtual tours of Built Green homes. Download the Built Green Remodeler checklist free of charge to help you brainstorm green ideas with your designer and contractor. When you enroll your remodel in the Built Green program, you gain access to the Built Green binder that gives in-depth details for each point available on the checklist. This information helps both your designer and contractor successfully achieve each point your project attempts—a particular advantage for professionals new to the many elements of green remodeling.



All photos this page: Built Green™ Idea Home, designed by Mithun and built by Bennett Homes.



contractors

A contractor takes your home improvement plans and turns them into reality. But choosing a contractor requires patience and commitment to your priorities for health, safety, and the environment.

Learn About Building Contractors

Educate yourself about the home improvement contractor process. To do business in Washington State, a contractor must be licensed, bonded, and insured. Realize however, that there are no proficiency exams for licensure in our state. Therefore, it's even more important to carefully review and select the right contractor for your project. For an excellent primer on the process, visit The Better Business Bureau online at www.bbb.org/alerts/Home.asp and click on *Home Improvement*. This fact sheet covers it all, from finding contractors to financing and contract negotiations.

Contractors will vary in experience with green building practices. The following table lists skills contractors should have to complete a green remodel.

construction recycling & reuse

Remodels can generate tremendous amounts of waste—or resources, depending on the manner in which materials are dealt. Contractors can reduce waste through salvage and reuse, and maximize recycling, to keep useful materials out of the landfill. The *Construction Works* program helps King County contractors minimize waste during the construction process; to learn more, go to www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/construction-recycling/ and click on *Construction Works*. Also refer to the *Salvage & Reuse* guide; see *Resources* on page 12.

healthy home construction

Remodeling activities pose various hazards, from lead paint dust to asbestos exposure. (Go to the Environmental Protection Agency's site on lead at www.epa.gov/lead for resources on reducing lead exposure). Minimize these hazards with special precautions, and ensure they remain contained only in the areas under construction. Prevent future problems by keeping materials dry and protected prior to installation. Also choose construction materials such as adhesives, glues, and finishes that affect air quality the least. For more, refer to the American Lung Association of Washington online at www.alaw.org/air_quality/healthy_house_programs/

water-quality protection

Remodeling projects involving a home's exterior or grounds can negatively affect water quality by allowing silt and contaminants to wash into our creeks, lakes, and Puget Sound. King County maintains strict code requirements for protecting water quality during construction; contractors can learn more by visiting www.metrokc.gov/wlr/stormwater to review the code. Other strategies for protecting water quality include proper handling of paints and finishes, using nontoxic concrete form-release compounds, *biodiesel* (a plant-based alternative to petroleum diesel) in earth-moving equipment and diesel trucks, and substituting hazardous substances and cleaners with low- or non-toxic alternatives.



The Built Green™ Remodeler program offers contractors dozens of strategies for job site practices related to waste reduction and recycling, healthy home construction, and water quality protection. See page 8 for more on the Built Green program. In addition, your design professional can write requirements for such activities into the specifications for your project, making green construction practices part of the legal documentation of your remodel. The *Contractor's Guide*, produced by Seattle's Resource Venture and the King County Solid Waste Division, contains a sample job-site specification for a Waste Reduction Plan; to find it, go to www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/construction-recycling then click on *Documents*.

Finding a Contractor

Like locating a designer, begin your search identifying prospective candidates. You can certainly take the friends-, family- and coworkers-referral route here, too. Also consider *design/build* firms that provide both design and construction services. This streamlined approach often saves time and coordination hassles on a remodeling project. Of course, as with any major decision, weigh all benefits and costs before proceeding.

In your quest for a qualified green contractor, you can also take advantage of two local resources. The first is the Built Green member list at www.builtgreen.net (see page 8 for more). Another option is the Northwest EcoBuilding Guild member publication, the *Green Pages*; simply go to www.ecobuilding.org and click on *Green Pages*. Note that neither Built Green nor the EcoBuilding Guild require a proficiency test to become a member; however, program membership indicates some level of green building interest.

If you're working with a design professional, ask for a shortlist of preferred contractors. This can make the contractor search process much easier, especially if your project is similar to others the designer has completed. The fact that a design professional is willing to recommend a contractor to execute his/her design indicates trust in the contractor's abilities. Regardless of such a referral, it's always wise to evaluate contractors on their own merits.





choosing a contractor

When evaluating your prospective contractors, determine if their abilities mesh with your project. As with design professionals, there are ways to evaluate a prospective contractor's skill sets, business practices, and interpersonal skills.

Evaluate Education and Experience

Determining a candidate's schooling, qualifications, and real-life green remodeling experience is key to the successful realization of your project.

- Ask for examples of previous projects featuring elements in your design. Ask specific questions related to your design, such as "Have you done a project that used low-toxic finishes and paints?" or "Have you worked on a job that used Advanced Framing techniques (framing on 24-inch intervals rather than 16 inches)?" or "Can you show me an example of a job where you worked with salvaged materials?" If the contractor answers affirmatively, ask for details—and references for the specific job.
- Evaluate each candidate's knowledge of the Built Green™ program of the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties (see page 8). Direct experience on a Built Green project is preferred; general knowledge of the program is good.
- Look for membership in the *Construction Works* construction waste management program, administered by the Resource Venture and King County. Ask if the candidate has a copy of the *Contractor's Guide* to job-site recycling and waste prevention. (If not, request that the contractor order a free copy of this publication by calling 206-296-4466.)
- Ask if the contractor has completed the *Healthy House Training for Professionals*, a seven-week course offered periodically by the American Lung Association of Washington. The program covers a wide array of issues critical to healthy home construction, from moisture and ventilation to materials selection.

Identify Green Business Practices

Does the contractor walk the talk? Look for office operations emphasizing energy efficiency, recycling and waste prevention. Do work trucks use biodiesel? An environmentally responsible workplace goes hand-in-hand with green remodeling services.

Respect the Social Element

Does the contractor listen to your questions and concerns? Are responses solution-oriented, rather than simply claiming something can't be done? Many contractors are wary of new materials and methods, fearful of call-backs and dissatisfied customers blaming them for the failure of a building element that isn't time-tested. A contractor should be able to raise concerns in a way that seeks mutually acceptable resolution. If communication is difficult or one-sided, expect challenges down the road. Open communication and a can-do approach, on the other hand, is a very good sign.

Once you've selected your contractor, maintain close communication throughout the project's duration. The most ambitious green remodels rely on an actively involved homeowner—one who is willing to make a personal trip to get the desired material or product if timing is tight and the crew is short. Showing respect and appreciation to contractors is an important part of maintaining a good working relationship. Don't be hesitant to say "thank you!" for a job well done, or bring coffee to workers burning the midnight oil on your project. Another tip: take pictures of the job before the walls go up, to identify electrical and plumbing layouts, and ensure work matches plans. These photos will come in handy when memories fade or the house sells. Take a final walk-through with the architect or designer prior to project sign-off—or final contractor payment—to identify last-minute issues before the contractor has packed up and left. With creativity, diligence and good humor, you can ensure that your green remodel is an experience to remember—for good!

Contractors skilled at reuse and recycling can divert 70% or more of construction waste from the landfill. Combined with deconstruction practices, waste can be reduced by 90%.



resources

Print

- *The Survival Guide: Home Remodeling* by Diane Plesset (D.P. Publishing, 2003). An in-depth introduction to the remodeling process (in general, not necessarily from the green perspective), with practical tips for executing a home project of any kind.
- *Green Remodeling: Changing the World One Room at a Time* by David Johnston and Kim Master (New Society Publishers, 2004). A comprehensive introduction to green remodeling room by room, with an emphasis on materials selection and use.
- *No Regrets Remodeling* by Alex Wilson et al. (Home Energy Magazine, 1997). Excellent overview of green remodeling, with emphasis on energy efficiency and health.
- *Healthy House Building for the New Millennium* by John Bower (Healthy House Institute, 1999). Covers all aspects of building a healthy house.
- To request paper copies of other guides in the Green Home Remodel series (including Bath & Laundry, Kitchen, Roofing, Painting, Salvage & Reuse, and Landscape Materials), call 206-296-4466.

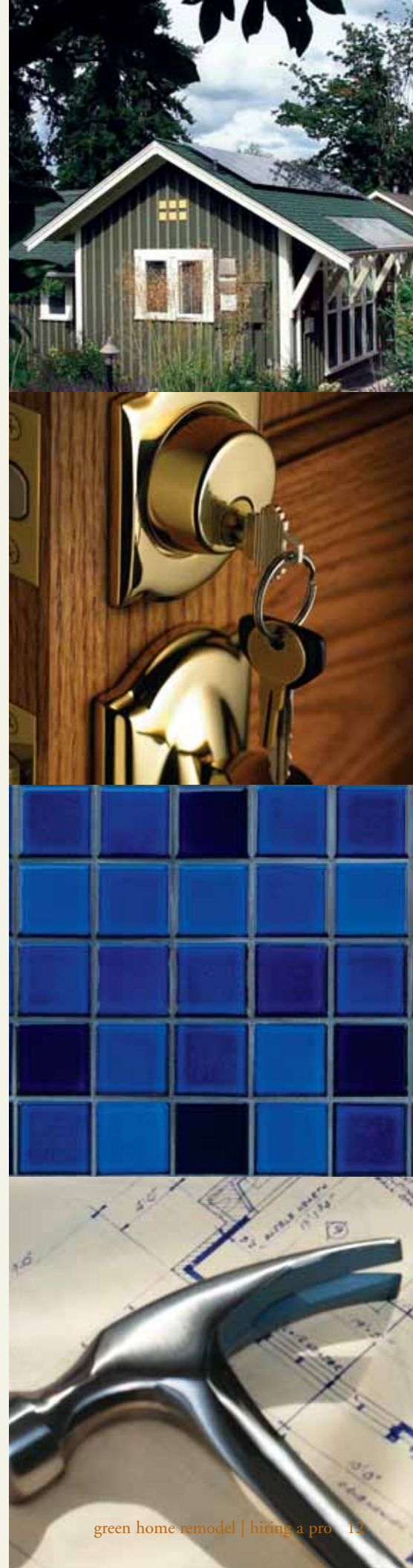
Online

- Download other guides in the Green Home Remodel series (including Bath & Laundry, Kitchen, Roofing, Painting, Salvage & Reuse, and Landscape Materials); see www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/greenbuilding and click on *Documents*.
- Find resources to help with the remodeling process at the National Association of Home Builders website, including tips on hiring remodeling professionals at www.nahb.org (click on *Resources*, then *For Consumers*, then *Remodeling Your Home*).
- The Northwest EcoBuilding Guild at www.ecobuilding.org is a resource for green building professionals, education, and events.
- The Built Green program site at www.builtgreen.net offers a Remodeler's checklist, virtual tours of Built Green™ homes, a member list, and more.
- City of Portland's green building program at www.green-rated.org provides an extensive resource of regional green building information, including green remodel case studies.
- *Green by Design* educational CDROM at www.ci.austin.tx.us/greenbuilder/greenbydesign.htm from the City of Austin, Texas makes a good general primer on green building.



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www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/greenbuilding/



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www.seattle.gov/sustainablebuilding



Want to learn more? For Green Home Remodel guides, information, financial incentives, and more see www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/greenbuilding or call 206-296-4466 or 711 TTY Relay.



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