



It Didn't Start Here

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Several years ago, we delivered an estimate for a renovation project that came in at roughly twice what the clients expected.

For the clients, the result was bewildering. Before we were introduced, they had purchased the house, completed a full round of design, and begun portions of demolition to get ahead. In their enthusiasm, they had even hired an HVAC contractor and started modifying the ductwork so construction could move quickly. By the time we were invited in by the interior design team to price the work, most of the major decisions had already been made.

The house sat in one of Portland's older neighborhoods, and the clients believed they had found a rare opportunity—a charming property in a great location, full of potential. They had hired a respected design team to rethink the entire first floor around how they wanted to live. Our role, at least on the surface, was straightforward: review the drawings and prepare an estimate.

But from the first walk-through, the project began to reveal subtleties that had not yet been accounted for.

The renovation was planned as the first phase of a larger effort: kitchen and living spaces now, with bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs to follow. A phased approach is common and often thoughtful. But houses are systems, and changes to one part inevitably affect the rest. The work on the main floor would need to tie into electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems that ran through the entire structure. Future phases would depend on those same systems, as well as on the integrity of the building enclosure.

As we looked more closely, the requirements to execute the current design (while preparing the house for what would come next) began to come into focus. Electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems would all require reworking. Conditions like this are not unusual when design decisions are made without early construction input.

Once those realities became clear, the scope of the project expanded accordingly. Preparing the house for both the immediate work and the future phases required far more dollars than the clients had anticipated. Delivering that news was difficult. The clients believed they had purchased well. They had invested heavily in design. They had put in their own time and effort to move the project forward. But what we uncovered together was this: They could not afford the project.

It did not feel like a design problem. It wasn't a construction problem or a budgeting mistake. But it did feel like something had gone wrong.

Was this avoidable?