

**Renovating Your Kitchen This Summer? Proceed With Caution.**

By: Ronda Kaysen

The salesman for the cabinets I was about to order stood in my kitchen a few weeks ago, looking worried. Normally, he would wait until after a contractor had gutted my kitchen to take final measurements, because these semi-custom cabinets ordinarily take three or four weeks to arrive. Now, because of pandemic-related delays, they would take 13 weeks, maybe more.

He suggested my contractor preemptively take a sledgehammer to my soffits to make sure no wayward pipe would undo my cabinetry plans. My timing headaches didn’t end there. The next day, when my contractor showed up to punch those holes in my walls, he told me to order my windows as soon as possible because who knows when they might arrive. Appliances, he said, would be even harder to get. A major kitchen renovation is never easy. It’s like assembling a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, with the addition of each piece dependent on the one before it. Renovating a kitchen during a pandemic is even trickier. The global supply chain has been upended at nearly every point, leading to [delays in everything](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/01/realestate/pandemic-home-furnishings.html?searchResultPosition=1) from refrigerators to lumber.

The shortages have been exacerbated by a home renovation boom that defied the recession. In 2020, as the U.S. economy fell by 3.5 percent, spending on home repairs and improvements rose more than 3 percent, to nearly $420 billion, according to Harvard University’s [Joint Center for Housing Studies](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/harvard_jchs_improving_americas_housing_2021.pdf). Since March 2020, monthly online spending for home improvement products and appliances was, on average, 74 percent higher than pre-Covid levels, according to 1010data, which analyzes consumer habits. “I don’t think anybody was prepared for the massive increase in demand, especially when it came to home goods,” said [Tyler Higgins](https://www.supplychainquarterly.com/blogs/2-scq-forum/post/4530-2021-supply-chain-outlook-uncertainty-remains-continued-disruption-expected), head of the retail practice at the global consulting firm AArete. Contractors, designers, cabinetmakers, plumbers and electricians are struggling mightily to keep up with the demand, meet deadlines, and temper the expectations of clients eager to gut their kitchens and bathrooms.“It’s pretty extraordinary,” said [Caleb Anderson](http://www.drakeanderson.com/), a co-founder of the New York City design firm Drake/Anderson. “I would have never imagined a year ago that this is where we would be.” Before the pandemic, his firm averaged about two or three inquiries a week. Now it fields that many in a day from clients looking to do major, whole-house renovations. Some of those clients now expect weekly schedule updates, an unheard-of prepandemic demand. One such client, a couple renovating a four-bedroom apartment near Lincoln Center, has been waiting on a slab of Italian marble that was supposed to arrive in February. Until it shows up, that bathroom will have to wait. “They’ve been on a wild ride throughout this whole process,” Mr. Anderson said of the couple, who started planning the renovation last April, when New York was still shut down, and started construction in the fall. “They were really, I hate to say it, the guinea pigs for how we navigated our design process” in this new environment.

When it comes to home improvements, I am generally methodical and conservative, agonizing over colors, researching materials and lining up contractors months in advance. Normally, I wouldn’t be the kind of person to gut the most critical room in my house in the midst of historic supply and labor shortages. But you have not seen my kitchen.

Last updated sometime around 1980, it has faded blue floral wallpaper, Formica countertops and vinyl tile flooring that, I am sad to say, is held together with packaging tape. Most of the lighting is fluorescent, and not all of it works anymore — which, because it’s fluorescent, isn’t entirely a bad thing. But the room is dark and the layout is miserable.

My husband and I had planned to renovate the room last spring, and had already designed the space, hired a contractor and selected our cabinets when the country shut down. The kitchen hasn’t gotten any younger over this past year. The refrigerator and dishwasher gave up over the summer, and both had to be replaced. The cabinets now look like they could use a break, with some drawers beginning to collapse.

Before we called our contractor back, we considered waiting another year to avoid the pandemic frenzy. But another year would only create more problems. We could end up spending money on more stopgap fixes as the kitchen continues to deteriorate. Plus, the uncertainty isn’t going to end anytime soon.

Waiting until next year could mean trading a faster turnaround for higher costs as suppliers pass increases onto consumers, according to Mr. Higgins. And so here we are, joining the legions of Americans frantically ordering granite counters and ceramic tiles, and hoping they show up.

Since I am no fan of surprises, I called up [Liz Caan](https://lizcaan.com/), an interior designer in Newton, Mass., who renovated her own kitchen last year, to find out how her job went. She started the project in June, and because she had ordered her materials before the pandemic, she thought she would be ahead of the curve. When she ran into problems, she pivoted, ordering, for example, the floor model of a Sub-Zero refrigerator when she learned a new one wouldn’t arrive for months.

But then came the Carrara marble countertop. The material arrived from Atlanta without a hitch, but the fabricator outside of Boston was backed up with orders that had been delayed during the shutdown, so Ms. Caan found herself at the back of the line. For six weeks, her kitchen sat there, nearly complete, but not functional because without a countertop she couldn’t install a faucet.

“It looked like a kitchen but it wasn’t a kitchen — I couldn’t use it,” she said. She finally completed the renovation in October, about four months after she started.

I asked her how to avoid, or at least reduce, the chances of getting caught in the supply chain trap. She suggested gathering as much information from the supplier as possible before placing an order.

If the tile backsplash is in stock, ask how much of it they actually have, and know exactly how much you need. Be flexible about materials in the event you might need to make a switch. Ask if the delivery timeline is accurate or if it is a moving target. And then place your order as early as possible, especially for appliances. If the dealer cannot store the item in a local warehouse, stash it in your garage or rent a storage space for all that you gather. (Cabinets, however, are an exception to the rule, as they should not be delivered until the space is ready for installation.)

“It’s a booming market coming out of a shutdown,” Ms. Caan said. “Everyone wants everything, but there is still a lot of product out there. You have to be patient.”