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Living with builders: first-home buyer Julian Barnard offers tips on how to keep all parties happy



Buying your first home is something of an epiphany. But breathing air that you own, splashing about in a bath you have paid for and gazing at your very own bare lightbulbs is a love affair I had hoped might last a little longer than 48 hours.

The strangely positioned walls, 1970s double-glazing and broken fence must all go if the dream is to last. With my monthly spending capacity reduced to red wine, coffee, cigarettes and a sprinkling of ready-meals - and, if I'm honest, absolutely no possibility of DIY self-help - I need to find a cheap, honest builder.

Talking to friends and watching the telly brought nothing but horror stories of botched work, unanticipated costs and missed deadlines, leaving me at a loss as to where to begin. Then I heard about Tim Rogers.

Tim started 15 years ago painting friends' flats for £50; he now runs TR Properties, one of London's most exclusive building firms. Such is his reputation that his contact details are passed around Notting Hill, Chelsea and Mayfair like an insider-trading tip-off. Tim suggests that, with all the exposure given to bad news stories, builders are now at a disadvantage even before they get through the front door. "A lot of it is dinner party talk," he says. "Good builder stories are no fun; bad builder stories are. It's a bit of a competition - 'my builder was worse than yours'."

The key, he says, is to select a builder you feel you can trust and, unless it's a very small job, only engage a builder who has been personally recommended.

It sounds simple advice, but a lot of people still make the mistake of hiring tradesmen without any knowledge of their ability or integrity. With this in mind, Alison Cork, presenter of ITV's property show *Don't Move, Improve*, has set up a website listing tradesmen who have all been independently recommended by members of the public. The site started in London, but has recently gone national.

Alternatively, conduct a little bit of harmless builder-stalking, suggests Alison. "As I walk round my area, I watch builders and see if they leave the pavement in a mess when they go home at night," she says. "If they are ticking all my boxes and they look good, I'll go up and talk to them, or approach the homeowner."

Hiring local tradesmen is usually best, she adds, since they will cost less and will have more of an interest in maintaining their reputation.

Before calling a builder, you should have a clear and detailed idea of what you want. "The builder builds what he is told to build," says Tim. Dimensions, layout, materials, budget and time are the basics. Finding an example that you have seen at a friend's house or in a magazine is an easy way to clarify your ideas. A good builder will tell you if planning permission, an architect or a structural engineer are required, but it is up to you to ensure that you meet all the legal requirements.

Once you have explained what you want, ask the builder to give you a quote detailing all the materials and work, with each item costed, down to the last electrical socket and door hinge. "The quote acts as insurance for both the builder and client," says Tim: if the client wants to add extras, as almost invariably happens, or the builder does not do what he agreed, you both have something to fall back on.

Always pay for work completed and not time spent on site, says Alison: "When you agree a job, say: 'To replace plaster of sitting room walls, £300.' Don't say: 'Three days' work on the plastering in the sitting-room, £300'."

There will also be some parts of the quote that builders cannot price accurately, and you should not expect them to. These are generally things they cannot see, such as underfloor plumbing or anything within the walls. These should be included in the quote, with a realistic estimate. If you have a fixed budget, it is critical that the total quote, including the estimated aspects, does not exceed the money you have available: there will always be things neither you nor the builder can anticipate, so allow about 10 per cent of your budget for such contingencies.

Finally, hold back 5 per cent of the total price for between three and six months to cover any problems that emerge in the weeks after completion.

Once the project is up and running, don't just go back to your normal routine and forget about the work - something many clients do, since a lot of the detail is rather boring. If you live in the property during refurbishment, it is easier; but if you do not, you should have at least weekly site meetings to check on progress.

Tim admits that many of his jobs overrun the initial time estimate. Bad weather, damp, dry rot and structural problems are the most common causes. Also, when clients see how their property is changing, they often want to adjust their original plans. Some couples even give different instructions.

Most major renovations are carried out on older houses, but making significant changes to any property is never an exact science. Accept this from the start and your relationship with your builder is likely to be far happier. "When we arrive, people say, 'We are so pleased to see you here,' " says Tim. "I always say, 'Well, you will be even more pleased to see the back of us.' "

- Alison Cork's site is www.problemsolved.co.uk TR Properties: 020 7731 6262 or www.trproperties.co.uk.

Snags, snot and sparks: a guide to builderspeak

Snagging Checking for faults with the builder after work is complete.

Chasing Channels in a wall for pipes or electrics.

Make good To repair or replace something to its original state.

First fix Wiring or plumbing under the floor or in the walls.

Snot A spilt lump of plaster on the floor.

Spread The plasterer.

Sparks The electrician.

Chippy The carpenter.

Pipes The plumber.

Footings Foundations.

A Triple 6 A terrible customer.

Gordon Brown Traffic wardens.

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