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# How to renovate your home in Israel

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and survive,  
and even enjoy it

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Orly Eran, architect

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## Introduction:

Congratulations!

You have just bought a home in Israel, and are very happy about your decision. It is a second-hand home in an established neighborhood, and needs some work to be done on it.

You fear that remodeling your new home is complicated, especially since it is in Israel - a country where you may not be familiar with the language and with the way things are done. To make things even more difficult, in addition to the normal hardships of a building project, you may not be present in Israel for the duration of the renovation, and might need to manage the project from abroad.

This might seem very confusing. Nevertheless you are willing to go ahead with your project, but you do not know how to go about it.

I am glad you are reading this guide, because this is exactly what it intends to do: explain to you how renovations are carried out in Israel, and help you find your way to a successful and enjoyable outcome.



## Part 1: Why renovate?

Several years ago I renovated an apartment for an American couple who lives in NYC but spends their summers and holidays in Israel, where they have family and friends. They bought a dark, crowded roof apartment, which did not at all fit into their dream: actually they were dreaming of a spacious New York loft, with the bright Israeli sun shining through the windows....

Another client of mine is an Israeli who had been living in the United States for several years with her American husband. As they got older, she succeeded in convincing him to buy an apartment in Israel, where they could spend more time with their children and grandchildren. They did just that, and bought an apartment near their children, which needs many changes so it will fit their taste and needs.

In many cases, you may find yourself facing a renovation of your new property.

Maybe it needs a new kitchen, with up-to date electrical wiring and plumbing, and a beautiful table for family meals....



Or lacks adequate storage space for your many books and the children's toys.....



Or is simply outdated in its design and choice of materials, and not your taste at all.....

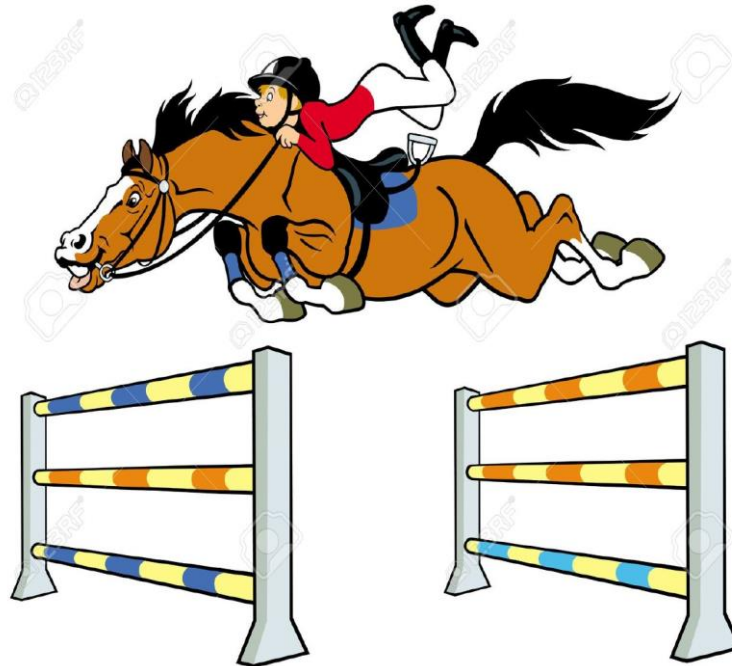


Or maybe it is not as bad as the pictures you have just seen, but still not exactly what you have been dreaming of. You do not want just any apartment. You have waited a long time to purchase it, you want it to be very special, to be your dream apartment in this special land.

You might also be considering the financial aspects of the project: you would like this to be a profitable investment, maybe even to increase the value of the property *in order to resell it in the future.*

*In any of these cases, you know what you need, you know what you want.....but you still have no idea how to go about achieving it.*

## Part 2: What are the obstacles?



Now that you have decided to go ahead with the renovation project, you may feel confused. You have heard stories about remodeling homes anywhere around the world, and many of them have no happy endings. Many home owners are left frustrated, angry, and disappointed, their pockets empty and their dreams shattered.

How do you go about such a project in a country in which you are not familiar with the language and with the way things are done? Who can you turn to in order to plan your project, to manage it, to build it? How do you manage your budget, and prevent unforeseen expenses?

There are many people involved in your project: you must hire an architect, a building contractor, sometimes a building supervisor and a construction engineer. You need to know who is responsible for each part of the project, and then find the right people to carry out the job.

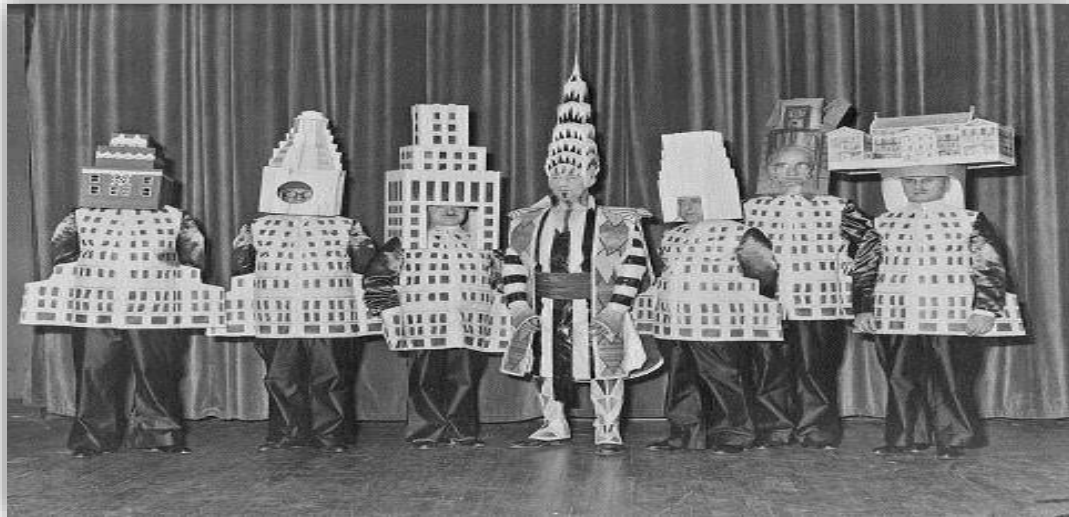
How can you make sure your project is a success?

In the next pages, I will explain to you how this is possible. I will take you step by step through a renovation project in Israel, and explain each stage in detail. Following these steps will ensure a successful remodeling project!



## Part 3: Stages of a successful renovation:

### 1. Choose an architect:



Whom do you want to be the person to design your home?  
Choosing an architect is the first step. It is probably also the most important one.

It is important to be informed about the training of the architect you are considering. In Israel there are architects and interior designers, who possess an academic degree from an officially recognized university. In addition to that there are many private institutions who hand out interior design diplomas after a short and unsupervised course. The title of "interior architect", which many designers use, is not a qualified profession. You should be aware of this before choosing the professional designer you want to work with.

What qualities are important to you when choosing an architect? Research has shown that the most important quality people look for is the ability to listen: not a big ego, but someone who will listen to you, who will truly want to hear about your needs, your wants and your dreams and will be totally accessible to you throughout the project.

These needs and wants have to be put into a practical application, so your architect should be an excellent and creative designer, who can bring new and inspiring ideas and possess the knowledge necessary to carry them out. She needs to be able to envision the whole project, but also to choose the right materials and design the specific details which make your home unique.

Last but not least, your architect needs to know her way around the Israeli building market: how to draw up a realistic budget for your renovation, how to connect you with the right contractor, where to buy the best building materials and accessories, how to coordinate and manage the project.

## 2. Define your wants and needs:

Your specific wants and needs stand in the center of your project. Together with your architect, they need to be as clearly defined as possible. You need to pay attention to the different functions of your home, and how these functions interconnect.

Here are some of the many functional questions you should be prepared to answer:

How large is your family, and do you expect it to expand or shrink in the future? Do you entertain frequently? Do you have many overnight visitors? Do you need a lot of storage, and if so, in what part of the house? Do you love to cook? Do you spend a lot of time in the kitchen? Where do you like to eat your meals? What are your hobbies, and what kind of space do they need?

Remember: Only you know the answers to these questions! Only by answering them carefully can you ensure that your home will not encounter functional problems, which can later annoy you every single day...problems like not enough storage for your winter coats, a noisy family room near your bedroom where you would love to take a nap just when your grandchildren are playing, not enough space in the kitchen for your beloved gadgets – all this should and can be avoided!

On the other hand, you surely do not want a home which is functional and correct, but does nothing for your soul. Try to define what you want it to feel like, what you want it to look like. What are your preferences concerning style, color, materials? Find pictures of homes you like, and discuss them with your architect. See what excites you, what inspires you, what makes you feel happy, what works best for you.

This is a long and difficult process, but it is important so that you, together with your architect, can achieve exactly the result you have been dreaming of.





### 3. Listen to your environment:

In modern language this is called sustainability, and it is actually of vital importance to any home. It is also not as complicated as it sounds. Before you begin your project, you should consider all aspects of your environment: where does the sun shine from at different times of the day and year, from what direction does the wind blow, where is there a beautiful tree you want to see or a nice view, what neighbors do you want to avoid seeing ...

Since you probably don't know the local conditions very well, rely on your local architect to help you with this information.

All these considerations will greatly improve the quality of life in your remodeled home, and by improving energy efficiency will also save you money.



(Why am I showing an example of a garden? Because I am convinced that planning the garden around the house is an integral part of its design!)







## 5. Developing initial concepts:

Now you are finally there: your architect will present you with several proposals, each showing a different possibility. For example, one proposal will be for a low-budget renovation, another for a more expensive one; one may include tearing down almost all the walls and moving the kitchen to the opposite side of the apartment, another may just consider rebuilding the existing kitchen.

Each of these proposals will have its pros and cons, each its own cost-effectiveness. One of them may seem just OK to you, another will make your heart beat. Your mission now is to find the right one for you.

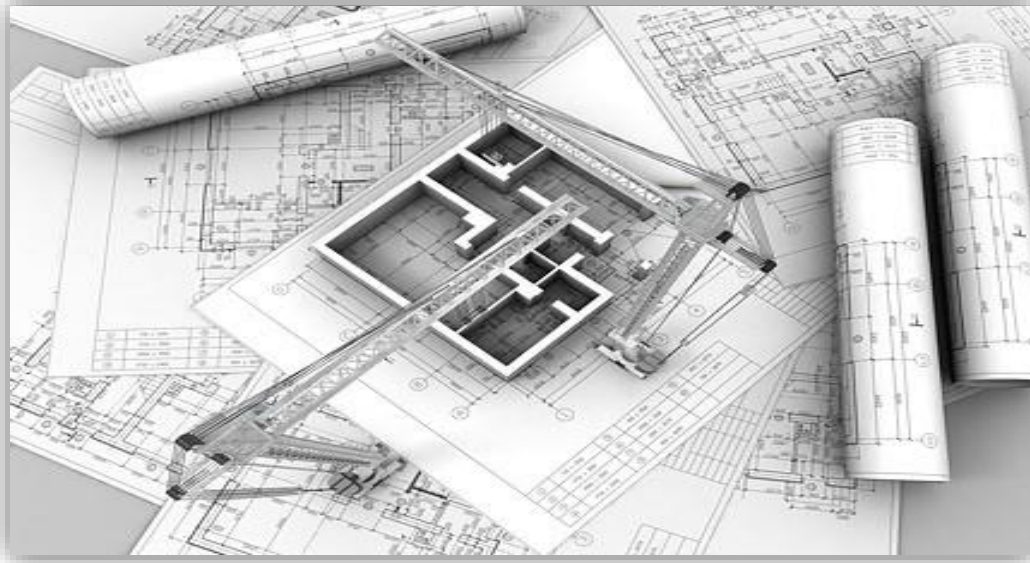
The proposal you have chosen will be reworked and polished by your architect until you are sure it is the right one for you. At this stage, you should also be able to receive a cost estimate from your architect, based on her experience and knowledge. The final design you choose should be the right one to answer your needs, your dreams and your budget. This may take time and energy, but it is important to be sure you have chosen the best possible design!

Some people find it very difficult to understand architectural drawings. If you are one of them, don't hesitate to ask your architect for three-dimensional drawings, which can help you out:



## 6. Working drawings:

You have now decided what you want to do. The next step is to decide how you want it done. For this purpose your architect will prepare a set of architectural working drawings. These convert the design information into technical drawings. They are intended for the contractors working on your project, and must include all the relevant information on how the project should be built.



What working drawings do you need? Demolition, walls, electrical facilities, plumbing, air conditioning, ceilings, windows, doors. You will also need detailed drawings of your bathrooms, kitchen, carpentry, floors, wall tiles and many other building details. If necessary, at this stage your architect will also coordinate the work of other consultants, and integrate them into the design.

The better your working plans, the better your renovation will be. You have probably heard horror stories about a forgotten electrical outlet, which had to be carved in a concrete wall after it was already painted...about a refrigerator which did not fit in its intended place... a door opening in the wrong direction and blocking the way....all of this can be avoided with careful planning!



## 7. Quotes:

Until now, you have an estimate of the cost of your project. At this stage, you need to obtain quotes from several contractors in order to get an accurate price. To make this possible, you need a document with detailed specifications. This very important document is actually a list of all the work and all the materials needed for the job. It specifies exactly what has to be done, how it has to be done, what is included in the price, what materials the builder supplies and which ones you will be providing. In Hebrew, it looks like this:

סח"כ	מחיר יח'	כמות	יח'	ת א ו ר
				<p><u>ג. חיפויים :</u></p> <p>מחיר החיפויים כולל את כל החומרים ה"שחורים", וכן את פריקת המרצפות והקרמיקות מהמשאית והעברתם לתוך הדירה. מחיר הריצוף כולל חיתוך פנלים, הדבקת פנלים ורובה, וכן את תיקוני הטיח לפנלים.</p> <p>הריצוף והקרמיקה יעשו לפי תכנית, עם או בלי פוגות לפי בחירת המזמינים, עם אפשרות לדוגמא לפי תכנית. המחיר כולל עיבוד סביב מכשולים, מחסומי רצפה, וכו'. כמו כן כולל המחיר יצירת שיפועים לפי הצורך. חיתוך פנלים, חיפוי נישות, ספסלים לצנרת ביוב, גליפים, וכד' ללא תשלום נוסף.</p> <p>חיתוך כל האריחים יעשה במכונה. הפינות החיצוניות של חיפוי הקירות תחתכנה ב"גרונג" של 45 מעלות.</p> <p>המחיר כולל גם כיסוי מושלם של הריצוף בקרטון גלי עד לגמר העבודה.</p>
		185	מ"ר	<p>1. ריצוף פנים באריחי קרמיקה או גרניט פורצן במידות 30X30 עד 60X60. כולל כל ההכנות הדרושות וכולל מחיר החול. הריצוף בפוגה מינימלית 2 מ"מ.</p>
		10	מ"ר	<p>2. כנ"ל במרפסות בקומה א ובקומת גג, כולל סף בטון בין פנים וחץ.</p>
		60	מ"ר	<p>3. כנ"ל ריצוף חוץ במפלסים שונים, כולל שיפועים ומדרגות לפי תכנית.</p>
		60	מ"ר	<p>4. אופציה (לא לסיכום): ריצוף פנים באריחי טרצו או אריחי בטון צבעוניים 20X20 או 30X30 על חול, כולל מלט לבן.</p>
		60	מ"ר	<p>5. כנ"ל ריצוף חוץ במפלסים שונים, כולל שיפועים ומדרגות לפי תכנית.</p>

How detailed should this document be? As detailed as possible!

Here is one example why: you have bought beautiful floor tiles, and paid the supplier to transport them to your apartment. When they get there, it turns out the truck driver will unload them on the sidewalk and drive away. Your builder says it is not his job to bring them up to your apartment on the second floor, and wants to charge you extra for it. You have no choice, of course, but to pay for this -- and for many other such small jobs, which may add up to large sums....

Such situations can be avoided by an experienced architect, who through years of working with builders is familiar with all these tricks, and can clearly define every single aspect of the renovation.

Many contractors prefer giving you a general price estimate for the whole job, without breaking it down to these specifications. Beware! This is dangerous, because there is no way to know exactly what they are offering you for the price. As tempting as it may be to engage a contractor whose quote is cheap, you can never be sure that he is not just giving you a low price in order to get his foot in the door, and planning to charge you much more at a later stage.

What is the most frightening aspect of renovations? Surely it is the question of your budget. You do not want to start with an affordable estimate and find it turning into a catastrophe along the way. Working with a detailed specifications document is the best guarantee that your expenses stay within your planned budget.

## 8. Selecting your builders:



Besides choosing the architect, this may be your most important decision. A good, honest and experienced builder will make your project successful an enjoyable, and a bad one will make it a nightmare....but how do you choose the right one, who will do the job well, on time and within budget?

Here are some warnings – what not to do:

Engage only builders willing to work with the detailed specification document discussed in the previous chapter.

Do not automatically hire the one offering the cheapest price. He may be unaware of possible complications, he may intend to use inferior materials, and he may eventually demand more money than agreed upon.

Do not be tempted to divide the job among several subcontractors, even though this may seem to be a good way to save money. The best way to go is to hire one builder who is in charge of the whole project, hires all subcontractors and takes the responsibility for delays and defects.

Do not forget to check for valid recommendations, license, and insurance.

Trust your intuition – but not too much....sometimes people who seem nice can cease to be so when things get serious.

Israeli builders do not have the best reputation. In spite of this, there are many good ones out there. You just need to find them.

## 9. Choosing materials, finishes and colors:



This can surely be the fun part of your project, the part where the design and style of your home become a reality. You are certain that the materials you use will have a big impact on the quality of your home. And yet when you start choosing them, you will probably feel nothing but confusion. What type of floor would you like? One color, like in the picture on the bottom left, or marble, like on the top right corner? Dark or light? Shiny or matte? Large or small? The same size of tiles in both living room and bathroom, or different sizes? Or maybe you actually want a wooden parquet floor, but are not sure if it is the right material to use in Israel? Should you go to a different store and start over again? What are the best stores in Israel, and where are they?

When shopping for tiles, you usually get to see only a small area with the specific one you are interested in. It is difficult for non-professionals to imagine how a large area – for example, the kitchen floor – will look once it is finished, and even more difficult to imagine what it will look like next to other materials or colors you have chosen. For example – will it match the dark wooden cabinets you would love for your kitchen?

The options are endless, and the task of choosing can be overwhelming. The many floor tiles available to you differ in so many aspects: character, quality, price, usability. Some of them may be popular in your own country, same may be new to you. Since you do not live in Israel, you do not know where to start looking....

Of course you need a lot more than floors: you need tiles for kitchen and bathroom walls, countertops, plumbing fixtures, hardware, sinks, lighting fixtures, windows, doors, electrical appliances, wall and ceiling surfaces, kitchen cabinets.....the list seems endless.

In other words: you need your architect to inform you about your possibilities and to guide you in this task. Your architects knows what might be right for you, what fits in with your other choices, and where to find it.





## 11. Home styling:



This is the last phase of your project, where everything finally comes together.... The construction is finished, your renovated home is ready, new and sparkling clean, yet it is still not a home. It is empty, waiting to be dressed with just the right colors, textures, scale, and composition.

Now is the time to furnish and accessorize your new home: to choose colors, furniture, lamps, drapes, pillows, carpets, pictures, decorations. Some you can buy in retail stores, others need to be custom-made to fill your exact needs. In each accessory, you are looking for beauty, functionality, style and value.

Remember the beginning stage of your journey, when you described your likes and dislikes, your dreams and your wishes to your architect? Now it all comes together in the space you have built. In order to create a truly harmonious home, which is a fulfillment of your dream, the choices you make in this phase should be a continuation of that which had inspired you in the beginning.

## Part 4: The easy solution

In the previous chapters, you have learned something about the process of renovating in Israel, and about some of the many problems which might arise. At this stage, things might seem very complicated to you, maybe even a bit frightening.

It is important for you to know: there is an easy solution for your fears and worries, which can ensure you that the renovation will be smooth and even enjoyable: this solution has a name: an architect!

Here is how I work with my clients: first of all, I listen very carefully to their needs and their dreams. I design a home which fits these exactly, avoiding unnecessary mistakes and achieving the look and feel they had envisioned. I identify possible problems and difficulties before they arise, and solve them. I give my clients full control of their budget and timetable at all stages. My clients even enjoy the renovation....and of course they enjoy the results!

Would you like see some examples?

This was a large house in a moshav, a cooperative agricultural community. It had the many advantages of a country house – but was quite ugly and outdated:



It had an unwelcoming entrance and a neglected garden:



Here is a look at the same staircase, after the renovation:



This is what the same front door now looks like:



You can read more about this home [in an editorial article on "Houzz"](#) – an Internet community of more than 25 million homeowners and home improvement professionals.



Here is another example: before the expansion and renovation.....



And after:



More about this home [in an article in the JERUSALEM POST](#), the leading Israeli English newspaper.

In case you cannot be in Israel for the duration of the renovation, there is a possibility to carry it out while staying abroad:

One of my projects is a renovation of an apartment for an Israeli couple who lives abroad. We began working together during their stay in Israel, and made all of the major decisions concerning the design at this stage. After they went back home, we

continued working together via e-mails and telephone. There was one more short visit to Israel, where I helped them choose a contractor and all of the building materials. The rest of the project was carried out under my supervision, without their presence and to their full satisfaction.

This is what the apartment looked like before the renovation:



After the renovation, the apartment looked like this:



You can recognize the same *structural pillar and the same windows in both pictures of the kitchen.*



The living room now looks like this:



Besides being very happy with the result, my clients enjoyed the time spent working on it, felt it was a creative and satisfying experience, and managed to stay within the planned budget.

## Part 5: Sometimes you just need some professional advice...

because you cannot decide if it is worthwhile to renovate.



You may be the owner of property in Israel, which you would like to remodel. However, you have no idea what this involves, what it costs and how long it takes. You do not know if a small renovation will do the job, or if you need a large and comprehensive one. You cannot decide between the options you see, and keep thinking that there are better ones out there ...

Maybe you are looking for a property to purchase in Israel. You have seen one or two which seem attractive and suitable, but you are still hesitant. You feel you need to consult a professional in order to decide which one to buy.

In such cases, I can offer you a one-time consultation, in which you can receive an answer to your questions, doubts and hesitations. My vast experience, professional knowledge and trained eye will help you to a better understanding of your options. I can show you all considerations to take into account, give you a preliminary cost estimate, and help you make the right decision easily.

If you have found this guide useful...

it is most probable that I can help you with your personal project.

You are welcome to call my office if you are interested in speaking to me about your project.

Good luck!

To see more of my work, [please look at my website.](#)