

7 VITAL THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU HIRE A CONTRACTOR



BUNGALOWS
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You have purchased a 100 year old (give or take) bungalow. You have your home inspection in your hand & you want to move forward on your restoration. You are not a DIY'er & do not plan to be one. You have a demanding job, perhaps a family & other responsibilities. You'll need a contractor or contractors, & you'll be depending on the kindness of strangers to turn your house into a home. So, how do you find the best strangers?

I wrote training manuals for 40 years so I am big on proper sequencing & I loves me a checklist. So here are my suggested steps.

1. What is a bungalow? What are best restoration practices?
2. What are your own needs?
3. How do I find good tradespeople?
4. What else do I need to know about them?
 - A. Referrals
 - B. Reviews
 - C. Go legal.It's only at this point that you start talking to people.
5. How do you conduct the first interview? What should you ask? What should you request?
6. The Proposal- what should it include?
7. How do I make sure that the restoration is satisfactory?

STEP ONE- Get Educated

Building & remodeling a new house is lightyears different from restoring an old house. Most contractors are clueless about this. You need to be able to guide them concerning design, materials, techniques & why they should care. To do this you're going to need to know some of these things yourself. You're going to need to be a student for a little bit.

My whole site is dedicated to teaching you about your house. The primary thing that you need to know is that your house does not stand alone from its culture of origin. It is part of a larger picture starting with the rise of the Industrial Revolution, the Arts & Crafts Movement originating in England, culminating in Stickley's interest in the Movement which he brought to America & then how it was adapted for American living & coming full circle, mass produced as kit homes!

It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with the arts of the times. Based on nature, their simple aesthetic will guide you in making the right choices for your house so that it speaks as one voice.

Most contractors do not know about the glories of plaster or of original wood windows. You need to cruise around my site & click on my social media, absorbing the bungalow

character & charm so that you, yourself will understand the charm of these features. Over & over I recommend reading, no *studying*, Jane Powell's books on bungalow. If you cannot find a question about your house covered in one of her books, I will pay you a nickel. I restored/created 5 bathrooms from her bathroom book & when I thought she had omitted a detail that I needed to know, she primly pointed out the page & the paragraph that I had overlooked.

I am also working on gathering information from contractors of the more mechanical specialties, again, not from a DIY viewpoint, but wanting to help you become an educated consumer. I do go a bit overboard on information about wood floors, but I owned a wood flooring company for 40+ & hey, I paid for these pixels & everybody has floors!

READ UP!

I recommend a great many books & have written about most of them in the blog:

All of Jane Powell's books- Bungalow Bathrooms, Bungalow Kitchens, BUNGALOW: The Ultimate Arts & Crafts Home. Bungalow Details: Exterior & Bungalow Details: Interior. I promise you that if you only look at the pictures, you will save yourself from making 50% of the mistakes that are possible. If you read them all, you will qualify as a true bungalow scholar because there is nothing about bungalows that was omitted from these books.

Then there's Bungalow Bob Winter the esteemed architectural historian who began researching & writing about the Arts & Crafts Movement in the 1970's, when it was almost completely forgotten. His book, American Bungalow Style features beautiful photographs by Alexander Vertikoff, who shot every cover of American Bungalow Magazine. The most beautiful images I have of my Tampa bungalow were taken by Alex & made me fall in love with my house all over again!

What I love best about American Bungalow Magazine, is its neighborhood focus. It communicates the unique culture of every area shown, in addition to featuring some of the finest homes in the country, clearly reflecting publisher *John Brinkmann's* statement, "...it's not about how big you live, it's about how genuine you live. That's what the magazine stands for."

I recommend a peruse through the Secretary of the Interiors Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. From their website, "The Standards are a series of concepts about maintaining, repairing, and replacing historic materials, as well as designing new additions or making alterations." Honest, it's not scary.

STEP TWO- Determine your own needs.

Your ideal contractor loves bungalows & places high value on historic materials. They follow the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. As a result, their first purpose is to

restore your house, not make it shiny & new or to change the color, the layout, etc. to follow current trends.

But that's *my* ideal. The first thing that you need to do is to establish your own ideal.

The Secretary talks about appropriate treatments for a historic building:

Preservation focuses on the maintenance and repair of existing historic materials and retention of a property's form as it has evolved over time.

Rehabilitation acknowledges the need to alter or add to a historic property to meet continuing or changing uses while retaining the property's historic character.

Restoration depicts a property at a particular period of time in its history, while removing evidence of other periods.

Reconstruction re-creates vanished or non-surviving portions of a property for interpretive purposes.

I'm not going to discuss remodeling: to alter the structure of; remake. You'll have to go elsewhere to find out about that.

Which one will you choose for your house? My choice with bungalows was always Restoration, freezing a house in time. I rehabilitated a 1907 Victorian because it was impossible to determine much about how it had been originally, & I wanted to make it livable with a kitchen & bathroom *inside*. In my 1925 bungalow, I turned the butler's pantry into a second bathroom. The area was a laundry a/c room when I got the house. All the built-ins in the whole house had been long gone so I had no clues at all about the original character of this pantry. I was wa-a-a-y happy to have a walk-in shower.

Your Bungalow's Home Inspection Report

Some of those needs will be determined for you by your inspection report. **ANYTHING FOUND TO BE UNSAFE FOR YOU OR YOUR HOUSE GETS 1st ATTENTION.** That means water intrusion (Of course mold is a screaming high priority.) - plumbing, roof, doors & windows, gutters & drainage- foundation issues & electrical. Heating & cooling get thrown in here to because it can get might uncomfortable & even dangerous to be lacking those comforts, especially if you have, or might have, someone fragile in your home. You have no argument with me that paint colors & getting a shiny floor are way more fun. But, they are the icing & you need to make sure that cake isn't crumbling.

Then take a look at the other situations found in the report. Some of them just might get addressed during the restoration. If you're going to rip out the avocado appliances & recreate a bungalow kitchen, it don't make no never mind that you have hinge issues or a leaking faucet.

Money, A Passionate Subject

I hope that you had a budget before you purchased the house. If you have not, create one now. Your contractor sends his kids to college on your money. He's going to encourage you to spend. And his priorities may not be yours.

Have this all worked out & clearly written before you interview anyone. Assumptions about \$\$\$ always end in tragedy.

Do you want to hire a general contractor, or just specialty trades? If you decide that you need a G.C., who will choose & hire the sub-contractors? You can save some money of you do this, but not all contractors will allow this, or, they may allow it for certain trades but not others.

You also need to take a look at what quality of work you want, both in terms of product & service. Generally, good quality & service cost more. Of course, you can also get stomped on after paying through the nose. We'll talk about that.

Life In a Jobsite

How do you want him to plan & schedule the work? You need to determine how the amount of intrusion you can tolerate & discuss this upfront. Scheduling is often a major issue so you want to have it worked out first between you & you &/or you & spouse, before you start talking about it with prospective contractors.

The more you need to have done, the more I recommend not moving in until it is completed. Jobsites are full of dangerous equipment, toxic materials & strangers making a lot of noises. If you have kids, I double up my enthusiasm for this. Their developing bodies do not need to be exposed to these things & children crave stability. I have seen tradespeople behaving badly on jobsites & frankly, doing & saying things that you would not want your child to witness.

All of these discussions can & should be included in the contract. And we'll talk about that too.

STEP THREE- Start your search. Get referrals, check reviews. Go legal.

I recommend putting together a spreadsheet to keep track of the information you collect. If you are searching for a number of specialty contractors, you are going to be amassing a great deal of data & you want to be able to use it. My suggestion is to create different sections, in rows, for each type of contractor. Here are the column headings that you might use:

Contractor biz name

Contact name

URL

Phone number
Licensing checked
Workers' Compensation Insurance
Liability ins.
EPA Lead Certified
Asbestos testing & abatement
Who referred you
Reviews average
Date contacted

Your ducks are now in a row as far as what & how much so that next matter is who. I have experienced some horrors in my life so I recommend doing every step enumerated here.

Referrals

It is important to realize that preservation tradespeople are in a separate category

You may have been represented by a Realtor who specializes in bungalows or at least old houses. If so, she should have many trade resources. Usually these referrals are pretty good because your Realtor has both a reputation & a license to protect.

Your house is probably in a bungalow neighborhood & there is likely a great deal of work always going on. So, the neighborhood is a good place to start. If there is a neighborhood association, join it (You should do this anyway. They are your advocate at City Hall & deserve your support) Their website & publications often feature advertising from tradespeople who know bungalows & at least a little bit about preservation. The best thing about these tradespeople is that their clients are your neighbors & will probably be more than pleased to show you the work.

Take a look at my article, OLD HOUSE CLASSES. It recommends some preservation schools which are attended by people from all over the country, many of whom are construction pro's. Contact them for a list of pro's in your area that have attended their schools. Even if they do not perform the type of work that you require, they probably know someone who does.

There are many Facebook old house groups. Join them. They could likely have referrals for you. MyOldHouseFix.com has a whole section of tradespeople.

You may have a locale preservation advocacy group. Join them. Support them. Get referrals from them.

Call your city, county & state preservation offices. Often they will refer.

If you should have a historic window repair company in your area, for sure they will have referrals for other trades. They are friendly & should be glad to help.

Call your local AIA & get names of architects who specialize in preservation. They should have trade referrals & might be able to provide other valuable assistance.

Any one of these folks might sponsor educational events for historic homeowners, delivered by tradesfolk who specialize in preservation. Attend them.

CAVEAT: My warning here is to make sure that the people (including neighbors) who are doing the referring have your standards. I did a large project with someone strongly referred to me by someone I like very much. I did not take into account that, as dear as this neighbor is, he lives *in* his house while I live *for* my house.

Then you go online & check reviews:

Google

Yelp

Bing

Houzz

Angi

BBB

Nextdoor

Facebook

Other places that I don't even know about!

True story: We once fired a young fellow who went out & started his own business. We were more than fine with it. We knew his work habits & were just waiting for the other shoe to drop. He did ok for about a year. Then the calls started coming in from people that he had scammed, needing his work done (after having made chunky down payments to this scoundrel) or they needed the work to be completed or repaired. We started seeing horrible reviews but were surprised at how many *horrible* reviews on a great many sites there were over such a long period. By the time he ended up in jail for fraud, many people had been robbed, their floors ruined, their pregnant wives bullied, their lives turned upside down. They just didn't *read the dang reviews before they hired him*.

After running a construction company for 4 decades, I am here to tell you that I was aware that in any complaint filed, or bad review there was some degree of culpability on our part. Any time we had a job that went sideways, I could always trace it back to some omission on our part that got out of hand. A responsible company looks at their part in any difficulty & works to rectify it. A great deal of the problems we had, came from our failure to include all the details & caveats in the contract. For example, we got a B review (Our first. I was crushed.) because we had not used dustless equipment. I asked my husband about it, & he said that the homeowner had declined it, not wanting to pay the upcharge. I asked to see the contract. Dustless sanding was not mentioned. Hubby said it had been discussed. Not good enough. After that, dustless sanding was in the

contract whether desired or refused. Every difficult job resulted in the next contract being longer. More about contracts later. My point here is that if there is a random bad review in a sea of positive ones, how does the company respond? A bad review is an opportunity to improve, though a painful one. The company's response should include their willingness to look at their own failings & their eagerness to rectify them.

Go Legal

Restoring & maintaining an old house requires a team. Although this suggestion may strike you as overkill, I'm going to make it anyway. Before you go much further, you want to line up a construction attorney. You may never need her services, but you just might, & having legal help in your back pocket to pull out when you need it can save you money & grief. I can give you plenty of advice, but it's just the advice of a friend- a friend who has hired stinky contractors & lost way money & learned a little from it, but a lawyer can read contracts before you sign them & write encouraging letters when you need to light a fire under somebody's patootie.

Contractor licensing laws differ from state to state & even county by county & city by city. It can be a bit confusing. A Google search of. "Are painters required to be licensed in Timbuktu?" should get you started. If they are, I cannot stress how much you need to hire someone with a trade license. I agree that some laws are arbitrary, sometimes goofy & sometimes destructive but this is *not* one of those times.

OK, you believe me, so the first thing you do is get the company's license number. Then you go online & you check for any complaints against the license. Form your own conclusions based on what you find.

Insurances

Workers' compensation insurance protects your homeowner's insurance & you if a worker were to be injured on your property. In most states, workers' compensation insurance is required as a condition of licensing. The insurance companies inform the regulating board if the insurance is allowed to lapse & bang, away goes the license. I cannot guarantee that this is the case in all states. If you are given a license number, look it up. Ensure that the person with whom you are dealing has the authority to speak & sign legal agreements for that license.

Check the status of the work comp insurance with the issuer. A number on a piece of paper means nothing. It could have been canceled the day after the document was printed.

Workers' comp insurance is expensive. Coverage is a key sign of the degree of professionalism of the company. A professional makes his decisions & bases his actions on future consequences. He doesn't gamble. You will "save" money by hiring

someone who doesn't have it, but realize that he's a gambler & he's gambling with his employees' well-being & your homeowner's insurance.

Liability insurance protects you from damage caused by a contractor to your home. For example, we once entered a house in which we had installed a wood floor some months earlier. Many trades had completed their work & we were back bright & early one Monday morning to sand & finish the floors. We opened the front door & we were in water up to our ankles. An electrician had punctured some plumbing on Friday & over the weekend, the house had filled with water like a swimming pool. This was the electrician's liability & their insurance company paid us to re-do our work.

Then there's lead certification. Any contractor working on a structure built before 1978 must be certified in lead abatement by the EPA. They are trained in testing for lead & if it is found, in the proper techniques & equipment for its removal. You want to hire someone with this certification. One of the things that they will do is present you with a copy of the booklet, Renovate Right which you can find at <https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/documents/renovaterightbrochurecolor.pdf> . It explains the whole process.

Another potential hazard old houses is asbestos. We're sliding into the next section with this topic. You're going to want to discuss testing & abatement in your interview with the contractor. I would recommend against hiring someone with a casual attitude toward this material. A house could have asbestos siding, insulation & sometimes old linoleum flooring & maybe some other things that I have never encountered. Asbestos should not be disturbed by anyone who is not trained to handle it.

STEP FOUR- How do you conduct the first interview? What should you ask? What should you request?

You have completed your due diligence & know that these folks are well-regarded & have their legal basics in place.

You know what you want & have a clear picture of your budget. So you start calling contractors. Some call you back & some do not.

I consider speed of communication to be an important measure of customer service. In fact, by survey, timeliness in general is considered to be the most desirable trait in a contractor. Ideally they will chat with you over the phone to start determining how good a fit you will be for one another. This is a good time to haul out the wish list. There is no point on wasting time with someone who thinks that the ideal house has been gutted & left with no character defining features- those things about a house that define its style, period & place. You can also discuss scheduling. How far out is he booked? How many jobs does he run at a time?

You make an appointment for a site visit. (Better start thinking of your home as a job site right now.) Take note of his timeliness & also, if he is delayed, does he call ahead. The world runs on communication & prediction & if these are missing, it ain't good.

Note what his reaction is to your beautiful old house. What is the degree of appreciation? As you chat with him, notice if he listens. Does he interrupt? Do you get the idea that what he thinks what you have to say has value?

Give him a copy of that wish list. Now is not the time to be bashful. If you don't ask, you don't get. Get answers to all your questions & jot down notes. Rate him on his listening & understanding skills & mark it on your spreadsheet.

Walk him out to his truck & take a peek at it. Is it clean & tidy, or full of empty to-go containers. How he cares for his own belongings is a great indication of how he will care for yours. My former employee, now sittin' in the hoosegow, had a mess in his truck that would have done a tornado proud. My bestest guy, in stark contrast, had a truck which he had outfitted beautifully with leftover materials & lit looked like an automat. Nothing was out of place & you could eat off the floor.

STEP FIVE-The Proposal- making sure it includes everything you want including special instructions.

Contract: a legally enforceable agreement that creates, defines, and governs mutual rights and obligations among its parties. A contract typically involves the transfer of goods, services, money, or a promise to transfer any of those at a future date.

The proposal, once signed, will constitute the contract. It needs to be thorough & well thought out. We live in an unpredictable world so the more you can address upfront, the better the outcome.

This is one of my key policies in my life. I used to have sign in my warehouse that said, LOOK, PLAN, DO. If you don't observe, you don't know what is there- the promising, the threatening, the resources, the scarcities. Knowing what's in front of you, you can plan. The more finely tuned the planning, the better the project.

The contract is a statement of the plan- what will be done, what materials will be used & how much will it cost & how long will it take & by whom. I am including one of our proposals so you can see what the possibilities are just for refinishing a wood floor.

Make sure that permitting is included in the contract. I have little enthusiasm for tradespeople who do not insist on doing only permitted work. Yes, permits cost money but so does sub-standard work.

That having been said, I am not a lawyer & this is not to be construed as being legal advice. As is the case with this entire book, it is friendly advice- my tale of what has & what has not been effective for me. While I'm at it, I will mention that I

have done all the steps I suggest & still gotten a crappy project. 'tis the human condition but, when I haven't done it, I have gotten a crappy project *100% of the time!*

Here are the pieces a contract should have:

Scope of work. This definitely applies when hiring general contractors, but also pertains to most specialty trades:

1. If you are doing major work, you will have an architect draw up plans for you. You will need them for permitting & your blueprints are a major part of the contract. They should be referenced often in your proposal & contract. They are how your contractor thinks. All his decisions are based on those plans. Make sure that you have working out everything *before* you start building.
2. Square footage of each area to be addressed (where applicable)
3. Materials to be used- by specific product. Paint can vary from \$20-\$50 a gallon, even the same manufacturer will have several levels of quality & pricing. Ditto other finishes.

Do not let someone tell you that they use "the very best materials." We worked for builders who advertised their lux finish materials & then wanted us to put in flooring that we sometimes found unacceptable & occasionally would refuse outright to install.

4. Timeline- how the project will progress, trade by trade, area by area.
5. Who will purchase materials. Generally, if you purchase the materials, the materials warranty will not be honored by the contractor.
6. Who will choose & hire sub-contractors If you choose & hire, who will be responsible for their co-ordination & supervision?
7. Daily & end of job clean-up. It's very seldom that a contractor will see your house as anything other than a jobsite. Make sure that it is delineated what clean-up will be done & where the equipment will be stored.
8. Payment schedule. This may be regulated by law. In some states, it is not allowed for a contractor to ask for payment in advance over a certain percentage of work completed, other than for materials. In most states it is also illegal for contractors to co-mingle funds, i.e., use funds from your down payment to pay for an on-going job because he has already spent the money he got from the other client. A good payment schedule protects you from the contractor failing to perform work for which he has been paid because he can't fund it.

9. What is not included that could be assumed to be included. The contractor should have a good idea of what this would be from their own past experience. If it's not in the proposal, ask about anything that you can think of. Get creative. Know before you go is very important here.
10. All caveats regarding expectations. Like Madonna, we are living in a material world & sometimes you either just can't do something, or it involves 17 extra steps, special equipment & the handwork of fairies to accomplish. If this is laid out upfront, you won't be experiencing disappointments.

This is where your wish list comes in, however, the experienced, intelligent contractor will be able to predict much of it because he, like I, learned long ago what people commonly expect.

11. Anything else that is important to you. Wish list again. If it's unstated, it is unknown.

All of this should be written in words & terms you can understand. If there are words you don't know- ask. I am not in love with people who speak in words that they darn well know are not commonly used.

STEP SIX-Ensuring you get what you want.

Even with the best contractor, you are going to spend some time overseeing the work. It will never go fast enough & it can be difficult to stay enthusiastic. But it's the best way to get it done.

Refer to that contract any time you see something that doesn't seem right. It's probably covered in the plans or the contract.

Now, speaking from the viewpoint of the contractor, the best, newest, well-maintained equipment can fail; long trusted suppliers can ship weird stuff; the wife of the best employee can find somebody she likes better & throw said employee out onto the street with his clothes in a trash bag, having to fight to see his children, leaving him useless or worse.

A general contractor must keep a huge number of balls in the air & sometimes, gravity is going to win. The best guys have learned how to operate smoothly despite all, but beyond acts of God- floods, hurricanes, pandemics- there's enough to deal with daily that I do urge you to have a certain amount of tolerance for imperfection in delivery & use communication to straighten things out. Just play nice.

STEP SEVEN- Write a review

Good, bad or indifferent. If you had a bad experience, tell your story sequentially- what was promised, what was delivered, how they handled any problems. You can help other

homeowners who might fall for a slick sales pitch & set an example to them to review whomever they hire. Maybe their review will help you down the road.

It's also important to review the companies that do a good job for you. We kept our men working & their children fed during the Great Recession because we had wonderful reviews. People called us first & chose us over the others because of the reviews of our grateful & generous customers. Your glowing review might keep someone in business during an economic downturn so that if you or a friend needs them, they are still there. And then there's the kids.

Acknowledging good work is a way to make the world a better place. It encourages & rewards good behavior. I studied the positive reviews of my competitors to discover what they were doing that I had perhaps overlooked & I learned a great deal that I wove into my business.

Please let me know if you have any tips or advice that I might have missed. I spent 40 years on the phone, helping homeowners manage their old houses & I missed it greatly when we sold our business & retired. I still love old houses. I still like to help.

Disclaimer: I have no training, no credentials, no licenses, no nothin' in the construction trades nor in law. I have my experience from which I draw & can boast of losing over \$50,000 on a single project because the contractor should have been in jail!