

RIGHT AT HOME

Going on a Scavenger Hunt to Finish Your Kitchen Renovation

Since the pandemic has driven home renovation costs up, how about some secondhand ways to save some money?



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By Ronda Kaysen

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I recently showed up at the Habitat for Humanity ReStore in Randolph, N.J., about 10 minutes after it opened, and already the warehouse was full of customers looking for secondhand light fixtures, door knobs, bedroom sets, sofas and windows.

A white Jacuzzi tub with jets was sprawled awkwardly on the floor beside a bathroom vanity with a granite top and ornate cabinetry. No one seemed particularly interested in either. But the narrow aisle full of screwdrivers, light switches and door hinges was packed with shoppers expertly sifting through the bins. On the opposite side of the warehouse, a young couple examined an old door. Over by the light fixtures, an older woman delicately placed a brass chandelier into her cart.

I had come here in an effort to whittle down the cost of my kitchen remodel, a project that I had shelved for a year because of the pandemic. Maybe I could find a kitchen sink in good condition, or a window in the size I needed. Maybe, just maybe, I'd get lucky and come upon a funky pendant light. Maybe, somewhere among all this used stuff, I'd find a way to bring my renovation budget down to what it had been before the pandemic.

I am among the millions of Americans renovating their homes this year, at a time when [the price of goods is rising](#), driven up by the pandemic and tariffs set by former President Trump. The price of lumber has jumped by 180 percent since last spring, according to the [National Association of Home Builders](#). In March 2021, the price of refrigerators was up 8 percent and dishwashers up 11 percent from March 2020, according to 1010data, which analyzes consumer habits.

The result, for me and others like me, is a more expensive kitchen. In 2019, the national average for a middle-of-the-road kitchen remodel was \$20,000. Now, it's \$30,000, according to data from [Fixr](#), a home remodeling website.

There are some tried-and-true ways to keep remodeling costs under control. You can reface or repaint existing cabinets, avoid moving gas or water lines, or choose more affordable materials, like laminate instead of granite. If you're shopping for a natural stone, you can skip an expensive special order and just buy what the supplier has in stock.

But you can also scavenge for secondhand items. It seems like every episode on HGTV has some wily host scoring an amazing deal at a funky antique shop. They make it all look so easy. With a little creative shopping, any budget is possible!

So I have been channeling my inner bargain hunter. The quest often feels like looking for a needle in a haystack, or, in this case, a counter-depth refrigerator in a New Jersey strip mall.

At the discount appliance store about a mile from my house, new shipments arrive on Fridays. Every week now, I drag my children there so we can hunt for a deal on a range or refrigerator. Most of the appliances have some glaring imperfection — a handle askew, a softball-sized dent on the door, a scratch that streaks across the front. So far, I've been unwilling to accept these flaws. I'm waiting for the unicorn: the imperfect refrigerator or stove that is just flawed enough to still be acceptable.

I put in a call to Nicole Curtis, who most recently starred in [“Rehab Addict Rescue”](#) on HGTV, and is perhaps the country's best-known shoestring renovator. I caught up with her while she was sitting in her car in an Ace Hardware parking lot in Los Angeles about to buy spray paint for a set of chairs. The secret to scavenging, she said, is time. “If you're going to be cheap, you have to put the work in,” she said. “That's why I always ask people, do they have more time or money?”

You must also be fast and flexible. See a deal on a site like eBay, Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace, and you can't wait until Saturday to get it. As for my hunt for damaged appliances, Ms. Curtis is all in. "I buy scratchy, dented appliances all day long," she said. (Floor models are another way to save, as stores will often sell theirs at a discount.)

The biggest source of savings, she said, is in the cabinets. Accounting for 29 percent of a remodeling budget, according to [HomeAdvisor](#), cabinets are the single biggest-ticket item in a renovation. At the beginning of her career, Ms. Curtis would often ask contractors if she could clear out the materials of the homes they were about to demolish. "They have no use for the extra stuff," she said. "It's just going to go in their dumpster."

Ms. Curtis is starting a line of home goods this fall, where she plans to sell, among other things, a line of mid-market vanities. For those of us who are willing to forgo the new vanity, she suggests asking contractors or neighbors who you know are remodeling if they would pass along their unloved but perfectly usable ones. Make friends with the owners of a few antique shops, too, and they might alert you to the next fabulous light fixture.

"There is no shame in knocking on somebody's door," Ms. Curtis said. "There is no shame in your game. If you want something, go and ask for it."

You could even go dumpster diving. Trolling the sidewalks on trash night in search of discarded furniture became a [pandemic pastime](#) for many New Yorkers this year. So it seems logical that the same rules of scouring would apply to a kitchen. Drive through a wealthy neighborhood, and someone might have left a sink or other building materials on the curb.

Cara Fox, an interior designer in Salt Lake City, has trekked out to Orange County, Calif., six times over the past several years in search of high-end discards. She comes back with truckloads of materials that she repurposes, like a farmhouse table that she turned into a laundry-room island for a client. “Find these high-end ZIP codes where people are constantly remodeling every five years and they’re getting rid of really good stuff,” she said.

Ms. Fox, the principal designer at the [Fox Group](#), often puts the word in with contractors, telling them what she’s looking for. When they come across an item she might like, she quickly snatches it up — arriving and taking the material before they dispose of it. “If you take the work off their plate, you can get a lot of salvaged pieces for free,” she said.

But as an ordinary homeowner with no personal contacts in the building trades, the idea of calling up a contractor and begging for tiles seems strange. I asked [Jack Finn](#), a contractor in Montclair, N.J., who regularly takes on six- and seven-figure projects, whether he ever passes off luxury goods to eager homeowners. “It’s unrealistic,” he said of the idea of a homeowner coming to take, say, a farmhouse sink or a set of wooden cabinets. “It’s like used clothing — you wouldn’t have people coming into your closets” to pick through the castoffs.

Mr. Finn currently has a client who bought a window, but then decided he wanted a door for the space instead. It’s a perfectly good window, but Mr. Finn doesn’t have the time to find someone to take it. “It’s too much trouble and too much organization,” he said.

Even a charity organization like [Renovation Angel](#), which resells luxury kitchens, is not a realistic option for the lone window. While Mr. Finn has made arrangements for the nonprofit to come to his job sites in the past to remove cabinetry, it no longer takes single-item donations (for the most part). Instead, it first assesses potential donations and accepts entire kitchens — cabinets, appliances and countertops — disassembling the materials and reselling them as sets. It also sells luxury bathroom and kitchen fixtures and appliances individually, like Thermador and Viking ranges or Waterworks faucets.

For people like me, the Renovation Angel showroom in Fairfield, N.J., is a potential jackpot, which is how I ended up there earlier this month, wandering the vast space looking at other people's oven hoods, refrigerators and cabinets in search of something that might help keep my budget in check.

I still haven't found it, but I'm sure it's here somewhere.