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Curb your enthusiasm for the 'dream project' says John

Home truths and the tea tray test

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Having surveyed scores of badly renovated homes in France, **John Snell** has some no-holds-barred advice for budding DIYers

Curb your enthusiasm. I know that sounds harsh, but if you're thinking of taking on the renovation of a traditional French house, you need all your wits about you. There are many reasons for taking on such a project and, on completion, there is much satisfaction in being able to say: "I did that!"

There are, however, some lessons well worth heeding. The observations here are aimed at the lay-renovator so think of them as advice given by a critical best friend.

This roof is looking rough

SPY BEFORE YOU BUY

Before you sign on the dotted line for a French fixer-upper, you need to undertake pre-purchase technical due diligence. Put simply, this means a careful assessment of the feasibility of renovating and adapting the property you have identified. Look carefully at the walls, floors and roof structures; there is usually an engineering or design solution for most structural problems, but the more complex, the more expensive.

Look at the roof in Picture 1. Some sales folk may try to tell you it's bowed like that simply because of old age, but no. In addition to the improperly fitted panel windows cut into it, the original roof frame is failing due to the massively increased weight laid on it by modern machine-cut slates, plus insulation and plasterboard suspended underneath - a costly oversight.

BEEF UP YOUR BUDGET

Once the basic structure - your starting point for the project - is understood, it's time to undertake the financial appraisal. This need not be a fully costed breakdown of the works, but there needs to be some understanding of the financial implications of completing the project, right down to the carpets, light switches and sanitaryware.

This window, high up in the ceiling, is not such a bright idea

Running out of money is the biggest single risk so it pays to be cautious. Overestimate costs and make a generous contingency allowance. Cost overruns are the cause of many distressed sales of incomplete renovation projects, arising from an overestimate of the renovator's DIY skills and an underestimate of material and labour costs in France.

I am frequently confronted with unfinished renovation projects, and one of the more difficult challenges is to understand what has been attempted and why some things have been done the way they have.

MAKE A PROPER PLAN

It is worrying the number of times it appears as though a renovation has been attempted without any coherent plan of works, with no clear notion of what is to be achieved or how it is to be achieved.

A plan and programme are simple ways to control and oversee the project. Even the most rudimentary of sketches is very helpful. Plans will be required for any planning permissions and regulatory consents, so it's of vital importance to fully think through the design before launching into the project.

DO THE TEA TRAY TEST

You are unlikely to find this tool on any building design software, but it is very important to consider how your living space will function once humans are actually in it. What is it going to be like to move around the building and how can the likely risks be designed out? Imagine carrying a loaded tea tray or a heavy basket of laundry around the property, or better still, go and physically do it. Bear in mind that you're now only partially sighted and can't see the floor directly in front and below you.

Take a look at the window in Picture 2. It lets the light in, but it's so high up in the ceiling, how can you open it or clean it without going up on the roof?

Mind you, that's nothing compared to the flimsy, pine staircase I witnessed while surveying a house last year (see Picture 3). Inserted at right angles to the beams, it gives a maximum clear height on the stair of a challenging 1.42m (just over 4.5ft).

Ascending is difficult enough, but the only way to descend is to crouch and crawl backwards! The injury risk is self-evident as is the gross violation of the building code. It was one of the most idiotic things I saw in 2019 (and that's saying something!) and a spectacular failure of the tea-tray test.

FUTURE-PROOF

Don't overlook this important step. Beyond the inevitable need for ongoing maintenance, you need to recognise that the people occupying the property in the future (perhaps it will still be you) may not be young, able-bodied and energetic. Creating a living space that is convenient for disabled/wheelchair users is a specialist subject in itself. However, there's a lot you can do to factor in the common frailties of humans, such as physical ability and visual acuity.

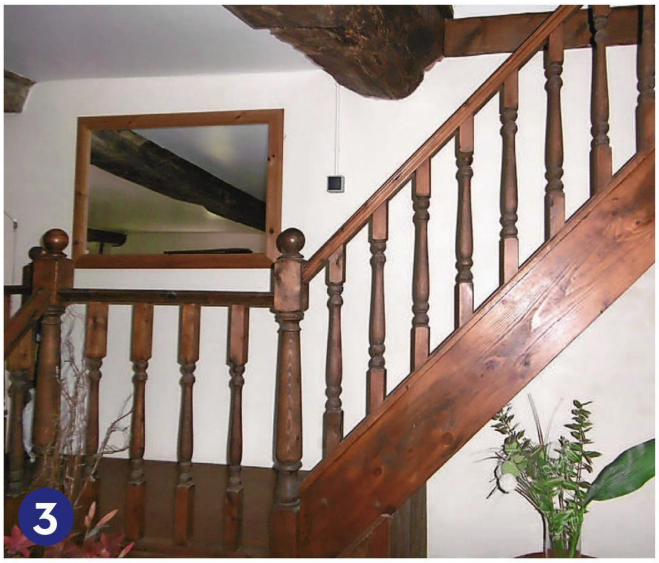
Take the tea tray test again but this time imagine you have also lost your spectacles. Is your living space safe, with appropriate handrails, balustrades and visual signalling for low ceilings or sudden changes in floor level? Are your doors and staircases high enough or have you accidentally created a head-banging hazard?

Take a look at Picture 4 and imagine your vision is not so good. Would it be immediately obvious that there is a flight of three steps down from the lounge into the kitchen-diner beyond the curtains? Without a handrail and other visual cues, I would say it's not, yet this is a high-traffic area of the house.

FOLLOW ORDERS

So you've done the feasibility study and financial appraisal, considered the implications of the design and passed the tea-tray test. There's a clear notion of the objective; now it's time to prepare to start work.

At this point your 'method statement' or 'planned programme of works' comes to the fore to ensure that works are carried out in the correct order. It's easy to get carried away with



Mind your head! An epic fail of the tea tray test

Would you stop before the drop?

Don't walk before you can crawl... and have a decent wall

Poor pointing on a period home

an exciting part of a renovation project before you've done the more boring groundwork. First steps must be to secure the structural envelope - walls, windows, roof, chimneys etc - before moving onto the 'dry trades' of fitting-out the accommodation spaces.

Look at the attached outbuilding in Picture 5 with its crumbling and badly damaged mud-block walls and its rapidly failing roof covering of asbestos tiles. Would you believe me if I told you that behind those walls is a very modern and expensive 'wet room' suite? Sad, but true.

INSIST ON QUALITY

You don't necessarily have to pay for the most expensive materials or workmanship, but using appropriate materials is vital. This is a large subject in its own right. However, if I can make only one point, it's that older French buildings need to be able to 'breathe'. Since they have no barrier damp-proof course, they must be allowed to dissipate ground-source damp through their walls, and for this they must be treated with vapour-permeable cements, mortars, fillers and paints and given access to free-circulating air.

Typically, this requires the use of lime-based materials. The knock-on consequences of using cheaper non-permeable materials such as gypsum (grey cement) can be catastrophic although may take many years to become manifest if hidden behind sealed panelling etc.

In Picture 6, the wall shows a technically proficient quality of workmanship, but it's the wrong material. This is gypsum mortar used to point an old stone house. The result is chilly living spaces, rampant damp and all the structural defects that come with it such as woodworm and rot.

I've seen some real shockers in the past year relating to standards of workmanship - drainpipes propped up on bricks, boilers propped up on wooden posts, non-permeable plaster and render slapped on stone walls, patchworks of cheap materials - the list goes on and on.

Picture 7 shows how someone went to a lot of trouble to install a mechanical air-handling system. Apart from some daft ducting runs (warm air doesn't like to move downwards) the discharge to the roof void created a complete weather-system as the humid air once condensed was close to raining inside the bedrooms immediately below!

HIRE GOOD ARTISANS

It is unlikely and unwise to contemplate doing every part of a renovation without engaging contractors and artisans. Selecting appropriately qualified, experienced, registered and insured firms is also a large subject field. Put simply, make sure they are fit for purpose through your own due diligence, agree any dispute resolution / third-party sign-offs and adjudication mechanisms and payments schedule. Confirm that their mandatory insurance guarantees can be assigned to any (as yet unidentified) future owner of the property.

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

You need a rudimentary and flexible catastrophe plan to cover unexpected and unwelcome events - running out of money is the most common. Knowing when and how to stop is key. There is a gambling analogy to be drawn: "When the fun stops - stop!"

Picture 8 shows a stylish and expensive fitted kitchen. Unfortunately, it does not have a floor. Luckily, the renovator had the sense to halt work and paint the concrete screed - an acceptable solution - but if the purchaser didn't like it, it would be a hugely expensive and time-consuming job to refit the kitchen to a different finished floor height.

To conclude, renovating a French house is exciting enough without having to make it up as you go along. So before buying the project of your dreams, take a step back and have a long hard think about what it entails to achieve a successful outcome. ■

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Not so hot: a bad ventilation system

Nice kitchen, nice door but no proper floor