

## **FIX IT UP!**

*Bruce Turner*

### Why Remodeling is so #@\*&\$%! Expensive

After 22 years in the business, I've gotten accustomed to the shocked looks people give me when I hand them an estimate. They all want to know how in the world their remodel project can be so doggone (that's rarely the word they use) expensive.

It would be easy to say that everything's just more expensive in the Bay Area, that labor costs are higher, that insurance is obscene, that gas prices are brutal. All that would be accurate, but every local business faces those realities.

The single factor that ratchets up construction costs more than anything else is regulation – the extraordinary list of rules we must follow to build anything. There are good reasons for most of those rules, but there sure are a lot of them – and for every regulation, there's a permit to acquire and a process to implement.

To begin with, as you may have heard, we get earthquakes here from time to time. California has tight seismic standards, and all buildings must conform to strict engineering specifications. Sheer walls must be built to resist the lateral movement produced by a quake, and all structures must be bolted to the foundation – even in a remodeling project, if it involves structural changes to the house. That takes time and expertise.

Then there's the Local Coastal Plan, which governs everything we build here on the Coastside. I should say right up front that I love the LCP – it has done a wonderful job of reining in rampant development, protecting open space and keeping our coastline one of the most beautiful places in America. But the LCP is also a rigorous, complex web of regulations administered by a glacial bureaucracy, and it's no fun to deal with.

Getting the necessary building permits is a slow and complicated process that customers usually entrust to their architects or builders (most of our clients who try to do it themselves give up in frustration), who charge by the hour for what may be months of filing applications and attending hearings. City permits can also be a major hurdle in many places, although Pacifica is actually one of the easiest towns in the region when it comes to permits.

The building process itself is impacted by California's rigorous environmental regulations. The state's erosion control and wastewater management plan must be implemented on every project to keep pollutants out of the ocean, the bay and the aquifers. When we excavate something, for example, we're required to cover the "spoils" – the dirt that's been excavated – to make sure that rain and wind don't carry anything into nearby streams or sewers. That's a line-item expense in every project plan – the cost of the tarp itself and the labor to deploy it. Even the small stuff matters – those hay bales you see on every construction site to prevent runoff cost eight dollars apiece.

City and county environmental regulations figure in as well. Many municipalities, for example, require us to recycle a certain percentage of the construction debris, and whether we subcontract a recycler or haul the stuff to the recycling center ourselves, it costs the client money.

Yes, this is one of the most expensive places in America to build or remodel something, and no, I don't enjoy that look I get so often. But as frustrating as these regs may be, they serve a vital purpose – they protect us and the place we live.

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