

Bad remodels rarely fail in spectacular fashion. Most of the pain shows up in slow drips: a permit hiccup that idles crews for a week, a change order that feels small but snowballs into four trades revisiting the same room, a contractor who stops texting back once your check clears. After twenty years in and around job sites, design meetings, and budget autopsies, I've learned that the biggest headaches are predictable. They're also preventable.

That's why I was glad to see a new home remodeling book launch that doesn't sugarcoat the messy bits. *Remodel Without Regret: Surprise Costs, Contractor Ghosting, and Delays* reads like a field guide you'd pass to a friend before they hand over a deposit. It's a remodeling book for homeowners that explains the process in plain language, then shows how to sidestep the traps. Consider this your companion tour, layer by layer, with examples and the kind of specifics you only get from lived experience.

## Why smart people still blow their budgets

Most homeowners underestimate soft costs and overestimate how far their budget will stretch. It isn't because they're naïve. It's because early research skews toward glossy inspiration photos and rough square foot numbers that ignore the real drivers: scope complexity, access, age of the house, and jurisdiction.

I worked on a 1920s bungalow where the owner budgeted 60,000 for a kitchen remodel. The cabinets and countertops alone ate half that number. The gut punch came from hidden work: old knob-and-tube wiring behind the plaster, no GFCI protection, and a venting maze that required reframing part of a soffit. Those [Jeremy Maher Remodel Without Regret](#) invisible fixes cost 12,000, which meant the gorgeous range they wanted became a mid-tier model. There's no villain in that story. There's just an old house behaving like an old house.

*Remodel Without Regret* suggests a contingency of 10 to 20 percent for most projects, and more for pre-1950 homes or when moving plumbing. That's not pessimism, it's math. The book's framework for scoping a project builds in unknowns instead of pretending they won't happen.

## The scope creep trap and how it starts

Scope creep rarely shows up as a big decision. It arrives as a nudge: We're already opening this wall, why not move the door while we're at it? The answer might be yes, but you need the full price of yes. Moving a door means new framing, patching flooring, rerouting a switch, adjusting trim, and possibly fire blocking, not to mention paint. The job you thought added 300 in materials becomes a 2,000 mini project, and you'll discover that after the fact if you don't slow down.

In one bathroom remodel, we added a recessed niche at the last second. The tile setter was already staged, which meant the plumber had to return later to relocate a line. That return trip triggered a schedule shuffle. The domino effect added nine days to a three-week schedule. The niche cost 250 in materials, and 1,400 in schedule and labor hit. Pretty? Yes. Worth it? Maybe. Better if priced and scheduled up front.

The book's advice is clear: freeze design decisions before demo. A homeowner once told me that locking decisions felt constricting. I get that, but it actually buys freedom later because you're not negotiating under pressure while a crew waits. That's how you avoid surprise remodeling costs that sting twice.

## Contractor ghosting and the silence that costs you

Let's be honest about contractor culture. Most are over capacity. The good ones manage expectations and say no to work when they're booked. The ones who ghost often do it out of discomfort, not malice. They overcommit, a bigger job calls, and suddenly your messages sit unread. You think the job is moving forward, but the calendar says otherwise.

A few ways I've seen clients avoid contractor ghosting, which line up with the *Remodel Without Regret* contractor guide:

- Ask about current workload and lead time, then verify it during reference calls. "What was the original start date? When did they actually start?"
- Tie deposits to clear milestones, not calendar dates. Deposit at contract, next payment at rough-in completion after pass, not on the second Friday of the month.
- Agree on a weekly update rhythm before you sign. Even a two-sentence Friday text keeps projects from drifting.

- Put an availability clause in the contract. If the contractor is absent for more than seven consecutive business days without notice, you can suspend or seek alternatives.
- Keep a written log of communications and site conditions. It's boring. It's also gold when memories get fuzzy.

Project communication shouldn't depend on charisma. It should be a system, visible to you, that survives someone's bad week [Continue reading](#) or sick kid. The Remodel Without Regret remodeling guide leans hard on this, and it's the right obsession.

## Bids that don't compare, and how to align them

I've seen homeowners collect three bids that look like apples, oranges, and a mango. One includes drywall patching, another assumes you'll hire a painter, the third has allowances that could swing 10,000 depending on selections. Lowest price usually means the thinnest scope. It's not a scam, it's a draft. Your job is to standardize.

Ask every bidder to base their proposal on the same scope narrative: demo area, mechanical changes, finish levels, code requirements, and allowances. If a contractor won't revise their bid after you provide a detailed scope, that's a tell. You're about to hire a guesser. This is where a home renovation guide earns its keep, because it teaches you to build that scope story like a pro.

A homeowner I worked with insisted on itemized bids for a kitchen: framing, electrical, plumbing, insulation, drywall, cabinets, tops, tile, paint. Two contractors balked, one didn't. They hired the one who did. When drywall bubbled after a damp week, there was no finger-pointing. The contract clearly assigned warranty responsibility for that trade. Problem solved in two days, not two months.

## Permits, inspectors, and the database that remembers

Skipping permits looks tempting when a friend says, "We did our bath without one, saved weeks." You might save days now and lose months later. Unpermitted work can delay a sale, trigger fines, or require opening finished walls to show what's inside. Inspectors aren't out to get you, they're out to ensure the next person living in that house doesn't meet a preventable hazard.

Here's the part many folks miss: jurisdictions keep records. If a past owner ran a kitchen circuit without AFCI protection and you inherit that risk, the cost lands on you or your insurance premium later. Remodel Without Regret walks through what's typically permitted versus exempt, and the gray zones where local policy matters. If your area requires separate trade permits, the general contractor should handle them. If you're acting as your own GC, plan time for plan review and inspection sequencing. A failed rough inspection isn't the end of the world but it's a delay that stacks.

## Building budgets that respect reality

A remodel budget isn't just materials and labor. It's design fees, permit costs, demolition and disposal, site protection, temporary kitchen or bath setups, storage pods, rental housing if the house is uninhabitable during a phase, even pet boarding on loud demo days. These are the line items that ambush first timers.

For a 200-square-foot kitchen in a midcost market, a thoughtful range looks like [home remodeling book](#) this: 75,000 to 140,000 for a full gut with midrange finishes, not including high-end appliances. Design can run 8 to 15 percent of construction. Permits may span 500 to 3,000 depending on scope. Contingency, at 10 to 20 percent, is not fluff, it's a buffer. You won't [Jeremy Maher](#) need every dollar every time, but when you do, you'll be grateful it isn't on a credit card.

I watched one family plan a kitchen remodel while keeping their mortgage payment steady. They were proud of squeezing the number to the dollar. Then asbestos showed up in the old vinyl tile mastic. Abatement was 3,200. Without contingency, they would have cut electrical upgrades to pay for it. They used the contingency instead, kept the safer wiring, and slept better.

## The selection gauntlet, or how lead times wreck schedules

Selections drive schedules. Long lead items like custom cabinets, stone slabs, specialty plumbing fixtures, or a popular tile can take 6 to 14 weeks. Order them late, and you'll have a perfect crew waiting with nothing to install. Contractors will either leave for another job or burn clock on change orders to stay busy. That's how a four-week gap opens in your timeline.

Front-load selections, confirm lead times in writing, and align them with the critical path. If a quartz slab needs a template after cabinets are set, give the fabricator dates before demo. If your heart is set on a certain sconce, have a backup option with similar dimensions and junction box location ready, just in case it backorders. *Remodel Without Regret* lays out a step by step home remodeling guide for sequencing decisions that reads like common sense once you see it on paper.

A quick example: on a bath remodel, the client swapped to a wall-hung vanity after rough plumbing. That meant moving the drain, redoing blocking, and changing tile layout. Not a disaster, but it turned a two-week finish stage into five. If you crave a change, press pause, cost it, and decide. You won't regret the extra 24 hours.

## **Living through a remodel without losing your mind**

You can keep a sense of humor and your security deposit with a few ground rules. Set work hours, define which bathrooms are available to the crew, and establish a dust path with zip walls and floor protection. Invest in a HEPA filter and ask the GC to include it. Photograph rooms before demo, including corners and ceilings, so damage claims are straightforward and fair. These habits are small but they keep relationships healthy.

Meal planning matters more than you think. A temporary kitchen with a hot plate, microwave, and a folding table will save you hundreds in takeout and a lot of stress. If you work from home, negotiate the loudest trades for times you can be away. The best projects I've seen had the homeowner and contractor aligned on logistics before a single tile came off.

## **Kitchens: where ambition meets constraints**

The kitchen is the most written-about room in any home renovation book, and for good reason. It's a dense tangle of services and finishes. Mistakes get expensive fast.



Three recurring issues:

- Ignoring function for aesthetics. Waterfall islands and open shelves look great, but if you cook five nights a week, you'll want closed storage, durable counters, and ventilation that actually moves air outside.
- Underlighting work zones. A single center fixture won't cut it. Plan task lighting at counters, dimmable ambient lighting, and consider undercabinet fixtures with integral diffusers.
- Skimping on electrical. You'll want more circuits than you think, especially for coffee machines, toaster ovens, and induction ranges. Panel upgrades aren't glamorous, but they keep breakers from tripping and appliances from underperforming.

If you're browsing a kitchen remodeling book or kitchen renovation guide, favor the ones that break down clearances and code. For example, keep 42 inches around the island if you have multiple cooks, 36 inches minimum otherwise. Range hoods should be sized to the cooktop width and cooking style, not just matched to a brand suite. A kitchen remodel planning book that skips ventilation in favor of backsplash photos isn't doing you any favors.

## **Bathrooms: small rooms, big surprises**

Bathrooms pack plumbing, electrical, waterproofing, and tile into the tightest square footage. That density amplifies mistakes. I've torn out tiled showers that looked flawless but leaked behind the walls because the installer skipped a flood test or used the wrong backer board. Water is relentless. It finds every gap.

When a bathroom remodeling guide or bathroom renovation book talks about waterproofing, pay attention. Cement board alone isn't waterproof. You need a membrane system, correctly overlapped and sealed, and a flood test before tile. Curbless showers

are beautiful and safer as we age, but they demand precise slope, recessed subfloor, and planning for glass placement to control splash. A bathroom remodel planning book that explains these trade-offs will save you from costly redos.

Heated floors are one of the highest satisfaction upgrades, especially in climates with cold mornings. They cost more upfront but sip electricity once installed. Make sure the thermostat is on a dedicated circuit and that your tile setter coordinates with the electrician for sensor placement. It's the kind of detail that shows up in a remodeling planning guide written for homeowners, and it's often missed in rushed jobs.

## **The myth of the friend who can do it all**

Everybody has a cousin who "does construction." Some are great. Many are masters of one trade who dabble in the rest. General contractors exist for a reason. Coordination, sequencing, and accountability across trades is its own trade. If you're considering acting as your own GC to save 15 to 25 percent, understand what you're signing up for: daily scheduling, inspections, material tracking, punch lists, and warranty wrangling. If you have time and appetite for risk, it can work. If not, the savings evaporate in delays and rework.

I once consulted on a DIY-managed project where tile was set before the shower valve was pressure tested. When the valve leaked, everything came back out. That single mistake wiped out the perceived savings and then some. A design build remodeling book or a consumer guide to home remodeling can help you gauge whether you're a good fit to self-manage. Honesty here is cheap insurance.

## **Red flags and green lights when choosing a contractor**

You'll hear a lot about how to choose a remodeling contractor book recommendations, and they have familiar advice: licenses, insurance, references. That's baseline. Look deeper.

Green lights: a contractor who brings up permits unprompted, talks about sequencing trades, and asks detailed questions about selections. They give you a sample schedule and define what's included and excluded. They show you a certificate of insurance without being asked. Their references mention how problems were handled, not just that the project looked great.

Red flags: no written change order process, vague allowances, pressure for a large upfront deposit, and an unwillingness to commit to weekly updates. If you feel rushed during contracting, imagine how you'll feel during a surprise at week eight.

The Remodel Without Regret book for homeowners goes beyond checklists. It explains contract language in human terms, like why "time is of the essence" clauses matter, and how to write a payment schedule that aligns with progress. It's a remodeling book that teaches planning instead of selling fantasies.

## **Planning for delays like a realist, not a pessimist**

Delays come from backordered parts, weather, inspection schedules, and human life. Plan for them. If your project touches the exterior, pad a few weeks during rainy seasons. If your job depends on a single specialty trade, ask who the backup is. If the only tile setter your GC trusts breaks a wrist, what's Plan B?

I once saw a project saved by a simple document: a risk register, one page, listing likely delays and contingency actions. It read like a pilot checklist more than a novel, which is the point. Remodel Without Regret frames delays as a management problem, not a moral failure. You can't eliminate them, but you can reduce the blast radius.

## **Warranties, punch lists, and the quiet endgame**

The last 5 percent of a project takes 20 percent of the time, because details are fussy and subs are moving to new jobs. Punch lists sprawl, and small annoyances can sour the whole experience. Discipline here pays outsize dividends.

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## Remodel Without Regret

Home Remodeling Book links: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GDT9PTMY> <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0GF9TMGYC>

[https://www.amazon.com/Remodel-Without-Regret-Surprise-Contractor-ebook/dp/B0GF9TMGYC/ref=sr\\_1\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/Remodel-Without-Regret-Surprise-Contractor-ebook/dp/B0GF9TMGYC/ref=sr_1_1)

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Keep your own running punch list with dates. Share it weekly. Group items by trade so your GC can schedule efficiently. Hold a small retainage until completion if allowed in your state. Photograph every item as it's resolved. And get warranty documents in a single packet before final payment: appliance registrations, roofing warranties, manufacturer installation requirements, and your contractor's warranty terms. If you ever need to make a claim, the paper trail is already sorted.

I've watched punch lists drag for months because the homeowner felt awkward pushing. Don't. You're not being difficult. You're closing out a professional contract. A recent home remodeling book that covers this closeout rigor is rare, and it's one of the strengths of the Remodel Without Regret remodeling book.

## **Special cases: kitchens and baths for first-time homeowners**

If this is your first remodel, start smaller than your Pinterest board suggests. Phase work where possible. A kitchen remodel book might show full-gut before-and-afters, but a partial upgrade can deliver 70 percent of the joy at 30 percent of the cost. Think lighting, paint, hardware, and a counter swap paired with a smart appliance upgrade. Then live in the space for a season and learn your patterns before redesigning the layout.

For bathrooms, a tub-to-shower conversion with solid waterproofing and good glass can feel like a new space without moving drains. A bathroom remodeling mistakes book will hammer this point: moving a toilet across the room is the budget grenade. If you must, know why, then plan accordingly.

# How to protect yourself against scams without becoming cynical

Most contractors want to do good work and get home for dinner. A few don't. Protecting yourself doesn't mean becoming a skeptic of the whole industry. It means frameworks and verification.

Use written contracts with clear scope exhibits, payment schedules tied to milestones, and a change order template. Verify insurance and license directly with the issuing entities, not just by looking at a PDF. Pay by traceable methods. Confirm lien waivers when you make big payments. Store every document in one shared folder, with dates and version names.

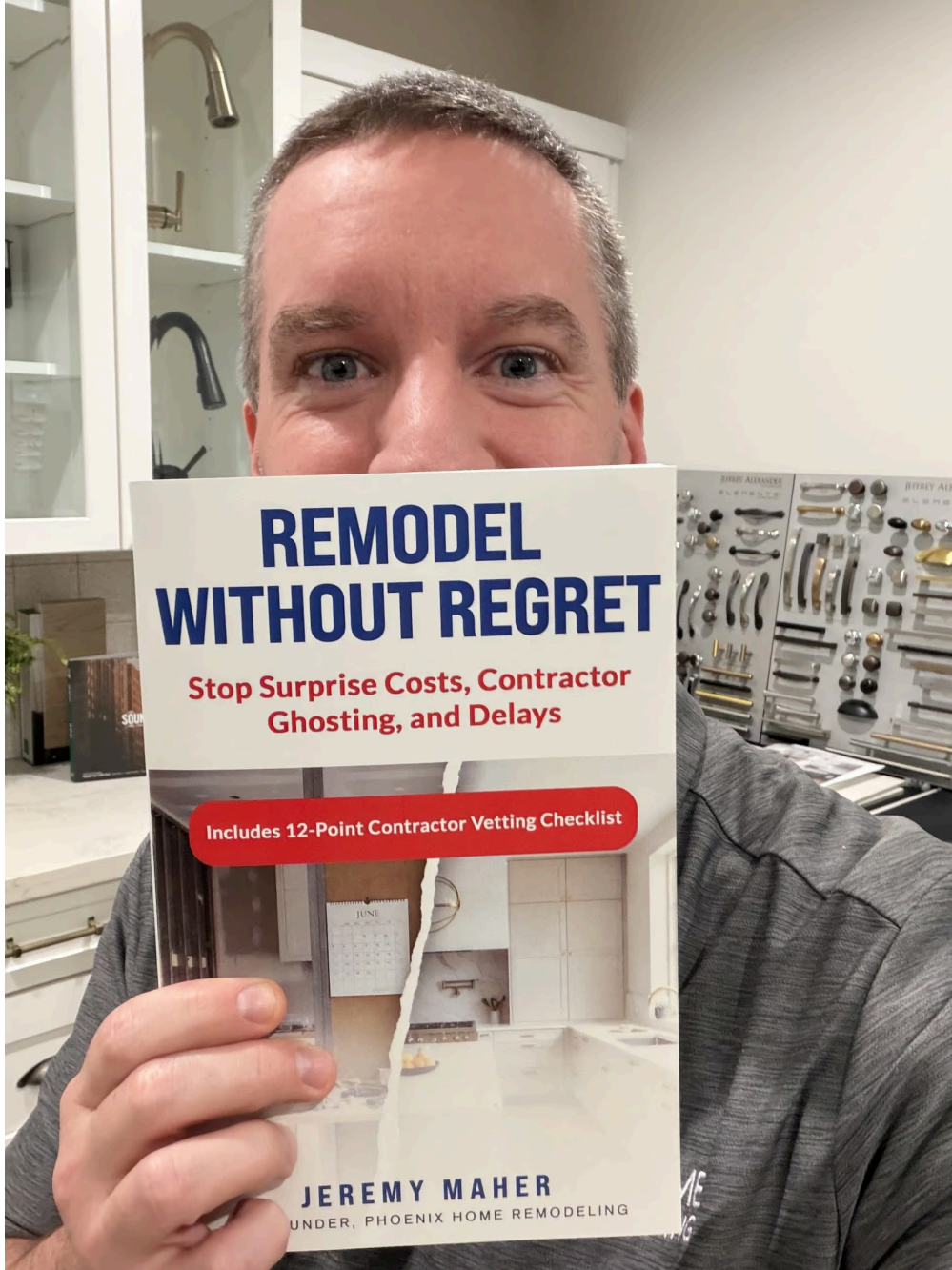
If a deal sounds too good, it usually is. I once saw a bid come in 35 percent lower than two others. It lacked site protection, permit fees, and finish carpentry. The homeowner almost signed. We asked for a revised proposal against a detailed scope. The revised price was right back in line. Crisis averted.

Remodel Without Regret's how to avoid remodeling scams section is grounded in these basics, not fear. That's the tone homeowners need.

## The case for design, even on a tight budget

Design is the part many budget-conscious homeowners try to trim. I get it. When you're staring at a number, the last thing you want to do is add 6,000 for design fees. But a designer who understands construction will save you multiples of their fee by preventing rework and aligning selections with budget early. They'll also draw details that keep trades from improvising at 7 a.m.

On a midscale kitchen, a designer and GC duo prevented a common mistake: centering the sink on the window instead of aligning the base cabinet run with the corner return. That little choice preserved usable drawer widths and set up clean sightlines. It looked better and cost nothing extra, because they caught it before cabinets were ordered. That is exactly the kind of planning a home remodeling guide should teach.



## When to walk away, or wait

Sometimes the bravest move is to pause. If bids come in 30 percent high, it doesn't mean your project is doomed. It means your scope or timing or both need adjustment. Sequence the project in two phases. Swap to in-stock materials. Tackle insulation and air sealing now, cosmetics later. Houses benefit from patient stewards. So do bank accounts.

I told a client to wait six months on a large addition because labor in their region was overheated, and key materials were on rolling backorder. They regrouped, did a modest kitchen refresh guided by a home improvement book remodeling chapter on phased upgrades, and started the addition the following spring with better bids and saner schedules. They still send holiday cards.

## A quick, high-impact planning checklist

Use this as a preflight, adapted from lessons in the Remodel Without Regret home remodeling guide and years spent around dust and tape measures:

- Define scope in writing, with inclusions, exclusions, and finish levels. Freeze major decisions before demo.
- Build a budget with contingency, permits, design fees, rentals, and temporary living costs. Verify long lead times.
- Standardize bids with a shared scope narrative. Tie payments to completed milestones, not dates.
- Confirm permits, inspections, and warranty responsibilities. Keep all documents in one shared folder.
- Schedule weekly updates. Log changes, site conditions, and punch items. Photograph progress and closeout.

# Where a good book changes the arc of a project

You can learn the hard way, or you can borrow the bruises. A home remodel book that's honest about contractor ghosting, change order creep, and how to protect yourself during a remodel gives you leverage before trouble starts. *Remodel Without Regret* isn't the only home renovation book worth reading, but it's a recently released remodeling book that's unusually frank about where homeowners get hurt and how to avoid it. If you need a remodeling guide for homeowners that explains the process and teaches planning, it earns a spot on your counter, next to the samples and the blue tape.

Whether you're hunting for a kitchen remodeling guide, a bathroom remodeling book, or a broader homeowner remodeling guide, look for the same virtues you want in your project: clarity, specificity, and respect for budgets and schedules. When the dust settles, you'll remember two things, the craftsmanship you can touch and the decisions you made before the first hammer swing. Make those decisions with your eyes open. That's how you remodel without regret.